

You were here before

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Johannes Driessen

Sum qualis eram
I am not who I was before

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Dominique

1

“They can go to hell, I won't!”

I have rarely been so angry. I don't often talk to myself either. The car comes to a brutal halt in the small car park at the entrance to the forest. A State Forestry Service post falls victim to my three-pronged parking manoeuvre. The markings on the car park are no match for the solid steel of the bumper. A couple on the adjacent forest path looks up in alarm. I make an apologetic gesture, pull the handbrake hard, take the key out of the ignition and get out.

The couple continued on their way, only to be startled again by the slamming of the door. My Defender's door may have been built to take a beating, but it can't have been the British car manufacturer's intention that the buyer of this off-roader should have to re-test the hinges.

I don't bother taking stock of the damage to the street furniture and the car.

My anger subsides for a moment as I open the back door and am greeted enthusiastically by Kibwana. The friendly Rhodesian Ridgeback wags at me from his shiny, wet muzzle to the tip of his tail. Everything about his slender, wheat-brown body is moving. He shakes his head excitedly, his big ears suddenly resembling flapping wings. Saliva flies from his mouth. His friendly, light-brown eyes seem to be looking straight at me.

‘What are you worried about?’ they seem to ask.

But I can still feel the anger from the conversation I had with the headmaster of my school about an hour ago. Anger at so much incomprehension. I don't understand at all. I had to get out of there, out of the school. To clear my head. I can only do that if I can walk my dog for hours on end, or walk across the moors or through the woods.

I had no students today, I was supposed to be in the building for a short meeting with the headmaster. Kibwana could stay in the car. I

had parked the Landrover with the windows half open, but locked, near the lyceum in the shade of a huge plane tree. A Ridgeback is the best car alarm imaginable. The impressive, broad head of the South African lion dog is sure to make any unwanted interest in my vehicle quickly disappear. I think there are usually nicer and faster cars on car thieves' wish lists. However, my car is in the top ten of ram-raiders' lists, and I naively assumed that would not include the daredevils who dare to confront a show-off.

After the unpleasant conversation at school, I hardly felt like going on the planned trip to the Zeeland coast. It was not going to be a nice beach walk for me and my dog today. During the long drive there, I start to worry, but I shouldn't. Forget it, they'll just have to sort it out.

Kibwana jumps out of the car, circles around me and then presses his front paws as high as he can against my chest. His mouth and mine are at the same level. He does not hesitate and I feel his wet tongue brushing my cheek.

"Yech, Kibwana!"

I push him away. He stands in front of me, wagging his tail in anticipation. Is he expecting a reward for this disgusting greeting? I wipe my face with my sleeve.

"Boy, oh boy. You don't do that! You're sweet, but you can exaggerate."

"You talk to your dog. Funny to hear."

I hadn't noticed the woman across the car park. She's standing next to a tomato red Mini with a black canvas top. An Austin Mini Cooper, a classic convertible. The lady has good taste. A woman in her late forties, I would guess, with something indefinably chic about her. Her exclusive, sporty clothes, the rather ostentatious jewellery on her neck, fingers and wrists, and the fact that she'd just come from the hairdresser's, put her in the category of women I've only ever known from afar. A lady who, like the owner of the mini, falls into the category of 'too beautiful & too expensive' and is therefore unattainable. I certainly don't go looking for them; I'm

afraid of being turned down. I never had such reservations about my female colleagues, my sister and my friends from the tennis club.

The woman must have noticed my discomfort. Before I can think of a clever answer, she apologises: “That's all right. I often talk to Mr. Jansen too, and sometimes I even think he understands me.”

It is immediately clear who Mr. Jansen is. She opens the door of the Cooper, a Beagle jumps out of the car and immediately approaches the Ridgeback. A metre away from the much larger dog, the little dog suddenly stops, puts its front legs in the sand and lets out a loud “Whoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo.” Kibwana is not impressed. He wags his tail, lowers his head and as the Beagle approaches, the Ridgeback slowly sinks through his front legs. Undaunted, Mr. Jansen steps up to Kibwana and lies down near the Ridgeback's head, their snouts touching for a moment.

“They get on very well together, I dare to say.”

“Mr. Jansen is a Beagle, isn't he? They have a reputation for being rather stubborn.”

“He listens when it suits him, which is not very often. I prefer to call it a particularly well-developed hunting instinct. Mr. Jansen chases everything that moves.”

“Kibwana hunts too, but he comes as soon as I call him. I am glad of that.”

“A beautiful dog. What breed is he, or is he not a pedigree dog?”

“Yes, it is. One with a pedigree from here to there. It's a Rhodesian Ridgeback, a dog bred by the Boers in South Africa to guard their homes and also to hunt big game. This breed is a cross between many European breeds and the native Hottentot dog. The latter probably gives the breed the strip of hair that runs in opposite directions down its back,” I say in the same breath as sharing my Wikipedia knowledge of the breed, secretly enjoying her interest.

“You know a lot about them,” the lady compliments. “I saw you pull into the car park. That didn't go very well. You slammed the door as if you were really angry. Would you like to talk about it? I'm a good listener.”

“No, I'm not. I'll be fine. Misunderstanding with the school authorities. They'll come round.”

“I'd like to go for a walk with you, if I may. Our dogs can walk together and I'd like to know more about you. You fascinate me.”

I should be flattered by the interest, but I'm looking for an excuse to walk my dog alone this afternoon.

“You have just returned from a walk in the woods with Mr. Jansen. I intend to cover quite a few miles. Is your dog still up to it?”

“You tell me. My name is Dominique, Dominique Offenbach. You'd be surprised how much energy the Beagle still has in his little body. We'll go for a walk with you.”

“Offenbach, the composer? Jacques Offenbach. Everyone knows the ‘can-can’ of *Orphée aux enfers*.”

I discover a little too late that my interest in music has started the very conversation I wanted to avoid.

2

I lock the car and the lady does the same with her Mini. The dogs run ahead of us on the forest path.

“Do you like classic music? The composer is actually my grandparent. Then we must go back seven generations. I think it is an interesting name. German-Jewish family. I kept my maiden name.”

“You are married?”

“Yes, to Louis. For almost twenty-eight years.”

I get the impression that this information is not shared with great enthusiasm. I don't ask any further.

“I am Johann. You write my name with a double 'n'. That's Norwegian, my mother is Norwegian.”

“I already had the feeling that there was something unusual about you. My instincts are rarely wrong. You also look athletic, you are quite tall. One metre eighty, I estimate. I think your ponytail is something special. You are beginning to look grey. Late forties, like me?” I'm immediately in madams rating.

“Do you want to tell me what's going on between you and your management?”

We turn into a forest path. Mr. Jansen and Kibwana run past at high speed, leaving a cloud of fine sand in their wake. Grains of sand appear between my teeth. Literally gritting our teeth, we walk behind the two troublemakers.

“Oh well, I shouldn't make such a big deal out of it. I'm just having a disagreement with them about how we're going to organise the next study trip for our students. You're not going to find it fascinating.”

“Apparently it's fascinating enough to make you very angry. Tell me about it anyway.”

“I'm a teacher in history at a high school. For the last fifteen years I have been organising the study trips abroad for the fifth and sixth formers grammar school. I have often done this together with a colleague who teaches foreign languages and a colleague who

teaches geography. To the complete satisfaction of pupils, parents and head teachers, we have been to Athens, Rome, Berlin, the trenches in Belgium and northern France, Auschwitz and Sobibór, the invasion beaches of Normandy.”

“Gosh, how interesting. I don't remember much of my high school years, but the school trips and especially the work weeks abroad are still vivid in my mind. It's nice you do this with your students!”

“This year we have a new colleague in German. This year we will be visiting Berlin. So I invited the new colleague to take on some organisational tasks. Well, she did it with enthusiasm! A few weeks later, the new colleague came to the rector with a detailed travel plan for the Dutch and German railways. She immediately let it be known that the coach trips I had been organising could be much more efficient and probably cheaper. The school board was interested and my colleague was given permission to make the arrangements. You can understand why I felt a bit left out. I didn't like it at all. I don't want to travel by train. It gives me the unpleasant feeling of being dependent on timetables, waiting in windy stations or missing connections. With a coach we have the freedom to go where public transport doesn't go. The coach driver becomes part of the group and adds a lot to the study trip. Of course, the underground takes you almost everywhere in Berlin. But you can easily lose students in a busy station or on a crowded train. No, I won't go if the school decides to go by train in future.”

