

A rich psychological sketch



J.J. Voskuil

Inside the Skin

‘HE WAS IN A QUANDARY RIGHT to the end,’ writes Lousje Voskuil-Haspers in the foreword to *Inside the Skin*, ‘because of the intimate nature of the book and his not wanting to hurt anyone.’ The author, who died last year, had misgivings about publication and left the final decision to his wife. It is hardly surprising

that Voskuil had his doubts, since *Inside the Skin* is a remarkable account of the emotional roller-coaster the author finds himself on when he falls in love with his best friend’s wife. There can be few books in world literature that expose so inexorably the contradictions in the author’s own attitude and feelings. The central character wants to be consistent but is tossed back and forth by his emotions. All this against the background of a 1950s intellectual milieu in which opposition to bourgeois morality appears to be the most important of values.

At the start of the novel Maarten is confronted by his friend Paul’s apparently untroubled decision to live a ‘bourgeois life’. Paul has become a teacher in a provincial town, with a modern house and a child on the way. Maarten and Nicolien resent the fact that he now lives as he does, despite all his talk about ‘resistance’ and ‘Paris’. Nevertheless, Maarten too baulks at following their mutual friend Henriette, who has taken the plunge and moved to Paris. He knows that in the end he will ‘capitulate’ and seek a career. The thing he holds against Paul most of all is his refusal to acknowledge his ‘cowardice’.

Against this background, Maarten falls in love with Paul’s wife Rosalie. It is fascinating to watch how at first Rosalie chiefly annoys him (Maarten and Nicolien see her as the evil genius behind Paul’s bourgeois existence), until he falls for her charms. He wrestles with concepts like loyalty and longs to act alone, to be tough, a ‘plebeian’, a ‘commercial traveller’ (the opposite of the intellectual in this milieu), but of course an inhibited intellectual is what he remains.

Voskuil’s technique, as in his other novels, is to report events, conversations and reactions with great precision. One significant difference between this and the author’s other novels is that *Inside the Skin* is written in the first person, making it seem closer both to the author and to the reader. It is a painful account, in which the author spares neither himself nor his wife and friends, making his wife’s decision to publish particularly courageous.

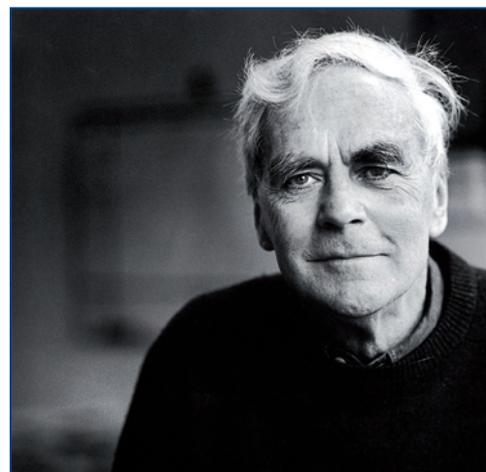


photo Vincent Mentzel

J.J. Voskuil (1926–2008) did not publish much in his lifetime. After *Bij nader inzien* (‘On Second Thoughts’) in 1963 there was silence until *The Bureau* began appearing in 1995, a seven-part series of novels about Voskuil’s job as a senior civil servant at a research institute.

Voskuil himself said of his career as an author that he wrote only if he had ‘a problem’. In *On Second Thoughts* he puts paid to the illusions of friendship, in *The Bureau* it is the turn of the alliance he had imagined existed between him and his colleagues, while *Inside the Skin* lets fly at marriage and loyalty.

A merciless self-analysis and an indirect but rigorous settling of accounts.

NEDERLANDS DAGBLAD

A disillusioning look at the constancy of the supposedly deeper things in life, such as emotions, feelings and passionate desires.

DE GROENE AMSTERDAMMER

The things that remain valuable in this posthumous confession are reminiscent of the pent-up rage with which W.F. Hermans attacked bourgeois morality and the grim analysis offered by existentialist authors like Camus and Sartre. TROUW

PUBLISHING DETAILS

Binnen de huid (2009)
427 pp

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Sample Translation

Inside the Skin

(Binnen de huid)

by J.J. Voskuil

(Amsterdam: G.A. van Oorschot, 2009)

Translated by Jonathan Reeder

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It was windy. The sky was a drab grey. It rained off and on. The moorland with its soggy shrubs was a desolate sight. The patches of sand were darkened with damp. Nicolien was sick. I waited with her parents in the cramped living room until it was dry. As soon as I was on my bicycle I felt free. I biked along the Apeldoorn canal, the wind at my back. The rain picked up again. In addition to the pupil, now there was the family friend too. As I rode along, it occurred to me that the differences were reflected in her behavior. Her bored exchange with the teacher when he said he wanted to quit his job, her flirtation with the family friend, who she senses won't dare to make a move, unless perhaps he's drunk. Unbearable.

