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Titel: Manekino. Een realistische fabel.

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mǎn'ikǐn, nl Little man, dwarf; artist's lay figure*; anatomical model of the body; small tropical American bird.

[f. Du *manneken*, dim. of MAN]

* *lay figure* (ger), n. Jointed wooden figure of human used by artists
for arranging drapery on etc.; unimportant person, nonentity; unreal
character in novel etc.

[lay f. obs.*layman* lay figure f. Du *leeman* (*led* joint)]

THE CONCISE OXFORD DICTIONARY, Fourth edition, 1963, Oxford

Afternoon. Down below, the cars were forming three lanes between the white lines. When the traffic lights turned green, they fanned out in three directions: right, straight, left. At almost the same time, one single lane of cars started moving from the opposite side of the square, some lowering their speed to yield to oncoming traffic. Motor scooters and tiny bicyclists were swerving in and out of the lanes of traffic, and on the sidewalks and the oblong traffic island, countless tiny pedestrians were moving. Others were waiting for the pedestrian light to turn green. A streetcar slid past the other side of the traffic island, stopped, moved along.

For one brief moment, the center of the traffic square was nearly empty, and then the cross traffic started moving and the pedestrians hurried across the crosswalk.

He watched the interplay of measured movement down below for quite a while, and it seemed again as if it made him more measured and even-keeled.

He was just about to turn around back to his desk, not so much listlessly or energetically, but indifferently, when his attention was drawn to a diminutive figure that was crossing the crosswalk toward his building, a few steps ahead of a group of pedestrians. With a jolt he recognized the figure. Having reached the traffic island, it tilted its head upwards, fairly successfully aiming at the window where he stood.

He instinctively stepped to the side, realized how pointless that was, and adjusted his position. He then followed the figure as it crossed the second lane, until it disappeared from his field of view and probably moved toward the building where

went to sit at his desk, arranged the objects

lying on it as though he were expecting a business contact. The ballpoint pens in the pen tray, brochures, cliché prints to one side of the desktop, in front of him a blank sheet of paper with the letterhead ADVERTISING AGENCY EURO-AD. Leaned back into his chair and waited in anticipation.

He left his house carrying his attaché case as a newly acquired status symbol ... frozen in his tracks ... saw himself. Flashback. The bright light of a spring morning a few weeks ago. Light spot on the aluminum doorknob, something off-center. A wad of paper next to his feet. Dog doo. His photographic position unfroze; he stepped off the sidewalk.

Almost immediately following this – or was it just before? – he must have felt something; otherwise, he wouldn't have looked sideways in the opposite direction of where he was going to

turn. About fifty feet away from him was a nine- or ten-year-old boy playing with a little ball, which he bounced up in the air before catching it with the same hand, in a somewhat childish manner, seemingly nonchalant, seemingly inconspicuous. For a second he stopped playing, snuck a little glance at him, and then continued hitting the pathetic little ball. The young man with the attaché case (he) lost interest in it and continued his route. He had seen the boy several times before, usually alone, sometimes playing with other boys from this neighborhood filled with children. It had struck him lately that this little boy was the only one who looked back at him when he looked, quickly or more closely, at a group of children, and the boy sometimes even seemed to stare at him for a moment – possibly to receive extra attention as kids more often ...

Fifteen minutes later, when he arrived at the office building where he worked and wanted to go through the revolving door, he had the same vague sensation as before, that he was being watched. When he unconsciously looked behind him, he saw the same boy whom he had seen hanging around near his house. Odd, he must have followed him the whole way; the route he had taken made coincidence virtually impossible. He acted as though he hadn't noticed a thing and walked into the lobby. Was he mistaken, or had the boy tried to hide behind a taller pedestrian when he turned around?

A few days later he was convinced that he was being followed. At the most unexpected moments he could feel something signaling the boy's presence: sitting in an outdoor café, engrossed in conversation, absentmindedly looking up, and – hardly surprised at this point – he made out the small figure on the corner of the street; walking down the street, alone or with his wife, Mirjam; the moment he entered his or a friend's house; once even on the trolley car. And then the possible times he did not pick up the signal and was being followed. The longer this game went on, the more intrigued he was.

What was going on here, he asked himself. Just a child's game? Playing detective? Possible. But the kid's face was way too stern, and the game was played with a nearly fanatical seriousness. During the next phase, he fully played along, the pursued and his shadow. While walking he would sometimes turn around suddenly and continue in the opposite direction; he turned unexpectedly into a side street and hid in a doorway, awaiting the appearance of his pursuer; or

he would enter a café, only to exit it immediately through a different door, but not once could he outwit the boy or cast off his shadow.

He did try to engage the boy in a conversation, but this was apparently not his intention. He had hardly taken a few steps in the boy's direction when his pygmy's shadow withdrew, only to resume his pursuit as though nothing had happened. It was clear that the boy knew he had been discovered from the start, but this did not faze him in the least, and after a while he hardly tried to hide anymore.