“And you told the management that today?”

“They were not happy. According to the headmaster, I was the driving force behind these study trips. Former students immediately mention my name and the trip they went on with me when they talk about the school. No, the headmaster thinks I should go; he doesn't want the study trips to continue without my knowledge and experience. He didn't want to put a much younger and inexperienced colleague in charge of the study trip. I had to think about it.”

“And that's why we're walking here now.”

“Yes, but I've made up my mind: I'm not going to Berlin or Paris, Rome or Athens by train. It makes no sense at all.”

“Do you have something against trains? There are people who will never get on a plane. You can have something like that.”

“Not that I know of. We flew to Athens and Egypt with the exam classes. There was always a coach waiting for us at the airport. I can't imagine getting on Greek public transport with fifty students.”

“And trains?”

“Are you a psychologist? Why these questions?”

“Something like that. I have a practice for regression therapy. I often feel things that others don't. With you, I feel a huge aura around you. I noticed it when I was standing with you in the car park. It was as if you were blowing heat in my direction with a huge hairdryer. I immediately took a professional interest in you.”

“You know, I don't like this at all. Too much supernatural for me. I don't believe in it. It is not for me.”

“You don't have to. I have helped many people deal with unresolved events from their past. I have the gift to bring that back. You have to be open to it. But I'm not gonna tire you with it. I don't think it will work with you to put you into trance or hypnosis. I see you as someone who likes to be in control. You need to keep that control.”

“I don't need therapy, you know. There is nothing wrong with me. Nothing traumatic has happened to me in forty-eight years. Maybe I have had a bit of a boring life. I had a nice childhood. I was brought up in a loving family. I did well at high school and university; I got a nice job at the lyceum; I was always allowed to teach motivated students. I was to organise things in my school; I am good at it and I like it. And Kibwana lives with me for three years. He came to me when he was eight weeks old. We have a good time together. He fits in well with me, I think.”

“Oh, I think so too. But I don't like the fact that you have a conflict at school right now. I can feel how upsetting it is for you.”

We walk through the whole forest and reach the tavern at the second car park. On the terrace people are enjoying the early spring sunshine. We put the dogs on a leash.

“Would you like something to eat? I'd like a cappuccino, maybe they have apple-pie.”

“It’s my treat. Come on, there's a place in the sun over there.”

“Nice. I'm ready for this. This is a nice walk. It's a long way back. I have to watch the time. I'm expected home at six. I have another client tonight.”

The waiter takes the order.

“Shall I bring water for the dogs?” he asks; the man knows how to earn a big tip.

Coffee and apple-pie are brought. Kibwana and Mr. Jansen gulp down their water bowls. The waiter immediately brings more.

“Now you know all about me. Who is Dominique Offenbach? Tell me.”

“Ha, I was waiting for that. I am married and have three sons. Our boys have left home, all three are studying; we see them occasionally at the weekend or when they need money. My husband is an architect and has his office in Breda. I did my Masters in Psychology at the Free University of Amsterdam and then worked as a psychologist at the Van Mesdagkliniek. That was when I discovered that I had a paranormal sensitivity. That's why I took the course in reincarnation therapy.”

“How do you know that you are paranormal? Does it come naturally?” I detect a hint of sarcasm in my question.

The waiter brings us another cappuccino. The dogs are stretched out in the shade of the terrace table. Dominique takes her time before answering.

“At the clinic, I worked as a psychologist in the maximum security ward for the most difficult to approach and treat patients with an increased risk of aggressive behaviour. Few of my friends understood that I found this work extremely interesting and enjoyable.”

“I can imagine. Dealing with these offenders is not without risk.”

“Long before the first interview with a patient, I read up on the files. I usually have the patient's file in my mind when I arrive. I'm not so easily surprised. One day, the patient's photo was missing from a new file. A phone call to the administration office had quickly sorted it out. But by the time I went through the new patient's file, I

had a pretty clear idea of what he would look like. I neglected to have the photo delivered and had the new man brought into my office the next morning.”

“And?” I start to get really curious.

‘You are exactly as I imagined. I didn't have a photo of you, so I had to do with your file without your portrait. Gosh, you're even more handsome than I thought,’ I told him.

The flattery worked; the man let go of his reservations about carers. It turned into a pleasant conversation. The picture I had made of him was painfully accurate.”

“Did you do it again later on?”

“I wanted to know if it was just a coincidence. In consultation with my colleagues, I had the 'mug shots' removed before the intake for the files I would later have to deal with. After studying the file, I would make a portrait of the newcomer from memory and give it to a colleague to keep. I could usually tell by the look on his face that I was on the right track. We weren't making a game of it; I had discovered that I could form a vivid picture of a person from information about him or her. I see someone in front of me whom I have never seen before. I recognise someone I should not really recognise. I know things I could not know. It wasn't until I began to study reincarnation therapy that I discovered it must be paranormal.” I am silent for a moment. This world is not mine and it certainly won't be!

“That aura you felt with me, is it still there?”

“Your anger has gone, hasn't it? I suspect that the emotion released the aura within you. You are relaxed now. You will be more careful with your car later on, I think.”

I have indeed lost my resentment about the conversation with the headmistress. How did she do that? This woman is special; in one way or another, she brings me completely down. Not only by her charming appearance, but also by the way she talks and listens.

We walk back to the car park where we left our cars. The dogs still have an astonishing amount of energy left in them; they run ahead of us, looping around us through the tall overgrowth of ryegrass and

piping straw, and then seem to come at us at full speed. Kibwana, thanks to her tall legs, has little trouble staying ahead of little Mr. Jansen. The Beagle compensates for his lack of speed by barking loudly. Dominique films the scene with her iPhone. I try to stay out of sight.

We approached the car park, the dogs leashed up for the last stretch. “You haven't told me everything about yourself. I'm pretty sure there's more than you wanted to tell me today. I sense a barrier in you; it may not bother you, but there is definitely something there. You could arrange a session sometime. Here is my card. I have a practice at home in Wernhout. Think about it.”

“That's the second time today I've received this message. Don't count on it. I had a nice walk with you. Thank you for that.”

I want to shake her hand, but she comes closer, puts her arms on my shoulders and plants a kiss on my cheek.

I must have looked dazed, I thought afterwards.

“I like you. I'd like to see you again.”

She opens the door of the Austin and Mr. Jansen jumps in.

“See you soon. Call me or send me an e-mail.”

She takes a moment to fasten her seatbelt.

The twin exhausts of the Mini emit a low hum.

‘Even the sound of her car has class,’ I hear myself whisper.

She waves through the open door window and drives off.

3

What a week it has been. I am glad it is finally the weekend. It usually surprises me that there are two days off at the end of the week. I've never looked forward to a break in my teaching schedule. Teaching is my passion, but in the past week much of that enthusiasm has disappeared. It wasn't just my German colleague's repeated attempts to convince me of her great righteousness; I've also discovered that the principal has been talking to others about my position. One of my colleagues must have told a fifth form grammar school that the trip to Berlin would probably not take place because 'a teacher was counteracting'. The colleague did not mention my name.

"Has Berlin been cancelled because you're not coming, sir?" Ilse tries after class.

"You told us so much about it. We're really looking forward to it. You are coming, aren't you, sir?"

The pressure is clearly mounting on several levels.

The flyer in my letterbox on Friday morning is the last straw: Six days of Berlin in comfort by train. On the accompanying post-it note, my colleague wishes me a '*schönes Wochenende*' and asks me to think it over.

This will be a weekend with nice weather. Maybe beach weather. Two of my friends have an apartment in Domburg near the golf course with a view of the sea. They are in Switzerland for a fortnight; I can get the key to the penthouse from the caretaker, he knows about it.

In Domburg, I immediately get a pass for the car park underneath the apartment complex. My large Defender with roof rack was not expected; due to the limited headroom, it can be parked in the large private car park on the other side of the road. The pass works for this barrier too. I find a shady spot next to a tomato red Austin Mini Cooper convertible.

'It can't be that I'm meeting the therapist from Wernhout again,' I think aloud, 'Her car looks like this one, but it can't be.'