Water splashed from my front wheel. I pedaled faster. The thought of being shoved aside because I'd gotten too old to take risks made me combative. We'd see about that. The wind tugged at my poncho and drove the rain ahead of me onto the wet road. I kept my eye on the signposts and eventually lost interest in everything else. Thirty kilometers to Zwolle, thirty kilometers back through the storm.

When I rode back to the cottage later that afternoon, drenched and struggling against the wind, it felt as though I had fended off the enemy. For now the pupil didn't stand a chance. I almost called them up, just to let them know. Then I went glum all over again. I realized full well that I couldn't go on like this forever, and didn't have a clue what to do about it.

From the top of the hill I surveyed the city through the field glasses. After yesterday's operation the polder was wide open. I scanned the landscape for where you could make out the river, my troops hidden at the edge of the woods, and gauged the position of the bridge. If I took it by surprise there would be

minimal resistance. The city was wealthy. The men were cowards. The women longed to be taken advantage of. I gazed at the silhouette of the water tower, reckoned that Paul was at school and realized that I could cycle to her. The thought just flashed through my head. Then my mind went blank. On the way back down the hill I told myself it would be insane, but knew this was a feeble argument. I lay back in the lawn chair. If I had any guts, now was my chance to prove it. Was I scared? Did I prefer to retreat into harmless daydreams? Playing the tough guy when you're drunk, shooting your mouth off about patricide, but begging off when it's time for action. Friendship? Loyalty? I knew these were fallacies. Besides, it would be hypocritical to come up with moral objections at this point. And what if she resisted? She wouldn't resist. But what if she did? Then I'd have to break that resistance.

Once I realized I had to either put my money where my mouth was or accept being a chicken, I started to enjoy myself. We would see who was toughest. I relished the thought of her surprise, the two seconds it would take me to kick the front door closed behind me and prod her backwards into the house. The rest would be a matter of quick and decisive action.

Once on the bike I avoided thinking ahead. A strong wind swept small white clouds over the polder and gave the sky a strident blue. My poncho flapped as I flew along the narrow asphalt roads between the swaying poplars. I imagined myself a robber baron on a black steed, lance in hand and in full gallop. I liked the part about the lance. I waved to a passing farmer, and thought I could just as easily have robbed him blind, and felt good.

After a curve in the road I was riding into the wind. I had difficulty making headway, sometimes weaving to and fro, a firm grip on the handlebars. The landscape had lost its sheen, a bleak green expanse with no shelter except the puny trees nodding angrily at one another. I was suddenly tired. For a while I cycled on mechanically, without thinking. Doubt crept in. At a fork in the road I slowed down, coasting to a stop in front of the signpost. Quarter after one. Paul

was heading off to school. I envied him. I could still turn back, no one would notice. It seemed like a pointless undertaking. I dreaded the complications that would arise from it all, and was convinced she wasn't worth it. But to turn back would be cowardly. My aversion grew as I struggled along the barren road. It was insane to do something you really didn't want to do. I was about to turn around, if need be for no reason at all, but was ashamed of my half-heartedness. I was too tired to distinguish between truth and self-delusion.

At the last fork, the bridge already in view, it was only the cowardice that mattered. As I rode onto the bridge and saw the sunlit houses along the riverfront, with the church tower amiably above, I thought of Nicolien and Paul and felt like a heel. The idea that I would never again be able to cross this bridge with a clear conscience was so melodramatic that it cheered me up some. So old and so depraved, I thought. Not until I reached the center of town did it hit me that this was for real. I forgot my fatigue, took the curves automatically, braked, pedaled further, thought of the moment that I would whistle, prop up the bike, bound up the six steps to the front entrance, see the door open up –. When I turned onto their street, along the apartment blocks lining the wide, quiet sidewalk, the picture of decency, I was again, briefly, the ferocious Cossack commander whose surprise invasion was met by a slumbering enemy. I braked, looked up and whistled. I was so tense that no sound came out. I tried again and let out a shrill, tuneless whistle. No one came to the window. As I climbed the stairs I realized how exhausted I was, and that with this unwilling body it was a lost cause. I hesitated, but it would have been crazy to turn back. I rang the bell and stared blankly at the door. After a long while I heard the living room door and saw her approach, her form shifting in the matte glass. The door opened. My face went tight. Her flabbergasted reaction pleased me. For a moment I appreciated the humor of the situation.

