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Novel In de wacht

Excerpt Pages 28 to 35

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God it must be grim, visiting someone in hospital. I see it in the faces of the people who traipse past our twin room every day. Not that this is news to me. Can't say I was ever first in line when someone I knew was hospitalised. Not last either, mind you. It's the faithful visitors who look the most downtrodden. Come twice a day, some of them. Perhaps their friends or family have been told there's no hope.

I've no idea what state I'm in. Caught in a tug of war between the doctors and cardiologists at two hospitals. War is putting it mildly, by all accounts. Each hospital defending its own protocol to the hilt, over my dead body if need be. For as long as I can remember I've been caught up in some war or other. An Indo father and a Dutch passport. I might as well have been from the Moon, Mars or Jupiter. Better off, even.

The pluckiest visitors to this floor, the fifth according to my friendly neighbourhood publican from The Hague, are the women I take to be ninety or older. Desiccated as stick insects, they creak along behind their walkers, determined to see their sons or daughters one last time before turning into neat little piles of dust behind those odd trolleys of theirs, all ready to be swept up.

One morning Gregor Samsa wakes up with the body of an insect and is cared for by his sister until she comes to reject him and he is swept up by the charwoman. The End. I think Kafka meant that if you turn into an insect your human dignity is lost, even if consciousness and character are still intact. Perhaps, as we get older we all seem like insects. To the boisterous young pin-stripe brigade who believe in a bright future. Am I old? Am I an insect? Do I get under the feet of the fine young cannibals?

Hey Ma, the way I see it you'd be better off embracing your inner insect and visiting your ageing child in hospital. Less likely to be assaulted by the gangs of neglected kids who prowl the streets of deprived neighbourhoods looking for people to mug. The council should hand out finely crafted insect badges to venerable ancients who are kind to their decrepit children.

On the streets of Holland, you hardly ever see a broom in white hands. Odd that. And if you do see a white street sweeper – let's plug into the prototype and call them Batavian – he or she will be lording it over the rest at the helm of a dustcart, the seat of power in any street sweepers' crew. Nowadays people talk about race as black and white. Forget your palette of colours, it's one pole or the other. Well I've been called brown all my life and in that capacity I stand between the two. No place for me in the black-and-white debate, unless I

declare myself white and incur the wrath of many a Batavian, or claim to be black, at which men or women of African descent may well take umbrage. Another tug of war. Still, after a lifetime of not belonging I'm used to it by now. Small mercies and all that.

Today the talk is of asylum seekers, refugees, fortune seekers... whatever happened to immigrants? What's up with that word? And while I'm at it, can you still call a Chinaman yellow? Or a Chinaman for that matter? Bullshit, that's what it is. Bullshit. Holland has no desire to be a land of immigrants, all thanks to a stupid notion they inherited from the Portuguese in the sixteen hundreds, who'd had a century to mess around in what was then called the Indies before the Dutch arrived on the scene. By the Indies they meant the entire Far East. On no account were the men of the Dutch East India Company to bring their brown-skinned sweethearts back to Holland, in line with an injunction imposed by the Portuguese despite the mix of cultures they had instigated there. Or else it was forbidden by the Spanish Empire, which included Portugal at the time. I don't know the ins and outs.

The Americans are smarter about these things, cherry picking whoever they think might be useful. For brevity's sake, I'm skipping a few centuries. As colonists they simply stole the land from the Red Indians, who are no longer red and no longer Indians. We live and learn. Now the US hardly let anyone in, yet they call themselves a land of immigrants. And if you do beat the odds, the first rung on the ladder is pouring water in a restaurant, in New York at least. Here in Holland it's cleaner or street sweeper. If you're lucky, that is, and they spare you the delights of kicking a ball around the grounds of some asylum seekers' centre, or worse, some do-gooder herding you and your partners in adversity into an indoor rink, shoving skates on your feet and pushing you out onto the ice.

'Come on, lads,' the Batavian in the orange bobble hat beams at the inmates. 'This is our culture!' They are inmates, aren't they?