I have stayed in the apartment with the nice view before, when I was a guest here for a few days. Yvonne and Kathleen have been friends for many years. Two years ago they officially married and I was one of the witnesses. I find their two children's toys all over the penthouse. Before Kibwana starts playing with them, I collect them and put them in the safety of the children's room. In the guest room, the ladies have prepared a bottle of wine and two glasses for me. Unfortunately, I am on my own this weekend.

Kibwana tells me he needs to go to the toilet. He stands at the door, squeaking quietly. We hurry to the lift and just outside the compound he pees.

We walk down the dune path to the beach. Halfway there, I reach into one of my trouser pockets for a bag to clean up my dog's mess. Just as I do, an elderly couple walk by.

"Well done, sir. Everyone should do that."

"Everyone with a dog, you mean."

The couple looked at me for a moment, not understanding, and continued on their way.

Kibwana has done his job; I no longer have to feel embarrassed walking my dog on the beach while being watched by bathers.

It's almost five, time for a cool beer in one of the beach pavilions. At the entrance to the terrace, we are greeted by a young man with the restaurant's logo on his lapel. The waiter quickly scans the terrace.

"In or out of the sun, sir?"

I immediately point at my four-legged companions.

"Here are drinking troughs for dogs and there is a water tap," he points out. "Table two has just become vacant. You may sit there. My colleague will join you in a moment."

After a few minutes, when his colleague has just taken the order, I realise that I should have come here no later; the friendly host has to disappoint the guests who are now arriving. All the tables are taken.

I get a nice seat under a giant advertising parasol, and my happiness is enhanced by a cool glass of Belgian abbey beer and a cheese platter.

Kibwana is stretched out under the table. He is still catching the warmth of the spring sun with his head. Ridgebacks do well in the heat. He is also good in the cold. I have never seen him shiver in the cold during our winters. I will never put a warm dog coat on him when it gets chilly. I quickly feel sorry for an all dressed up dog and his owner.

At the entrance to the terrace, a young woman with a Ridgeback is arguing with the young man at the front of the restaurant. Unfortunately, there was no room for her and her dog. She will have to wait for a table comes available. Apparently the lady is not so easily persuaded. She points in my direction. I turn to see if there is another free table behind me. Alas, she will have to be patient. She doesn't. The discussion ends and the waiter comes to my table shrugging his shoulders.

"Sir, you only use half the table. Would you mind sharing it with the lady? She has also a dog with her."

"Of course not, if our dogs get on, I don't see any problem. Let her come."

"Very kind of you. Thank you."

Visibly relieved, the waiter goes back to the lady with the dog. In a few words, he probably explains my conditions to her.

The young woman reports at my table. She speaks German.

"How nice of you. A Rhodesian Ridgeback, a male too? Should I keep Chaka on this side?"

"No need, I think. Kibwana has already spotted him. Let him have a sniff. Please be seated."

The woman introduces herself as Christel, she comes from Potsdam near Berlin and has rented a holiday home with friends. The friends are going shopping in Middelburg today, but she doesn't feel like it.

"Besides, it is not very comfortable to go into town with a dog," she says.

"This is never a problem with Kibwana. There are not too many shops that he is not allowed in. He always behaves very well."

“Chaka is very different. He is a male who likes to leave his scent all over the place. This has led to some unpleasant situations.”

“Kibwana does that too, but I haven't had any unpleasant situations yet. Chaka, nice name. African?”

“It means 'warrior' in Zulu. A name that suits him, right?”

“Your dog is called Kibwana? Also special. Swahili?”

“Yes, Kibwana means 'young man' in that language. He is also a macho. He rarely tolerates other males around him, but he makes an exception for Ridgebacks.”

Chrístel orders a club sandwich and a latte macchiato. She treats me to a second abbeybeer.

“You must know Berlin. How would you 'do Berlin' with a group of thirty students aged seventeen, eighteen? I'm organising something like this for my school.”

I don't tell her that I'm in conflict with my colleagues and the headmaster about it. I was curious to hear her opinion.

“The metro takes you everywhere. The U-Bahn or the S-Bahn. Most places of interest are within walking distance of a metro station. Are you staying in a hotel or hostel? They are usually close to a metro station, even in the suburbs. This shouldn't be a problem.”

“We are staying in a hostel. They are designed for large groups. I have my reservations about travelling around the city by metro. Out of thirty students, there is always one who misses the train or gets off at the wrong station. I am responsible for the students I take with me.”

“If you explain the Berlin underground system to them and tell them where to get off, you can't go wrong. I often see groups of foreign students on the underground. And if something goes wrong, they have their smartphones to call you, don't they?”

“Actually, I hadn't thought of that. They just need to make sure they have enough credit and a charged phone. Thank you very much. I'll think about it.”

We pay and walk to the beach.

“Are dogs allowed to run free here?”

“No, they're only allowed after seven o'clock. It wouldn't be wise with the bathers. Further along towards the Westkappelle Zeedijk they are allowed to run free. There are hardly any bathers. This stretch is very popular with windsurfers and kite surfers. Let's walk that way.”

In the meantime, Christel points out a number of places in the German capital that are really worth a visit, but where hardly any tourists come. Especially in the part of the city that used to be part of the former German Democratic Republic. I immediately save the tips in my mobile phone.

By train after all? I am still not entirely convinced.

Chaka and Kibwana run along the tide line in front of us. A suicidal dachshund yelps at them. His owner rushes to get him back and, at the right moment, lifts him high above the charging Ridgebacks.

Our dogs had definitely left the little dog alone; it was a few sizes too small for them.

A few hundred yards away, a Alsatian got up from the pit his master had dug for him. The dog has noticed the two running Ridgebacks and is slowly making his way to the water's edge. The hairs on his back stand up. In a Ridgeback this is a breed characteristic, in a Alsatian it is a sign of aggression.

Christel has seen this too. We call Chaka and Kibwana back. Chaka hesitates for a moment, but when he sees that Kibwana immediately turns and comes to me, he follows.

The sheepdog no longer feels threatened and returns to his owner. The man in the beach chair next to the dog pit has not even woken up.

“Let's go back. Seems better to me,” I suggest.

“My friends will be back from Middelburg by now. We still have to cook. Would you like to join us? We always cook for too many people. You're alone here, aren't you?”

“I'm sorry, I made a reservation for tonight at the little restaurant in the village. I had to talk a lot to get them to allow me to take Kibwana in. I do not like leaving him in the flat.”

“Too bad. We have a friend who is about your age. She is also single. I guess you will like her. She is also very sporty and loves dogs.”

Christel and her Zulu warrior walk along the beach to the village. Kibwana and I take the shell path back to the apartment complex. I am ready for an hour's bath. Kibwana immediately seeks the warmth of the balcony.

4

Sunday. A beautiful day, the sun provides a temperature above twenty-five degrees. A little sea breeze makes it pleasant on the beach. I hadn't seen Christel and her friends from Berlin on Saturday. I was curious to see my sporty bachelor friend.

On this last day on the Zeeland coast, I wanted to take a long walk along the beach. From here it would be ten kilometres along the coast line via Westkapelle to Zoutelande. One or two hours there and two hours back. A terrace halfway for lunch. Plenty of water and a drinking bowl for Kibwana in the daypack.

We take the shell path along the golf course to the beach.

“Sir! Hello, sir. Over here!”

A boy holds up a golf club from a tee on the golf course. Fedde, from the fifth form grammar, I recognise him immediately by his reddish hair. His friends call him ‘Ginger’. I have to be careful not to do the same by mistake.

The boy apologised to the company he was playing golf with and came to the fence.

“Gosh, sir. You there! How nice! And this is the Rhodesian Ridgeback you keep talking about. What a beautiful dog! Weekend in Zeeland? Are you alone with your dog? I heard that Berlin might be cancelled, but that's not true, is it, sir?”

Fedde has never asked me so many questions at once before. I'm not going to answer them either.

An interested counter-question seems more appropriate at the moment.

“I didn't know you play golf. Do you play with family or friends?”

“That's my father. My brother is playing now and his girlfriend has just hit the ball into the rough. That's going to be a search. I have to get back. Nice to see you here. See you Monday!”

I follow the four golfers for a while. Fedde salutes again.

Nice guy; they're all nice students in that fifth form. It would indeed be a pity if their study trip to Berlin was cancelled because I didn't go along.