'God,' she said, 'you here?'

'Yes,' I replied hoarsely.

Everything happened so fast I couldn't take it all in. I took a step forward, she flinched back, and even before I put out my hand she reached for the knob of the bedroom door and pushed it open. 'Look who's here,' she said.

I thought she just had the jitters, but then I saw Paul, sitting up in bed, a bandage around his head. At first I didn't know how to react. Flustered, I entered the room. His expression was one of surprise and pleasure. It made my head spin. 'What's up with you?' I said.

'Mumps,' he answered.

I slipped into the hallway, hung up my poncho and went back into the bedroom in a daze. I had lost control of my limbs; talked, replied, sat down on Rosalie's bed, was surprised that no awkward silence fell, became gradually aware of the absurdity of it all, noticed their astonishment when I burst out laughing, made a comment I promptly forgot, with the feeling that anything goes. Indifferent to their presence, I started to laugh all over again.

'I have the feeling you've been doing something other than cycle,' he joked.

'You must be kidding. Mumps?' I said, my eyes wet with laughter. 'You don't expect anyone to believe *that*?'

'It can leave you with some pretty awful things, you know.'

I pointed my finger at him. 'Such as?' He looked ludicrous with that bandage tied under his chin, a bird's head, a little female bird.

'You do realize that it can make a man impotent?' she said.

I looked at her for the first time. She was standing at the foot of the bed. Had she stood there stark naked it wouldn't have been any weirder.

'You're not shocked,' he observed.

'On the contrary,' I assured him.

'It's damn contagious too.'

I brushed it off. I was invincible.

'And how am I supposed to have my second child?' she asked.

'Artificial insemination,' I suggested.

‘God, you’re an oaf,’ he remarked. ‘And to think I’ve already given her permission to make arrangements with you.’

‘Ha!’ I said gaily.

‘As long as it’s not here in the house,’ she said with a laugh. ‘And no more than once.’

‘Strict conditions,’ he stressed.

I shook my head, laughing. The conversation had taken such an absurd turn that I was at a loss for a retort.

She left the room to fix something to eat. He asked after Nicolien. I told him she didn’t dare eat any of my mushrooms, only the ones he had picked. I lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. An electric heater warmed the room. I felt better and better. I had proven myself without having to do a thing.

‘What do you actually do all day at your in-laws’ place?’ he asked.

‘Kick around a soccer ball with my father-in-law.’

‘Then I’d rather have the mumps.’

‘He’s a good goalie.’

‘I can just see it,’ he said sarcastically.

‘You and I used to play soccer too, before you came down with mumps,’ I reminded him. I laughed. ‘It’s been all downhill since then.’

‘It’s so odd to see you two lying there like that,’ she said, entering the room. ‘Perverse, almost.’

‘Maybe,’ I conceded, propping myself up and taking the plate from her. ‘Toast with jam! Not exactly a man’s meal!’

‘Something wrong with it?’ She sat down behind me on the edge of the bed. ‘All right if I sit here with you?’

‘That’s my friend Koning,’ he said. ‘An inveterate bellyacher.’

‘He is indeed,’ I admitted. I glanced at him before biting into my toast. ‘Has Pieter Halstein been around again?’ That was pure malice. I couldn’t have cared less if he had been around.

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That afternoon she went shopping with Nicolien. I stood at the window. They turned around at the same time and waved. I raised my hand with a half-ironic, half-shy smile, and as I watched them I took secret pleasure in the ambiguity of it all. The ladykiller.

I leaned against the bookcase. Paul was sitting at the table. He wrote intently, with one hand under his chin, apparently unbothered by my presence. His indifference to the scene at the window spoiled my pleasure. I felt empty. I figured he didn't give a damn what she got up to. She slept with him when he felt like it, she cooked, kept house – he was certain none of this would change. For the rest he let her do her own thing. The possibility that I was nothing more than a playmate was humiliating. My thoughts were vague and confused. I was anxious for her to return, as though I needed her to convince me otherwise.

I met them in the hallway and watched, smiling, as she came through the door with the child and the shopping bags. 'Get what you needed?' I asked.