I can't remember when I last saw skaters on a Dutch pond or canal. They rarely freeze over these days. But a single snowflake is enough to transport the Batavians back to the seventeenth century, with Hendrick Avercamp as the patron saint of winter idylls.

Decades ago, you used to see dredgers wading up and down the ditches with pitchforks. Back in the fifties, when I was a boy. They wore those long rubber boots that chafe your crotch. Burly Batavians. I loved watching them dredge those stinking ditches with their pitchforks, slapping the muck onto the banks. Go back a week later and you'd see frogs and fish swimming merrily. I once saw a rat shoot up from the bottom, snatch a duckling and drag it down into the depths. That rat was a filthy rat and the duckling a stupid duckling, that's what I thought. Anyway, the ditches round here have been choking up for years and the

fish are wasting away while jobless asylum seekers are champing at the bit to do something, anything. It would be good for integration: start them off with the dirty work. The natives will gain respect for them and be more inclined to meet them halfway. Or at least be less inclined to bang on about newcomers. Well, you'd hope so. Outdated thinking no doubt, or American, what does it matter? And I'm already growing tired again, life's too complicated, too hard into the bargain, a human life is worth nothing. Am I an insect? By the mid-21st century we'll be eating bugs by the plateful. I wonder if I've ever been worth anything to that mother of mine. Was I nothing more than an unwelcome ant that turned into a maddening fly and has now achieved the hideous status of beetle?

Ma is twenty-three years older than me and still does her own shopping and all that stuff. She even makes it up to Amsterdam sometimes, where Nana has taken root, unable to part with her houseboat on the Amstel. When it comes down to it, Ma is tougher than I am. Or she's breathed fresher air far longer. Holland was home to fewer people when I was born. Ten million at most. Ma hails from De Peel – land of trees, fens, clear water. Smoking does her no harm. Except for those heart attacks of hers... What's the latest tally? Maybe she counts every stay in hospital, so by her reckoning that time they poked around in her colon could qualify as a heart attack too. I mean who the hell survives a dozen heart attacks? She still has no need for a walker, as far as I know. Rainbow insect badges for old folk to pin on their lapels don't yet exist and if they did Ma wouldn't be among the chosen ones exempted from being beaten to death on the street in broad daylight by underage desperados and swept up by swarthy immigrants in orange jumpsuits. Don't ask me why. I probably think that because she hasn't had much luck in life. If she and I are lucky enough not to need sweeping off the streets, I reckon I'll be the first to go. Stored away in a freezer first of all. Now there's a prospect. But then... hey, it's out of the freezer and into the furnace. Ashes to ashes.

Remember man that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return.

Genesis something or other. Can't quote you chapter and verse. How am I supposed to know my way around a Bible with my background? And what good is a headful of Bible quotes anyway? They can look it up on their smartphones these days, along with everything else. All I have is a Nokia, for phone calls and the odd text message.

If dust is the end of you, someone will have to sweep you up. That said, you might end up blowing in the wind. Cue for a song. The intrinsic romance of death.

Flashback to a children's home in the little town of Voorschoten, where the head – a man born and bred in Amsterdam – held forth during every coffee break. According to him,

some bright spark predicted in Reader's Digest fifty years ago that apes would one day take over the work of street sweepers. Execrable reading matter, Reader's Digest. I've a nasty feeling that whoever came up with that prediction might have been using 'ape' as a metaphor.

How exactly do they sweep up your remains in one of those furnaces? Who gets that job? Is it a painstaking process? I mean, isn't there a chance of being mixed up with the ashes of your predecessors? And if so, what of it? You live on in the DNA of your children, nowhere else, no prospect of relocating to other dimensions, though we were happy enough to believe that in our hippy days. No kids and your life hits a dead end. Your every molecule vanishes in the cosmic mist. After your death you no longer matter, leave no trace behind. Simple as that.