The beach is very busy. Kibwana must be kept on a leash in this area. We find the quickest way to the waterline between the towels and beach chairs. It is less crowded there. The sea is still too fresh for many swimmers. The spring sun has warmed the sand on the beach more rapidly than the seawater.

It is a lot easier to walk across the newly dry strip at the water's edge, and after walking across the dry beach for a while, a lot of sand rises up in your shoes. Kibwana keeps a wary eye on the rolling waves. He is not very fond of water. It must be very hot in the summer for him to swim and cool off. If he swims at all, it is by accident.

At beach post fifty-one, a couple of naturists are cautiously trying to get completely wet, hesitantly venturing further and further into the sea. I find them brave. I don't like going to the nude beach; either the nudity on display looks so distasteful that you want to throw on a big towel, or a lady is so incredibly beautiful in all her nudity that it takes an effort not to stare at her. Either way, it feels uncomfortable. With my eyes on the horizon, I continue towards the next beach where Kibwana can run as much as he likes.

Suddenly there is a loud sound coming from the nudist beach to my right: 'Whoo-hoo-hoo!' A Beagle emerges from under a parasol and runs towards us. Under the parasol, a naked woman quickly sits down. She slides her sunglasses from her forehead to her nose. "Jansen! Come here!"

I recognise the regression therapist. Mr. Jansen is standing in front of Kibwana with his little tail wagging. He wants to play with his big friend.

I keep my dog on a short leash.

Dominique comes running up. I can hardly take my eyes off her beautiful body. She is beautifully slender, and her breasts make me wonder if they are natural or bought. She is beautiful even without her fancy outfit. She lifts her little dog.

"Hi, you're here too. It's a coincidence. Come and sit with me. I've chilled a bottle of rosé. It would be a shame to drink it alone."

“We are on our way to Zoutelande; we had planned this walk for today. Tomorrow I'll be back for school; a walk along the beach that's what I need.”

“You can get a breath of fresh air here. There's a nice breeze from the sea; you don't have to go to Zoutelande to get some fresh air. Come on, I'm over there.”

Submissively, I let myself be led to her sunbathing spot with a parasol. I feel a little embarrassed walking next to this beautiful naked lady in my clothes. I try to focus my attention on the dog, that follows neatly on a leash beside me, so I don't have to look at the naked people around me.

I've never sat down so quickly on a beach before; dressed bathers attract attention here, I tell myself.

“Take some clothes off, man. It's allowed here,” Dominique encourages me, “You can use a bit of colour. You still have your winter skin. You have a nice body, no belly like many men your age.”

“I've never done so before. I don't think I'll like it.”

“Actually, it might not be so bad for you at all. Apart from your mother and the doctor, more people haven't seen you naked, is it?”

“They have, but this was different. This is public. Other times it was in the privacy of the bedroom or in my sister's studio. This is a different exposure.”

“Your sister's studio? Now you're really making me curious. Tell me.”

The only concession I make to the naturists around me is to take off my shirt, shoes and socks. Everything else stays on.

“Nothing special, you know. My sister has the top floor of our house and she has set up her studio there. I sometimes pose when she gives painting lessons or a sculpture workshop.”

Dominique hands me the ice-cold bottle of rosé and a corkscrew. She holds two glasses expectantly.

I have to push Kibwana's curious snout away to uncork the bottle.

I pour the glasses and put the half-full bottle back in the cooler.

“Cheers! To your study trip to Berlin! Have you decided yet? You are going, are you?”

“I don't know yet. I keep having doubts.”

“You'll get there, just trust yourself. But tell me, you live with your sister? Don't you have a partner? Were you married?”

A glass of rosé on a sunny beach, in the company of a beautiful woman, a little breeze from the sea to keep your head cool, is now indispensable.

“I have never been married. I have had relationships with women; somehow I always ended them. I have never been able to find the fault in the other person. Apparently I am not very good at this. I get on well with my sister; we are really mates. We always have been. She is two years older than me. I always thought it was cool that my sister went to St Joost. I was very proud of her when she rode off to the art academy in the city centre on her colourful bike with a big portfolio of drawings. My room is full of her drawings. There are her sculptures in the back garden. Our parents died quite young and in quick succession. We were still living at home. I was twenty-seven. Freya was just beginning to become famous; her paintings and sculptures were selling well. I had my job at the lyceum. We were able to buy our parents' house together.”

“Wow, how special. You have the ground floor and your sister lives upstairs. Is it a big house?”

“You can say that. A detached mansion on the Baronielaan in Breda. We used to live on the upper floors, and our parents' practices were on the ground floor. Mum was a general practitioner and had the entrance to her practice on the right; dad's patients used the left door. My father was a psychiatrist. Sometimes someone would make a mistake with the door. It made for some funny scenes. There was a lot of laughter in our home.”

Kibwana dugs in and Mr. Jansen lays down next to him.

“Cute, those two,” Dominique says.

I realise now that I have hardly eyes for the naked body next to me; somehow the therapist manages to get me to say things that I have scarcely shared with others.

“Your mother was a doctor, that might be convenient. A psychiatrist for a father seems more complicated; they look with different eyes, don't they?”

“It wasn't so bad. In the first place, he was a father like any other; he read to us at bedtime, stood by the field on Saturdays when we played hockey, went to parents' evenings at school, made sure we had great holidays, and you could always turn to him for good advice. We only discovered the psychiatrist in him when he was one step ahead of us. It was impossible to lie to him. That was at times embarrassing.”

“You had a good childhood?”

“Yes, I did. There was very little conflict with our parents. My sister was quite a wild child; she still is. Our parents never said anything when she had her umpteenth boyfriend over or came home late from a party. Freya, in Norse mythology the goddess of lust and love; my parents could not have come up with a better name. We had relaxed parents. When I smoked my first joint in my room, my mother noticed. She joined in and took a few puffs. I got almost everything I wanted, although I had to talk a lot before my father bought me a moped. We had good parents. It is a shame that we had to miss them so early. I'm sure they would have liked it if my sister and I sticking together.”

“Sounds good. And yet there is something that upsets your balance. I can't put my finger on it. Maybe next time you will. Another thing: you pose naked for your sister and her students. And here you keep your trousers on? I don't understand.”

“Maybe I am ashamed to literally expose myself in public. It gives me a very uncomfortable feeling of vulnerability.”

“You think so; it doesn't have to be like that. Try it. Take off your trousers and you'll see that no one will be surprised.”

“I don't think so.”

“Boy, are you a hero! Let me pour you another drink.”

“Can I ask you something? When I arrived here on Friday afternoon, I thought I recognised your Austin Cooper in the car park at the front of the village. I parked my Defender next to it. It's a nice shady spot. Do you live in the block of flats by the golf course?”

“Yes, we're renting from a German owner for the weekend. Do you live there too? Do you have your own flat here?”

“No, I don't, it belongs to two friends. The penthouse on the top floor. I can almost see the English coast. I can stay there. Are you alone here?”

“No, unfortunately not. Louis is here for two days of golf with friends and business associates. I get to be the loving husband of the successful architect. You're not taking your trousers off today? Too bad, too bad, boy.”

We stay on the beach for a few more hours. The dogs enjoy the warmth. Mr. Jansen is tempted to go into the sea a number of times. Kibwana keeps her feet dry.

At six we break up. We walk back to the complex along the shell path. Mr. Jansen and Kibwana have gone for a pee.

“Too bad I didn't get to see you naked. Another time. We could make an appointment to come here again. Maybe I should take a nude painting workshop at Freya's.”

In the lift, as the door to the second floor slides open and Dominique steps out, she quickly presses a kiss to my mouth. I taste the rosé.

I shouldn't drive back to Breda tonight, I don't think it's a good idea after half a bottle of rosé. I'll stay here one more night. Tomorrow I have to get up early, change the bed, take Kibwana for a walk and make sure I'm in time for classes at half past nine. I have to set the alarm. I'll have a pizza delivered first.

5

In the weeks following the unpleasant conversation with the rector, no one mentioned the study trip to Berlin. There was no more talk of it in the staff room. Even the fifth form didn't come to ask if I had made a decision. It was almost as if a collective agreement had been reached to leave the subject alone for a while. It may have been clear to those concerned that I was trying to sort things out for myself in peace and quiet. Yet this silence is uncomfortable.

That must have been the reason why I started talking about it myself to the students in the fifth form.