'Everything except the blanket clips,' she said. 'I just have to pop into town on the bike.'

She brought the bags into the kitchen. I followed her. In the hall Nicolien took off the child's coat.

'Can I join you?' I asked. 'Or would you rather go alone?'

'No, come along if you want,' she said casually. 'You'll just have to pump up the tire.'

My elation was tempered with mistrust. I couldn't tell if her casualness was genuine or an act.

‘I’m just going into town with Maarten to pick up the blanket clips,’ she said in the living room. She stacked the fruit in the bowl on the buffet. He barely reacted.

‘Making progress?’ Nicolien asked. She lingered beside the table while I waited in the doorway with my coat on.

‘I’ve nearly finished a chapter,’ he said.

‘See? You can do it. If you just put your mind to it.’

He twisted his mouth, half-proud, half-abashed. ‘By the way, would you mind me dictating to you? I feel more objective about it if it’s typed.’

‘Yes, sure,’ she said eagerly.

I felt left out. ‘Let’s go,’ I said impatiently.

By the time we finally went down the stairs together I was irritated. In the dark basement hallway I yanked her towards me. She laughed sensually and pressed up against me. Attaboy, I thought with contempt. I let her go. She ran up the steps to the backyard and arranged her hair in the glass of the shed door. She blushed with exhilaration, her eyes sparkled. At that moment it made me go even colder. I pumped up her tire and we walked the bicycles, single file, down the path.

‘While Nicolien and I were shopping I thought about how crazy this is,’ she said. ‘The two of us, who both adore you.’

I didn’t answer. I thought her choice of words was unfortunate. I waited outside while she bought the blanket clips.

‘I also wanted to look for a brooch for Nicolien,’ she said as she came out of the shop.

She reminded me of my mother, the way she stood in front of the window and looked at the merchandise. We ambled further and stopped again. She didn’t find what she wanted. We made our way toward the river. It was sunny, calm. The carillon was playing.

‘Wonderful to be here with you,’ she said.

We walked our bikes along the riverfront. Gulls hovered above the water. The small ferry took a wide berth to the far side.

‘How would this all go in a novel?’ she asked, once we were back on the bikes.

‘Badly,’ I said gruffly.

‘In my novel he would go to Paris.’

‘With you?’

‘No, alone.’

‘You mean South Africa,’ I teased, referring to the end of *Brief Encounter*.

‘No, mine goes to Paris. And how about your novel?’

‘They could divorce. But I don’t write novels. Real life is a whole lot less heroic.’ I felt peevish all over again.

She gave me a sideways glance. ‘D’you think Paul would leave me if I disappeared for a week? To Paris or something?’

‘I doubt it. But you’d have to either go alone or take somebody else. I don’t feel like an escapade with such a predictable ending.’

‘No, of course not. But what if the experiment backfires?’

‘If you don’t want it to backfire, it won’t.’

She was silent.

I was on my guard. One evening at the movies, and then I got nudged aside – along with the previous ones.

‘Do you suppose there could be two other people so unfazed by their passion?’ she asked.

‘I don’t understand how you could have kissed those other guys,’ I said angrily.

She gave a start. ‘But I couldn’t help it! When I’ve been drinking I want to be kissed. Doesn’t matter who. And then it just turns into sex.’

‘Jesus H. Christ.’

‘Couldn’t we talk about something else? We’ll be home soon and then it’ll be too late.’

‘I couldn’t care less.’

I braked and rolled my bike onto the path. The way she walked ahead of me I could tell she wanted to be kissed. Go to hell, I thought. At the top of the stairs she turned and threw her arms around me. I gave her a hasty kiss and undid her embrace. ‘Not now.’

In the living room I regretted it. Paul was dictating to Nicolien. Rosalie disappeared into the kitchen. I sat down and watched the child crawl around in the playpen. She pulled herself to the edge and reached in my direction. ‘Matte,’ she said. I gazed absently at her. ‘Matte,’ she repeated. She flailed impatiently with her arm. I was soothed by the notion that this was her child. I got down on all fours and crept towards the playpen, grunting like a pig. ‘Here comes the pig.’ I pressed my face against the bars. The child squealed with delight.

Paul broke off. ‘Can’t you take the kid out into the hall?’ he asked irritably.

I stood up and lifted the child out of the playpen. ‘Come along, then.’ I bent over and picked up the ball. ‘Your father’s got a thing against pigs.’ I shut the door and went into the kitchen with the child on my arm. Rosalie was peeling potatoes.