It's no matter if you don't matter, so don't be sad. Rest in peace. And if you find yourself in need of hope, watch the cult film *Soylent Green*. You'll be recycled as bread and disappear into the stomach of a living person. A tiny piece of you will enter someone else's bloodstream and may well sprout from a follicle on the head of an infant born of a cyborg and abandoned as a foundling or some such. Unless you're excreted directly into the sewerage system, in which case you can at least fill the stomach of a rat and colour the universe as a rodent particle.

Every human serves their purpose. And if you can't take hope from that, you really are hopeless.

What's that particle book called again? *The Tao of Physics*? Something like that. The book that torpedoed my belief in God. Even if I got the wrong end of the stick, I should still sue Fritjof Capra for robbing me of my faith. And getting me to pay for the privilege.

Does Ma believe in God, I wonder? Is she using a walker these days? I haven't seen her in God knows how long, a walker-era you might say. As sons go, I'm pretty useless. I rarely visit her. But not never.

A walker helps you get around but saps your dignity, though on the plus side there's a handy rack to pop your shopping on. The faithful old mothers who creak past our room no doubt use it to ferry in home-baked treats rich in sugar, eggs and saturated fat. Can't be any worse than what they feed us in this place: white bread, margarine, processed cold cuts, and microwave fodder for an evening meal. The Surinamers probably get *bojo* smuggled in, the Turks baklava and the Kurds pita with kebab. My Dutch roommate, the publican, born and bred in The Hague, is a genuine throwback to the fifties and sixties, complete with young girlfriend. A sweet, cheerful, no-nonsense lass with no need for a walker, who turns up bearing rissoles, meatballs and cream buns.

No walker for Ma, then. But a walking stick? Nah, I can't quite see it. You need a measure of dignity to walk with a stick. And if there's one thing Ma lacks... Still, no reason for her not to put in an appearance. She excuses her indifference to her children by calling herself a pioneering feminist. Though she has a better excuse in the shape of that idiot ex of hers, the war-crazed young man from the tropics with a headful of colonial crap, not least a stereotypically Eastern reverence for the Queen of the Netherlands. Which one was it again? Juliana? Wilhelmina? He saw her the way the Japanese saw their emperor, well, more or less. That idiot fought like a madman for a shower of cold-blooded Batavian colonists, who saw Indonesians and everyone who looked like them as little more than apes. Apes they lost the war to. If only he'd known that in advance! Then again, maybe not. There are few insights more calamitous than knowing that somewhere in your life you made an absurd, absolute and irreparable error. That's a psychological life sentence. And no one can see the cell your locked in.

In came Johnny. My first visitor. Apart from Phil, of course. My old mate Johnny. Didn't stay long, has a healthy distrust of hospitals. No idea how he knew I was here so quickly. Johnny and Phil don't exactly move in the same circles. Faux macho with a sentimental streak. Heart attack at 45. Six weeks of bed rest was the drill back then. Surrounded by hopeless cases breathing their last. All very uplifting. Johnny's heart took a hit from behind, worst spot possible. A quarter of his engine out of commission. I was gutted when the wife of a cycling friend called to tell me the bad news. Johnny's wife and her children in a panic. He, the teacher, ex-marine with a harrowing stint in Vietnam behind him, wavering Catholic, hot-headed hardman, out for the count in a hospital bed. At the other hospital.

Johnny wandered in without so much as a hello, no flowers or magazines, armed with a bottle of fruit juice.

'Here. Same one I drink,' he said and planted it on my bedside cabinet like an elixir.

That was his entrance. Original. Putting up a bit of a front, mentioning casually that his eldest brother was on the cardiac ward too, in quarantine at the other hospital due to a bacterial outbreak. Telling me I should count myself lucky they transferred me here. Our hearts gave out on the same day, apparently.

'Must be catching,' Johnny said and asked if they had a smokers' room here too.

'Beg pardon?'

'A smokers' room. They've got one where my brother is. You can nip downstairs for a fag.'

‘How does that work?’

‘Every so often a group of heart patients pile into a lift with a bunch of nursing staff, doctors and surgeons. Head down to a ground-floor room set aside for smokers and puff away for all they’re worth.’

‘Did they do that when you were there?’

‘No, back then we smoked in the lav.’