"I'm not very much looking forward to the train journey to Berlin. I really enjoyed the bus trip. I don't really know what to expect from a train journey. Travelling by underground in the capital seems stressful to me. The bus driver waited patiently when a group of pupils were a bit late, because they got lost or because the terrace was so cosy. I really don't know."

Ilse is the first to try to convince me: "You're never stuck in traffic on the train. We have often been stuck in traffic for hours on our way to the winter sports resorts because of accidents or road works. From now on we will take the train to the snow. The train is relaxing, sir."

"We went to Paris in the second form some years ago. The coach dropped us off at a metro station in one of the suburbs. We saw all the highlights of the city in one day, thanks to the metro. You fly under the city. You have to watch out for pickpockets," says Dimitri. "Sir, I think we can get there faster by train than by bus. That leaves more time to see everything, doesn't it? Is the train cheaper than the coach?"

"It was a little cheaper, I think. Mrs. Van Basten-Batenburg has found out. I can ask her for you."

"No need, sir. We'll ask her ourselves. We'll ask her in German the next lesson. She'll like that."

Godelieve said nothing; I noticed she looked at me intently throughout the conversation, she seemed to be thinking deeply.

“Sir, did you ever have a bad experience on a train as a child? Do you ever travel by train?”

Godelieve could easily be an apprentice to Dominique Offenbach.

“Not that I know of. No, I never travel by train. I only know from hearsay that as a baby I had a terribly smelly nappy on the train to 's-Hertogenbosch. My mother was alone in a compartment and changed me just before the train stopped at Geldermalsen. Many people were boarding and before my mother could remove the dirty nappy from the seat opposite her, a man had sat down on it. My mother did not dare say anything to the man. I have heard the story of the nappy on many birthdays. I think it was the only unpleasant thing I ever experienced on a train. I was a baby.”

“And yet something like that could have an effect,” Godelieve sighs.

The following week, I bump into the headmaster in the corridor, accompanied by my German colleague. The classes had changed and I used the opportunity to get a quick cup of coffee in the staff room. I know very well that this is not allowed. The headmaster makes no comment. That's not so bad at all.

“Have you given any more thoughts to the study trip to Berlin?”

“I have thought about it, yes. I don't know yet. I need another week. The fifth form has almost convinced me.”

“They're a nice form. I like teaching them. I think it's a good group to take with us to Berlin. In any case, I would be delighted if you would come along. And the fifth form is more or less counting on you coming along, I heard,” says my colleague Van Basten-Batenburg.

I greet her and disappear with my illegal coffee into my classroom, where a third form of vwo has just arrived.

Last week, the third form went to the Binnenhof, where they watched the proceedings of the Parliament from the public gallery and were given a tour of the building of the House of the Upper Parliament. I hope I can make some use of this today when I talk

about the creation of the Staten Generaal in the Burgundian Empire of Philip the Good. I fear, however, that three-vwo will have more memories of 'the hour off' on the boulevard of Scheveningen.

Nevertheless, I will try to present this piece of Dutch history with enthusiasm. History. Most of the students to whom I teach this subject will not go on to study history, but will go on to become teachers, historical researchers, writers or journalists, museum workers, ambassadors to the People's Republic of China, deputy prime ministers, prime ministers or even king of our country. For most students, history is the subject they choose to study when other subjects are less attractive. I see it as my job to make history as interesting as possible for them. I hope to pass on some of this enthusiasm every time I teach; today to three-vwo pupils.

It is half past two. I'm done for today. This time I don't have a team meeting or other meetings, so I can go home. It takes me ten minutes by bike. I only take the car when it's raining cats and dogs. I hate it when my students come to class soaking wet. The smell somehow reminds me of horse blankets. I like to keep myself as dry as possible.

I park my bike in the front garden. My sister's bike is there; she is at home. Our bikes are never locked here; respectable neighbourhood, no one steals here. Our bikes have been here for over forty years; no one has ever taken them. Sometimes I forget to lock the Landrover. I have never missed anything in my car. I usually discover my negligence when I take Kibwana out in the evening.

Freya is in her studio. I hear Wagner blaring from her far too expensive sound system.

Kibwana comes to greet me enthusiastically. His whole body is happy that I am back. I put his collar on and take his leash from the cloakroom. There is a coat hanging there that I don't recognise. My sister doesn't wear such things. She must have visitors.

I close the front door behind me and immediately realise that I have left my house key on the cupboard in the hallway. Freya is home, I won't have to break in later.

The Mastbos is a ten minute walk from home. Kibwana goes potty at the foot of the beech trees that make Baronielaan an 'avenue'.

At the small car park at the entrance to the walking forest, a red Mini with a black canvas roof catches my eye. Will I see the Wernhout therapist here too? Three times can't be a coincidence! She knows I live in the Baronielaan. I'm not anxious for a renewed meeting with the lady who sees auras around me and is sure that I have suffered a trauma. Nevertheless, I walked through the Mastbos, looking for a woman with a Beagle. I don't know if I should be relieved that I haven't met her here today. Kibwana plays with the other dogs, does his thing and I put the poo bag in the container near the playground. I have a nice chat with the owner of a lovely Bernese Mountain Dog and then head home.

I have forgotten my house key. I can still hear the German composer's Lohengrin echoing through the house. Freya will not hear the doorbell, but I try anyway. Two seconds after I stopped ringing, the music stopped. I ring again. The door swings open. Dominique stands in the doorway with a big smile.

"Surprise!"

You can say that again! She's the last person I expected to see on my doorstep. I should have reacted enthusiastically, but I calmly take Kibwana's collar off and send him inside. The Wernhout woman has to step aside to let my dog pass and I immediately follow. Dominique has to stand aside for me. Our bodies touch. Dominique looks deep into my eyes. I look away. I walk into my living room. Behind me, I hear Dominique close the front door and she follows me into my room.

"What are you doing here? Did my sister let you in? How did you know where I live?"

"Nice welcome!"

"I'm sorry, but this is too much for me. Please have a seat. How did you know where I live? I told you we live on Baronielaan, which is a mile and a half long; there are over two hundred houses. Don't tell me you had a paranormal inspiration and went to the right door!"

“You told me that you live detached and that you have a front door on the left and right side of the house. There are only a few detached houses in this street. At one of the houses, I asked the neighbour who was working in the front garden if he could tell me whether a general practitioner had lived there. The man could remember very well that your parents lived in the big house opposite. The doctor's children still live there, he told me. Simple detective work.”

“Freya just let you in?”

“Yes, I told her that I am your friend and that you were expecting me. She also thought it was a little odd that you went with Kibwana all of a sudden.”

“You are quite cheeky, don't you think?”

“Then I would never have met that interesting sister. She makes beautiful things. That nude of yours in bronze, have you any idea how much she charges for it?”

“Do you like it? I have no idea. She has it cast by a company with the 'lost-mould method'. That seems to be quite expensive. You lose the original wax and the mould is broken after casting to bring out the sculpture. I think you have to bring along a big wallet for a statue of that size. I'll inquire for you later on.”

“You're probably wondering why I sought you out here. Yes, how can I put this? I was expecting a message from you pretty soon after the meeting in Domburg. I had the feeling that there was a click between us and that you might want to see me more often; at least I do. You have something that intrigues me, professionally and personally. Usually, I notice it quite easily; with you, it takes more effort. I'm curious: how did it go at school in the last few weeks? Have you already made a decision for yourself?”

“No, honestly, I haven't. My mind tells me to give in to the request of the principal for the sake of my students and to go along with the proposals of my colleague. My feeling tells me something else. I don't know anymore.”

“How many times have you arranged study trips abroad for your school so far? Did anything ever happen that made you feel guilty? You are someone who likes to be in control. Are you afraid that you won't have enough control over the trip to Berlin?”

“You keep digging, don't you? I can't remember any unpleasant incidents; it's always gone smoothly. This will be my fifteenth study trip. Three to Rome, one to Egypt, five to Greece, now the fourth to Berlin and two to Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland.

Wait a minute... I remember a terrible incident in the death camp. Something with a girl from the sixth form, let me call her Anna, about six years ago. She became very upset when we saw the piles of shoes of the murdered people in one of the barracks. Among the thousands of shoes, she suddenly pointed to two red children's shoes in a panic. She hyperventilated and we had to take her outside immediately. One of my colleagues was allowed to pick up the shoes. You could see the panic in the girl's eyes again.