This was precisely what made him start to feel agitated and what truly gave him a sense of being shadowed. At first, Mirjam, whom he religiously updated on the adventure, wouldn't believe him and thought he was exaggerating, even more so since he could not once deliver any visible evidence. Each time he wanted to show her the shadow that was following him, the boy decided to outsmart him and slip away when he wanted her - first making sure that they were being followed - to quickly turn her head. The detailed descriptions of the boy were probably the only thing that kept her from thinking he was making up the entire case - or perhaps hallucinating. The boy was apparently amused by this game of cat-and-mouse. When he saw him again after an unsuccessful attempt at showing her the boy, he thought he could detect a fleeting smirk on his still altogether serious little face.

Most recently, this happened about five days ago during a stroll in the park. Pausing on a side path, he faked kissing her passionately, while looking past her cheek to notice his little pursuer behind a bush, watching them, with bright, interested eyes, as though it was a movie scene. Then he decided it had gone on long enough.

(Had first planned to turn Mirjam's head toward the boy but realized that he would never be fast enough.)

He stretched out his arm along her body and beckoned the boy toward him with a bent finger.

He wasn't really surprised that he did not come over but instead ducked into the bushes. The remainder of the afternoon he did not show his face again.

Apparently, he had broken the rules of the game, broken the spell, and it was being held against him: the boy also did not show up the following days. And to his own surprise, he felt his absence as a void, as though something was missing in his life, something he had unknowingly

grown accustomed to. It was ridiculous, but more than once he caught himself looking around with a certain expectation when he left his house, turned a corner or ...

A knock on the door.

- Come in, he said, trying to contain the tension in his voice.
- What is your name? he asked.
- Guido. Guido Jagt.
- I don't have to tell you my name, right?
- Two feet of space between us, he said, no more.

The boy smiled, relaxed, hardly or not at all remorseful.

- Have a seat, he said, pointing to a chair on the other side of the desk. – Well, ...?
- I thought up a slogan. It is quite good, and I would like to sell it. Your company does the advertising for the coffee brand *Brazilia*, if I am not mistaken? He didn't wait for the answer. He knew.
- It is one of the better brands of coffee. My mother serves it, too. I have had a few cups, and it really tastes better.
- Better than what?

Smile. – Than the lesser brands.

- And what was that good slogan?
- Brazilia Coffee: A BIT *higher in price*, but A LOT *higher in quality*. “Higher in price” and “higher in quality” in italics, “a bit” and “a lot” in all caps, or: “A bit higher in price” in italics and “a lot higher in quality” in all caps. There is something to say for both. The one emphasizes the correlation between the (only) a bit higher price and the much higher quality; the other, the higher quality of the product itself. Personally, I prefer the first.

Assessing his reaction: - The novelty here is unapologetically admitting that the product is more expensive. During the current economic boom, it does not make sense to conceal that fact. Price doesn't matter that much to people anymore. By the same token, openly admitting the price difference will endear you to readers of the ad, while they believe they are getting a product that is *disproportionately* much better than the price difference

with other brands would suggest. Thus, the negative *price* difference is turned into a positive *quality* difference. At least, that is the psychological effect.

He paused for a moment. – OK?

He nodded, thinking. – Not bad.

- So it's a deal?

- I am interested.

- How much?

- How much what?

- Money, of course. I have heard that they pay well in advertising.

He looked, fascinated, at the little boy facing him: light-blond hair, almost platinum, sky blue eyes, a sharp, somewhat arched, lawyerly little nose.

Although the little face remained serious throughout the conversation, it did not have anything oldish, not even up close. The relative paleness of the skin was offset by a few clusters of freckles around the base of the nose. He wore a blazer and a bow tie.

- How old are you?

- Does that matter for the fee?

He waited.

- Nine.

Still unclear where this game of words would lead them, he decided to try something.

The slogan was indeed very usable, with a possible price tag between 250 and 300 guilders. Or even more if an entire campaign would be based on it.

- I will have to ask the manager, he said. I am not authorized to decide this, but perhaps he will offer 100 guilders.

Guido snorted.

- For less than 300 guilders, I won't sell it. In that case I will go to another agency, one that does the advertising for a competing brand – an even better brand.

- A better brand? Is there such a thing?

- The brand that uses my slogan is better.

Teasing: - What if we started to use your slogan without paying anything?

He didn't bat an eye. – I had my notary record the phrase.

- What?

- I may have something else for you, he said. The past few weeks I have followed your advertising campaign for that new brand of perfume, but I could not really get behind it. Who came up with it?

- I did.

- Sorry, he said. But it could be improved.

He sighed a fake little sigh. Up until now, however, he had not given the impression that the conversation required a lot of effort, that *anything* required effort for him.

- May I have a cigarette?

- No.

- May I offer you one of mine?