I coughed till my eyes watered.

‘Don’t you miss your cigs?’ he asked.

‘Me? Nah.’

I laughed so hard it took me five minutes of coughing to recover. Before he left, he showered me with diet tips. Go easy on the *trassi*, sambal and coconut milk, convert to healthy crap like yoghurt, cottage cheese, lemon juice, blackberries, fatty fish and the rest of it.

What kind of Indo eats cottage cheese? Give me a break!

Was it Johnny who told me The Hague is cardiac capital of Holland? The air thick with poison pumped out by furtive industries. A city where traffic coagulates: close to the sea, so there’s no ring road and a surfeit of long straight avenues that invite speeding and road rage at traffic lights.

‘A stressed-out city, you mean?’ I asked.

‘Something like that,’ said Johnny.

Once he’d gone, the publican asked me if Johnny was my brother.

‘No, a friend.’

He paused a sec, then asked, ‘Do you have a wife and kids?’

‘No wife, two kids. You?’

‘No kids. Not my thing. Hence the young girlfriend, if you catch my drift?’

‘Yeah, I get it.’

‘How old are they? Your kids?’

‘Uh, my son is almost nineteen, my daughter fourteen, from another mother.’

‘Oh... And they haven’t been yet?’

‘No. I’m hoping my son will come soon. Depends on his mother. It’s kind of complicated. More complicated with my daughter. Or simpler, I should say: I never see her.’

‘Oh? You never see her?’

‘Almost never.’

‘Does she know you’re here?’

‘I doubt it.’

‘Your son can tell her, can’t he?’

‘Maybe, but I don’t think they talk much.’

Another pause, then the publican said, ‘Nothing’s like it used to be, eh? Not that it’s better or worse. Just different.’

‘Yeah, yeah... different.’

‘Yeah, different.’

‘Different, yeah.’

‘I heard that friend of yours say The Hague is a stressed-out city. Didn’t used to be.’

Still, you read more tales of woe about Amsterdam than this place. And more with racist undertones. Probably because that’s where all the national dailies are. Pretty dim of the country’s newshounds to cosy up to each other in the capital. You wind up thinking everything happens there and nowhere else. The news gets skewed and samey, with the odd tweak here and there to make a difference. Meanwhile some Belgian press baron is snapping up the regional papers that cover events in the rest of the Netherlands. Sad times.

Here in The Hague we let our newspaper go down the tubes after 140 years. Incredible but true: seat of parliament, half a million residents and not a paper to our name. The Hague and protest don’t mix. The Hague hosts protests, that’s all. Docile souls, underhand for all their so-called frankness. It was child’s play for the Nazis to round up Jews here and ship them off, a lively trade in Jews, bribes and backhanders, the police in The Hague were most helpful to the occupier. Many Jews took their own lives and in the end only two thousand of the city’s seventeen thousand Jewish residents survived the war. Hardly any Jews live in The Hague today and with the help of a corrupt city council the Jewish neighbourhood is now in Chinese hands and goes by the name of Chinatown. Off in the distance a mirage appears, another fairy tale for our history textbooks, more lies to feed the kiddies: and then came the Chinese and that was the end of The Hague’s Jewish tradesmen.

Amsterdam’s treatment of the Jews wasn’t exemplary either, but what’s Amsterdam to us? All they do up there is gripe about tourism. About whores. First they bend over backwards to reel in the tourists and, now they’ve succeeded, they do what the Londoners did ten years ago and whine about a tsunami of visitors. Astounding how quickly that Japanese word has wormed its way into the Dutch vocabulary. Londoners went through a phase of pinning badges to their lapels proclaiming ‘I am not a tourist’. Back then it gave me great satisfaction to leapfrog English arrogance altogether and fly direct to Aberdeen. I don’t need

to look around and see how unwelcome I am. I know that feeling well enough. More to the point, I don't know how it feels not to have that feeling.