The supervisor wiped the dust off the children's shoes and discovered that a name had been scratched into the soles. It was the same first and last name as Anna's! I took her aside, she had to get out of there. We walked along the bare fence of the camp. She cried, she hugged me, I let her cry on my shoulder. When she looked up, she saw that I was crying too. The horrors that I had told my pupils about the Holocaust suddenly came to life.”

My voice trailed off; I had to swallow.

“And Anna is Esther Rothstein?”

“How do you know that?”

I am stunned!

“I know the story. Esther is my client. I can't tell you what's going on with her; I need her permission. I'm not going to tell you anything now. I can ask her in a next consultation. She certainly remembers her history teacher.”

“She graduated cum laude, I remember. She went to study. In Leiden. Biochemistry, something to do with bacteria and viruses. She must have graduated by now. I would like to meet her again.”

“She has had a hard time, but maybe she will tell you herself.”

“That event in Poland had a huge impact on me. That I had almost forgotten something like that.”

"Oh, our memories do strange things to us. You don't want to know what unpleasant events from our lives are repressed and still cause problems. That's my business, boy."

This 'boy' is starting to bother me; Dominique is getting too close.

"It could be that the incident with Esther is still with you. It was a situation in which you lost control. You are sure of yourself when you are travelling in a coach, but on a train you are afraid of losing control."

I let that sink in; she might be right.

"Tea or coffee? What do they usually serve when someone comes to visit here?"

"Oh, sorry. Careless of me. What would you like?"

"You look like the type for one of those fancy coffee machines, do you have one? I would like a cappuccino or a latte. I also like flavoured tea. Do you have one of those boxes you can choose from?"

"I'll have coffee. I can make eleven different kinds of coffee on my machine."

"I'll have a cappuccino, Mr. Barista."

I go into the kitchen to make the coffee.

Freya calls from my living room.

She has come downstairs and is sitting on the sofa.

When I come back with the coffee, the ladies are haggling over the price of the bronze nude. The amount they eventually agree on could pay for a two-week luxury cruise to Norway. And that is exactly what Freya intends to do with the money. All inclusive, no doubt, with a supplement for a single cabin on the upper deck and a place at the captain's table for dinner.

6

From my natural stone pedestal, my buttocks face the cows in the meadow behind the property. In my bronze nudity I look out over the perfectly manicured garden with its mossy lawn and colourful borders to the beautiful bungalow.

Through the wide patio doors we can see how the sunlight plays on the bronze.

“You look beautiful there,” says Dominique.

“I would have preferred a female nude, but it's your sculpture, dear,” Louis remarks.

Today I met with the architect from Breda. A small, corpulent man with a full, reddish beard. His heavy glasses are very strong. The curvature of the lenses makes his eyes look like those of a fish.

Jesus, you must have really good eyes to see through those glasses! I swallow the compliment anyway; after all, I'm a guest here and I don't know the man.

I wonder what it was about this man's charm that made Dominique fall in love with him.

Today Freya had the statue delivered to Wernhout. Two strong movers placed the statue on its pedestal. Freya came with the van; she wanted to take down the crate herself. I took Kibwana for a walk after school and came straight here to pick up my sister. The Ridgeback now sleeps in the boot of the Landrover.

“The statue needs to be blessed. I have an appropriate bottle of wine,” Louis announces.

“Yes, dear. I'll take four glasses.”

“Not for me. I have to drive. I'll just have a juice,” I manage to say quickly.

“And I can. I'm being driven,” Freya rejoices.

My sister has never refused anything with alcohol in it; it's a blessing for all road users that she never got her driving licence.

The architect returns a little later with a bottle, which he displays like a gem in the palm of his hand.

"We had a Dom Pérignon Brut from 2010. For about two hundred euros it should be quite good."

I don't bother to inquire for the price of the orange juice...

Louis opens the bottle with the expertise of a sommelier. Not a drop is lost when he pours it.

"Well done, sants!" the host toasts.

"To the bronze guy," I joke.

Wrong remark, nobody laughs.

A deafening whoop saves me.

"Mr. Jansen has discovered Kibwana," says Dominique, "I'll go there. Is your car open?"

"I rarely lock it, especially when Kibwana is in it. I will walk with you. Is there somewhere the dogs can go for a walk?"

"There is a forest nearby where they can run free."

She turns to her husband and Freya: "You'll be all right here? There's a plate of snacks in the kitchen."

She empties her glass in one gulp.

At the Landrover, the Beagle makes noise for three. The Ridgeback looks past the spare wheel on the back door in amazement at the little troublemaker.

"The country roads and cart tracks here are not asphalted. I think that is the charm of this Brabant landscape. I like living here," says Dominique after a moment of silence.

We walk through the meadows and fields to a modest forest of flying pines and birches.

"Dogs can run free here?" I ask, having already loosened the musket buckle to Kibwana's leash.

"Yes, there is no game here. The roes stay on the other side of the E19; the Belgian part has to be hunted regularly," Dominique knows, "I sometimes get invited there for a hunting party."

"Really?" my voice must have been full of surprise.

"Yes, of course. I have a hunting and firearms licence for both the Netherlands and Belgium. From the time I could hold a gun, my father gave me my own. Dad was a passionate hunter and it seems

it's in my genes too. We have a meadow behind the house. I sometimes practice clay pigeon shooting there.”

“You never cease to amaze me.”

“Louis doesn't like it. He only lets me practise when he's away. He is afraid of guns and loud bangs. That's why we moved to the country; we don't have fireworks here on New Year's Eve. In his childhood, Louis used to panic at the beginning of December because of the firecrackers his friends set off. We later found out that in a previous life he was killed at the Battle of Waterloo. He was a Prussian soldier.”

The firmness with which Dominique told me this forced me to remain silent. I will not ask any questions about it.

I leave aside my assumption that Louis, as a small child, cried out in vain for his mother during thunderstorms.

Mr. Jansen and Kibwana run ahead of us. They disappear into the tall grass between the trees. There are no wide forest tracks here. We follow a very small trail that is too narrow to walk side by side. The Ridgeback crosses our path a few times, followed at some distance by a loudly barking Beagle.

We come to a clearing in the woods. The ground is covered with starry moss and fescue. Dominique chooses a nice spot and sits down. Without saying a word, Dominique points to the empty spot next to her. She invites me to sit down too. As soon as I sat down, Kibwana joins me. He lies down at my feet. Mr. Jansen continues to pace restlessly around us.

“How do you like Louis?” the therapist asks.

What can I say?

I pull out all the stops of diplomacy I can muster: “Nice guy, likeable.”

That's all I can come up with; I'm afraid Dominique has found out.

“Boring guy, you mean. He's certainly not handsome, is he?”

“Those are not my words.”

“I can see you thinking it. I have this gift, remember.”

“Oh, well, no doubt he's fond of you. Otherwise you wouldn't have stayed so long, would you?”

“You can't call him exciting. Then you are much more fascinating. And more handsome.”

I stand up. Dominique comes too close to my comfort zone with these last remarks.

“Do you want to move on? This is a nice place. We can talk freely.”

“I don't know if I want to, Dominique. Come on, let's go.”

“Pity, I like it so much here with you. Come and sit down for a while.”

“Let's be sensible, girl. Let's go.”

Dominique rises up with obvious reluctance. This was not how she had imagined this walk with the dogs.

Mr Jansen and Kibwana run ahead of us, disappearing into the tall grass beside the forest path, then catching up again. These two are tireless.

“I have spoken to Esther. I would have forgotten all about it. If I am to believe her, you were one of the better teachers and mentors at the school. She started talking enthusiastically about your lessons. You turned every lesson into a feast, if I understood her well. You knew how to make boring lessons interesting. She became very happy when she started talking about you.”

“Esther is exaggerating, you know,” I moderate.

“She would be delighted to meet you again after all these years. I told her how we met and what I experience in your presence. She found it so special that she suggested the next session with her should be with you. What do you think?”

“I'm not going to be hypnotised!”

“Of course not. It's Esther's session. I rarely use hypnosis to retrieve memories. Sometimes a client will go into a light trance to relive a past experience. I then have the gift of seeing what is being told in images and hearing it in sounds. I like to call it highly sensitive. The hardest part is then getting the information back to the client. With Esther it went very well; I think she will tell you herself.”

“Esther Rothstein. I'm really curious to know how she is doing now.”