He pulled an unused yet already opened pack of cigarettes from his pocket and offered him one. – I don't smoke. Smoking is bad; it can give you cancer.

He smiled again and put the pack on the desk in front of him, with one cigarette poking out.

- Why did you ask for one then?

Endearingly: - No reason; just to see how you would respond. I had expected you to say, "No."

He was so surprised that he forgot to get angry.

He said: - The *Muskus* brand, for example, could be launched under the slogan INDIVIDUAL PERFUME. And under it, in a different font: *Now you smell like you*, or simple: *Smell like yourself*. The remainder of the text in the ad should say that each *Muskus* perfume has its own personality and that there is a perfume for everyone. The personality of each perfume needs a detailed description, with a number of clearly recognizable individual traits. That way people can choose the perfume that matches their personality – even if they don't have an obvious personality, he added with a smile, or a weak personality. The irony: *Muskus* perfume is character boosting. Most shower so often that their own body fragrance gets lost. If they can buy an – *individual* – perfume, they will have their own fragrance, for the first time in years, and they will smell like themselves again. Everybody will be content, and the company will have tapped into an unparalleled market. What do you think?

He nodded a second time, a little more slowly and more reflectively this time.

- It is an idea, he said, perhaps even brilliant, that is, from an advertising point of view.

In turn, Guido nodded, “yes,” once. He agreed wholeheartedly.

- Just one thing. The company only features, I believe, twenty different perfumes. There are more than twenty types of people.

- I know, I know, Guido said, but most people don’t know that. (Smile.) Perhaps the company should produce a few new types, or claim to have a higher number than they actually do. Most people only want a limited number of types to choose from anyway, because it is hard to choose when there are too many options.

- Okay, okay, he said, without smiling, Let me go to the manager to discuss this and see what we can pay.

When he returned, Guido was standing, looking out the window, in the same spot where he had left him; it took him a couple of seconds to turn around.

Was this to show that the tension about the decision was not getting to him in the least, or was this his natural disposition?

- Nice, modern view, he said. Very state-of-the-art.

He said: - We are willing to pay 300 guilders for each idea. If the second idea is used in an extensive campaign some more will be added. So, for now, you will receive 600 guilders. Great news, right?

The boy nodded again, once.

- If you give your dad’s bank account number, we will transfer the money.

- Can’t I just get it in cash now?

- No, under no circumstances. We cannot run the risk of a ten-year-old boy with 600 guilders in his pocket ...

Guido shrugged his shoulders.

- Then please transfer it to my notary’s account.

He pulled out a piece of paper from the front pocket of his jacket and put it on the desk.

Name, address, and phone number, all neatly typed.

- Why not to your father?

- It has to be a surprise, he said. I am saving my money until it is a really big sum.

- Isn’t this a big sum?

- It depends for whom.

- Not for you?
- No.
- How much do you already have?

Guido hesitated for a moment, although he had apparently already decided to answer the question if posed; otherwise, he would have immediately thought up a different answer. He looked at him with his sky blue eyes.

- I don't know the exact amount. Not that much in cash, but I estimate my net worth to be more than 400,000 guilders.
- *How much?*
- I am hoping to be a millionaire within a year, he said.

The birthday cake in front of him on the table. His aunts and uncles, father and mother surrounded him like gigantic candles, quietly burning with excitement. He sat there coolly in his high chair. They sang for him. They sang because he was 365 days older than a year ago. Why not 30 or 31 days, or every week? He let the singing good-heartedly wash over him and smiled because he knew that they expected him to.

- Well, Guido, his father said, how old are you now?
- Four.
- How many months is that?
- Forty-eight.

A murmuring of approval arose. Why?

- And how many days?
- Fourteen hundred plus sixty, no, sixty-one.

Astonishment.

- And how many hours?

He calculated, waited for a moment to build the tension.

- Thirty-five thousand plus sixty-four. And that equals two million and one hundred and another three thousand eight hundred forty minutes.

Hissing noises around him. His sister Gonnie (G-O-N-N-I-E), who was about two years older than he, clapped her hands excitedly. One of the uncles calculated it on the back of a cigarette box. He needed more than three minutes.

- It is correct, he finally said. This is not normal.

- He had drops of sweat on his forehead.

An aunt: - No, this is definitely abnormal.

The mood in the room suddenly turned somewhat somber, as though something bad had happened or was about to happen. The circle around him widened. The candles on the cake flickered. Outside, one could hear the honking of traffic jammed alongside the canal.

- Why “not normal,” he thought, frightened. What happened?

- Was it that the numbers he had calculated were too big? But why were big numbers abnormal? Because they were calculated by someone who was little, and only big people were allowed to calculate big numbers? For slightly smaller numbers than these, his mom and dad had always smiled encouragingly. He did not think that this was the reason, but he decided to find out soon. I do not want to be abnormal, he thought. I want to be normal, just like everyone else.