All that harping on about healthy eating while cars and factories poison the atmosphere, while building sites fire particulate matter into the air and get away with it. For sixteen years I lived two hundred metres from the Utrechtse Baan, four lanes of asphalt that pump hundreds of thousands of cars a day into and out of the city. The Hague has more cars per square metre than anywhere else in the country. No one's going to tell me our filthy air hasn't eaten away at the biological network around my heart.

Oh crap, and I smoke too.

And I'm stupid. I was a protestor myself once, waving my little banner with the best of them, up in arms at plans to build a system of flyovers between Hubertustracé and what is now the Utrechtse Baan. We won. Back then a demo or two could scupper a project once in a while. Those days are over. The government must be laughing itself silly at the protesting hordes clicking indignantly from the comfort of their home office. You can spend all day signing online petitions if you want to, not that they'll ever be read by the addressee. The computer and the internet: the cornerstones of the *1984* dictatorship George Orwell foresaw in 1949. What a man, what a mind, one of the first to write an anti-colonial novel into the bargain. That was in 1934, when here they were still singing the praises of the jolly old Dutch East Indies.

But back to the flyovers. We won, the visionary project was abandoned, and to this day we're being punished by snarl-ups and tailbacks on the Prince Bernhard flyover, the one structure the developers were allowed to cling to. Now one of the most toxic spots in all of Western Europe.

I lived in one of the grimy houses wedged under the armpit of the Utrechtse Baan. Ma lived there far too long herself. Even so, I hardly saw her and yes, her arteries were choking up too. Two of my neighbours, young women, non-smokers, died of cancer. The Hague is as polluted as Rotterdam, Amsterdam and Utrecht put together. The sea doesn't help. The sea is a con artist, the sea is a lie. Seaside living's not healthy at all. Not here it isn't. Too many toxic particles suspended in sea mists. Rolling in from England, where else? All the cities clumped together in the west of Holland are hotbeds of cancer and cardiovascular misery. Of stress, haste, aggression and fear. Ask for directions and people look at you like you're a terrorist, like your phone's a detonator. And off they jog, back home to their online forums to rail against the sugar content of fruit juice. The horrors of gluten. To extol the virtues of a

fish-based diet. No mention of the radioactive soup the fish swim in. Why complicate matters?

Protest. A good old rant. Now there's a way to up your stress levels. My generation rose up against everything. I'm a child of the protest generation, can't help that can I? Not allowed to get myself worked up anymore. Here at death's door, I get to learn a new life skill. Is there a textbook? A course? Meditation? Piss off with your meditation. I did Tai Chi for years... who knows, it might even have helped a little. Fun in any case, those spaced-out cats with their joss sticks, Tibetan tea and free love. Now we're the grey wave... no, we're the baby boomers. Slowly but surely, other generations are starting to wash their hands of us, to gripe about how much we cost them. But when it's our time for the furnace, they'll be the ones to inherit our savings. I know twenty-somethings whose parents have bought them a house, spoiled brats who start sobbing at the prospect of sharing a shower with a flatmate. I once shared lav, shower, kitchen, cooker and fridge with twelve other people in an old ruin of a house. Shared each other's partners too, once in a while – a girl has ructions with her boyfriend, asks if she can sleep over. And next day her mellow fella says, 'No worries, no worries...' Life as lived in the seventies, though the art was lousy, if not disastrous, and the music was unlistenable – people don't need good art in peace-loving times. Anyway, youngsters today are way too fat, have the thighs of heavyweight boxers, eat crap, drink crap, smoke crap and to cap it all they listen to crap. Hit the gym three months before the summer holidays, diet, cultivate a six-pack, look good for two months – if pumped-up Disney goldfish are your thing – give their all in the shagging world championships and then slump back into a consumerist rut, playing the hand of syndromes they've been dealt by shady psychiatrists with dubious links to cyborgs in the service of Big Pharma scum.

What the hell am I on about? My mind's on overdrive, I have to get some sleep, learn to nap between the nurses' rounds and the cleaners' rounds. Only 'having to' is bad for the heart, so first I have to learn not to have to.

Christ, there I go, chuntering on again. First I have to learn to stop chuntering. Unchunter. Is that a word?