The dogs find a place on the terrace. The tiles are warmed by the sun. The temperature is pleasant for the dogs' bodies and Mr. Jansen and Kibwana immediately stretch out. Dominique opens the sliding door and shows me the way to the kitchen. The bowl of snacks is half empty. The bottle of Dom Pérignon Brut 2010 is in the wastepaper basket. You can't get a drop out of it anymore.

In the living room, overlooking the recently opened sculpture garden, Freya and Louis have started on a second bottle, costing another two hundred euros. They don't notice us standing in the doorway.

Louis has his glass at eye level and inspects it with a carpenter's eye: "Made from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grapes. On the nose, the bright sweetness of tropical fruits: green mango, melon and pineapple, my dear Freya. Then it gives way to milder notes, the tingle of orange peel, the mist of a tangerine."

Louis imparts his knowledge of wine to my half-drunk sister. She hangs lifelessly on the sofa, pretending to listen to his entreaties.

"So, it's been fun," interrupts Dominique, the husband, "and you left some for us?"

"Come to think of it, it's a nice statue," the wine connoisseur avoids answering the question.

"Freya, let's go back to Breda. I don't have any food for tonight, I have to go shopping," I try to get through to my relative.

"You can eat here. I'll make something later."

"Don't bother. I am taking the artist with me. The sculpture has been richly blessed and the sculptor has also been richly blessed."

Dominique gives me an understanding look.

"You're right. I'll go with you."

"Louis, it was great fun. You just come and pose once, Dominique knows where we live," Freya speaks with a double tongue.

Who knows what the two of them agreed on when we walk the dogs, I wonder. The architect in bronze, that's going to be expensive!

On the way back, I don't get much attention from my sister, who has fallen asleep in the car seatbelt. I gently push her head back onto the headrest. She snores.

Fortunately, I find a parking space near the house. Freya has no idea that we have stopped. She doesn't even notice that I'm bringing Kibwana in first.

The distance from the Landrover to her front door is painful; I see the curtains move at the neighbours' house across the road. Freya's arm hangs over my shoulder; I try to support her as best I can. She is dragging two rubber legs.

Once inside, I decide to spare her the ordeal of the steep stairs to her living and working space. I have taken her up in the same condition before. Tonight she can stay in my guest room.

Totally unwilling, she lets herself be stripped down to her underwear on the guest bed. I didn't know she had a tattoo. I tuck her in. I witch on the night lamp.

“Please sir, will you come to my session with the therapist?”

“Eh, who am I speaking to?”

“Esther, sir. Esther Rothstein, remember?”

„Ah yes, Esther! It's been a long time, girl. How are you? What have you been up to?”

The appointment with Dominique has slipped my mind; the paranormal, the high sensitivity, as the Wernhout woman likes to call it, hardly fascinates me. It has been a while since we have heard from Dominique; the last time was when Freya delivered her statue. I am curious to know how one of my best students has been getting on since high school.

“I'm doing quite well now. It was a lot less for a while, but now it's going well. But I'll tell you about it later.”

“You're making me curious. Do you work or study?”

“It's a complicated story, sir. I don't know if I should bother you with it.”

“Come on. I'm not into the easy stuff, you know that.”

“I am a senior technician/analyst in biochemistry and microbiology at Oxford Global Resources in Leiden.”

“What am I to make of that, Esther?” I have no idea what she does; she certainly impresses me with that title.

“You asked for it, sir! One of the things I try to do is to detect the specific binding of antigens and antibodies in the blood, serum or other body fluids of humans or animals, and thereby possibly contribute to the diagnosis of an infectious or autoimmune disease. I have been working intensively on this for the past year. And now I'm looking at high-performance liquid chromatography, a method for separating different types of proteins, for example.”

I dizzy for a moment. Is this Esther Rothstein? My Esther? The girl with the red children's shoes that were laced together in Auschwitz?

“Absolutely clear, Esther. So you are busy. Something else, you're doing the sessions with Dominique Offenbach and I'm allowed to attend, I understand.”

“Yes, you were there when I had the flashback from my past life. I would like to show you how well I have come out of it thanks to the therapy. I have a session every now and then to make sure I don't relapse. It's not scary, you know.”

“Dominique has probably told you that I am quite sceptical about her therapy and her paranormal gift. I will be there for you, not for Dominique and certainly not for myself.”

“Ha, I know that tone from your lessons, sir. No nonsense, just facts; you were always very convincing. I look forward to it. We'll meet in Wernhout. It's on a Saturday, is that convenient for you? Dominique has tentatively scheduled the 23rd at eleven o'clock. We didn't know if that would be convenient for you.”

“Yes, I can make it. How will you get there? Shall I pick you up at the station in Breda? Shall we drive together?”

“I can just about afford a car, sir. I'll pick you up. Baronielaan, right?”

“I'll have to get a sitter for my dog. I'll manage. I'll be ready at ten.”

Today the Baronielaan is busier than on other days. On this Saturday, it seems that half of Ginneken goes into town through our street and from the city centre a lot of people go to the Mastbos. Lots of cars and even more cyclists make for a very busy street. Suddenly there was a sound I had never heard before. It was like the sound of a racing car, but then refined, almost chic. Cyclists look up, some step down. A big, white, sporty SUV makes its way through the traffic and parks next to my Landrover. The oncoming cyclists have to make a slight detour, but they don't seem to mind. Thumbs up to the driver. She is successful with her Poseidon Trident logo car.

“Get in, sir,” Esther calls from behind the wheel of the Maserati Levante.

I sit down on the leather passenger seat and admire the combination of leather and wood veneer in the Italian's interior.

To underline her point, she gently presses down on the accelerator. My comment: 'You could just about afford a small car' is lost in the snobbish hum of the twin exhausts.

I try again when the noise dies down.

"Jesus, is that your car? Young plates, is it new?"

"Three weeks young, sir. I got a bonus at Oxford, so I spent it on something nice."

"I know it's vulgar to ask, but how much is it?"

"Don't tell anyone; one hundred and forty thousand euros, not including delivery. But then you have everything: a three-litre Ferrari engine, six cylinders, four hundred and thirty horsepower under the bonnet and four-wheel drive."

We drive out of the Baronielaan, stared at from behind sliding curtains.

At Ulvenhout we take the motorway. I have never driven so fast on a fast lane before!

"Let's get through, get past the trucks," is Esther's excuse.

Then she sticks to the speed limit of one hundred kilometres per hour and tries to blend in with the other traffic. It hardly works.

"It's quite conspicuous, a car like that, Esther. People look at it."

"I have to get used to it too; I like a bit of attention. You do attract attention with that Defender, your Boulevard Jeep can't be called an everyday's car either, can it!"

"I won't say any more without my lawyer."

In Wernhout, they are still not used to the sound of Ester's new acquisition. Surprised faces of the therapist and the architect in the driveway of the villa.

"So you've really unpacked! A Maserati, brand new. How fast does it go?" Louis looks at it like a child in a sweet shop.

"Two hundred and sixty-five, I'm told. I've driven a bit over a hundred and seventy, I thought that was fast enough."

"Come on, let's have a session," says Esther, not willing to answer any more questions about her car.

8

Louis has continued to work in the garden. In the practise room, we can hear the motor mower humming in the distance.

Esther immediately sits down on the sofa. Dominique leads me to the chair at the foot of the bed, and she sits down on the chair next to the sofa.

“You know Esther's story, the incident with her name on the shoes of one of the victims in Birkenau. In previous sessions, Esther has opened and released the past that she carried in her mind. She has activated her self-healing powers, powers that are hidden in every human being,” Dominique begins.

“May I ask you something? The past she was carrying? I do not understand.”

“Esther came here complaining of concentration problems and nightmares. The problems she was experiencing could be traced back to a deeper cause. A cause that had to be in the past. By the second session she was in a light trance. She is not unconscious and she is not asleep. She is reaching a different level of consciousness; she is less sensitive to external stimuli. Her own sense of identity has diminished; she feels like 'the other'. In a trance she talks about this other person. This other person turns out to be the Jewish girl born in Frankfurt am Main. The girl who fled to Amsterdam with her parents in 1937, was put on a transport to the extermination camp in 1942, and was murdered in the gas chamber as soon as she arrived.”

“Will bringing it back do anything?” I try not to be sceptical.

Esther sits up straight. She takes a deep breath, as if doing yoga: "After the trance, I felt that I had to complete the life of the Jewish girl, which ended very traumatically. It was not finished. By reliving her emotions, my symptoms eased. I asked you to come with me today because you were there and you were a great support to me. When Dominique told me about meeting you, I decided I had to tell you my story. Did you mind?"

Half an hour later, we have swapped the office chairs and the sofa in the consulting room and the saddle of the riding mower for the deck chairs on the terrace.

Louis can't stop talking about my former student's Maserati. Dominique regrets that I did not bring Kibwana. We could have had a nice walk with Mr. Jansen, while Esther and the architect talked a lot about the horsepower and speeds attributed to the cars from Bolonga. I have to disappoint her; a walk in the woods is not on my agenda today. We console ourselves with a glass of rosé overlooking the sculpture garden.

“Hey, that's a new piece of art. I've never seen it before. Did you just get it?”

Esther gets up and walks over to the naked bronze.

She looks at it, walks around it, runs her hand over the cold bronze and then steps back from the sculpture. She stands with her back to us. Her gaze moves from the sculpture's thighs to its head. She lingers on the head. Then she turns to us, looks at me and then back to the sculpture.

“That's you! That head! That must be you!”

“It is a nice likeness,” I say a little apologetically.

“Not just the head, the rest is pretty good too,” Dominique jokes.

You can see Louis thinking: how can she know?

He swallows a sip of ice-cold rosé, gets up coughing and walks towards the statue, gasping for breath.

“It really is a beautiful statue. Your teacher's sister made it and Dominique loved it at once. They had to use a crane to put it up. I would have preferred a female nude.”

“I think it's beautiful,” Esther says, lingering on the spot where my bronze thighs meet.

This has not escaped our hostess.

“And yet I would like to see you naked one day,” Dominique whispers to me, ‘a statue is not the real thing.’”

Before I could say anything, Esther and Louis are back on the terrace.

“I'll get another bottle,” Louis announces.

“That won't be for us,” Esther has taken her handbag and car keys from the table, “I'd like to leave. We have enjoyed your hospitality long enough. Dominique, thank you for the session. I liked being able to share my story with someone else. I have a long journey ahead of me. Thank you very much.”

I stand up and thank Dominique and Louis.

Suddenly, a Beagle with a yellow tennis ball in its mouth came running towards me across the lawn. Mr. Jansen puts his toy at my feet, full of expectation. I don't even think about it, I pick up the ball soaked in dog saliva and throw it across the lawn. It hits the bronze nude in the stomach and bounces back.

“Oh dear, that must hurt,” Dominique says.

Before the ball hits the ground, Mr. Jansen has it in his mouth.

“We'll drive through Belgium for a bit, if you like,” Esther suggests. She has lowered the door windows so that we can wave to the therapist and her architect. At a modest speed for this car, we drive through the village of Zundert and follow the signs to the A1 motorway towards Antwerp.

In Antwerp, Esther takes the exit to the A13, the Boudewijn motorway to Liège.

“I'm not very good at navigation, but something tells me I won't get to Breda today and you won't get to Leiden,” I try.

“Ha, just wait, sir,” she says as she hits the road.

“On other days you shouldn't drive here, on weekdays this section is completely congested. It's quiet here on a Saturday afternoon. You can drive a hundred and twenty kilometres here. I'll see if there are many speed cameras today.”

She puts her money where her mouth is and presses the accelerator; I am pressed against the leather upholstery. I have to lean towards the driver to follow the rising speedometer. At two hundred, Esther slowly releases the accelerator and the Maserati slows down to the speed limit.

“Later, the section control begins, I have to take it easy overthere,” the chief technician/analyst promises, “How did you find it?”

“Fast, very fast.”

“I could have answered that myself. How did it feel to drive so fast?”

“Not uncomfortable. I would be very uncomfortable with the steering wheel in my hands at that speed. I'm used to my Landrover Defender; I can't do more than a hundred and ten.”

“You've had that car for a while, haven't you? I remember the Defender from my first year at secondary school; it must be at least ten years old.”

“It's seventeen, it is indestructible.”

After Hasselt, the right foot goes back to the base plate. No trajectory control, I suspect. The Maserati's extensive dashboard will tell you. Two hundred and thirty is ticking on the counter. The roar of the six-cylinder is deafening. I see Esther giggling. With a satisfied look on her face, she lets go of the accelerator and the Maserati slips back to an unsustainable speed.

At Tongeren, Esther takes the Maastricht exit. The N72, the Tongersesteenweg, is a narrow provincial road. It is as if we are now in a slow-motion film; the car moves at an almost respectable speed between the other traffic towards the capital of Limburg.

I feel myself relaxing. Ever since we left Wernhout, I have had a number of questions on my mind. The Tongersesteenweg gave me the opportunity to put them to the Maserati driver.

“Have you been with Dominique for a long time?”

“Yes, quite a while. The nightmares and concentration problems started in my second year of university. The doctor thought it was burn-out and prescribed total rest. I had to take a year off. A year backpacking through Australia or something like that. I didn't want to do that at all. I was enjoying my studies far too much, I didn't want to interrupt them. A friend pointed out an article about reincarnation and regression therapy in the Saturday supplement of *Het Parool*. It included an interview with Dominique. That's how I came to see her.”

“How does a session go?”

“During the second session I went into a trance as Dominique was able to get me to relax completely; I had never been so relaxed

before. I had to close my eyes and try to concentrate on an unpleasant experience from the past. I immediately thought of the study trip. I became 'detached from myself'. I saw a frightened girl sitting on a suitcase against the inside of the sliding door of a cattle truck. She was holding a pair of red shoes like a precious treasure. The metallic sound of the train tracks slowly brought me back to the therapist's couch."

"How did it affect you?"

"That night I slept peacefully for the first time. It took a week and a half for my concentration to gradually return. I noticed that I was happier."

We cross the Vroenhoven Bridge into the Netherlands. In Maastricht, Esther follows the signs for car parks.

"Hey, Q-Park under the Vrijthof still has space! That's something special on a Saturday afternoon," Esther cheers.

The Maserati gets the spacious spot near the exit of the car park; the supervisors get a view of Esther's gem from their small office.

"I have not been here for a long time. I don't know the city, maybe I recognise places from Flikken Maastricht."

"I studied here, lived here, have friends here, know most of the pubs. Wonderful city, sir. That's why I wanted to take you here."

"Shall we go somewhere to eat? I'm getting hungry."

"That's why I was so happy about the Vrijthof car park. I know a couple of good restaurants here. My treat."

"I'll call Freya. I'll ask her to take Kibwana out and feed him. It's going to be a long night."

"Grand Café Nieuw Bruin, look, there are still a few tables free. I hope they haven't been reserved," Esther says, walking ahead of me at a fast pace as if she has to catch a bus.

"One table is free upstairs, the rest are occupied," says the waiter at the entrance, "I'll bring you there."

"Upstairs," Esther says, turning to me, "you can eat well here and the prices are good. We came here often. Do you like everything? I hope you're not a vegetarian."

"No, I'm not, I'll eat anything. I'll have the same as you."

"I'll get you the menu," the waiter says as we sit down.

"You don't have to. Two Maastricht menus, please."

It's funny to hear her pronounce the name of the city as if she were born here.

When the waiter is about to pass on our order, Esther tells: "The Maastricht menu is great: tenderloin carpaccio, Scottish salmon fillet with lobster sauce, warm vegetables, baked potatoes and chips, and the dessert is always a surprise."

Esther has not said too much; the accompanying house wine for the co-driver and a flat water for the Maserati's chauffeur complete the meal.

"Is there room for us on the terrace now? We'd like to drink our coffee there later. May we?" she asks the girl who brings the dessert. I'll look for you.

A little later she comes back: "Table six is free. I've put a 'reserved' sign on it. Enjoy your meal."

Esther puts a ten-euro note in the girl's hand.

"Thank you. We'll go there after dessert. The bill can go there too."

With a view on the always busy Vrijthof we enjoy the people passing by. The coffee is brought. Esther takes a note of the saucer with the inevitable peppermints. After a brief glance at the final amount, she puts the paper back. Her smile betrays that she gambled well on the choice of the restaurant.

There are still things I would like to know about the sessions with Dominique; I don't know whether this is the most appropriate moment. Esther looks so relaxed.

I leave it.