‘We’ve been evicted,’ I announced. I stood next to her.

‘Aaiiee,’ said the child, pushing its finger into my eye.

Rosalie smiled. ‘Yes, a lovely eye. –You can go back in if you like. I’ll watch her.’

‘I’d rather be with you. I put the child on the floor with the ball and sat down on the garbage can. I watched her while she worked. From the other room came the sound of Paul’s voice and the click of the typewriter.

She smiled. ‘You’re such a he-man in that white shirt.’

‘With a surfeit of tenderness,’ I said.

The child pushed the ball toward me. I grabbed it and rolled it into the hall.

‘I don’t see how it’s possible for you to love Nicolien and me at the same time. We’re polar opposites.’

‘That’s why. Paul and I are too.’

‘No. You two are a lot alike.’

‘Except that we don’t see eye to eye.’

The child crawled back into the kitchen. I picked her up and set her on my knee. ‘Paul is an intellectual,’ I said mockingly.

She glanced over her shoulder. ‘Would you insist that I read?’

‘No.’ I played horsey with the child. ‘As long as I loved you I wouldn’t demand anything.’ I stood up, lifted the child on top of the cabinet, took her back off and brought her into the hall. We played on the floor for a while and then I returned to my post on the garbage can. She followed me and tried to climb up on my knee. ‘Does Paul ever lose his temper?’ I asked.

‘Once he hurled a saucer through the room. I get angry too sometimes, but I can just as easily let it go. You?’

‘When I lose my temper, I really lose it. Then I don’t give a damn about anything.’ I held off the child with an outstretched arm and poked her in the side. She giggled.

Rosalie smiled. ‘Then I’d better watch out for you.’

‘Why?’ I asked suspiciously.

She looked back teasingly. ‘For when I kiss someone else.’

‘Then you should let that go too.’

‘Maybe.’ She laughed. ‘Actually you’re awfully jealous.’

‘Yes. I don’t even want Paul to have you. I want you all to myself.’

She didn’t answer.

During dinner I got all worked up again. When Paul and Nicolien went back to their dictation I helped with the dishes.

‘Now we can pretend we’re married,’ she said. ‘How about we forget the dishes and go do something else?’ Her eyes sparkled.

That softened me, but I had no intention of giving in. ‘I can’t stand it, those other guys.’

‘But I’ve no self-control.’

‘You’re a goddam whore. It infuriates me that you’d let yourself be kissed by some jerk who doesn’t give a damn about you.’

‘But I don’t give a damn about them either!’

‘It’s degrading, that’s all.’

‘And what about the first time you kissed me?’

‘I loved you.’

‘I only started loving you afterwards.’

I was silent. ‘You’re right,’ I said grudgingly. ‘It’s more complicated than that.’

She laughed.

‘You’re wrong,’ I corrected myself. ‘Of the whole lousy bunch, I’m the only one who gives a damn about you.’

She turned to me. ‘Listen. I love you. I know you better than them. I can’t persuade myself you’d be a disappointment if we were married. I’ve seen you in your pajamas. The others mean nothing compared to this.’

‘You made the same gestures, used the same words.’

‘Honest. I know now that Paul’s right when he says kissing someone and going to bed with them boils down to the same thing.’

But I didn’t want to give in. That bit about the ‘pajamas’ and that ‘someone’ irked me.

‘Will there be any nice guys there tomorrow?’ she asked Paul in the living room. ‘To flirt with?’ Half hidden behind the cupboard door, she smiled at me with shining, teasing eyes. I melted.

Paul reacted annoyed. ‘Do you always have to sit like that?’ he grumbled, when she flopped into her chair.

She pulled her skirt self-consciously over her knees.

‘I thought I saw a run,’ she taunted him, and promptly pulled her skirt back up to inspect her stockings.

‘Goddammit!’ he exploded.

‘He’s got a mouth on him,’ Nicolien said later in bed. ‘And that tramp with her sassy answers. No wonder Paul gets so angry about it. That sort of woman’s constantly on the verge of adultery.’

‘What do you mean?’ I asked. Then I got what she meant.

‘Come on, what do you think,’ I snapped. ‘That I want to ogle her leg in front of the two of you? Damn it, do you think I need such a stupid ruse?’ I was genuinely indignant. Maybe that’s what made her go quiet. I thought the whole thing was damned hypocritical, and felt guilty about Rosalie. Everyone on her back, including me. What right did I have? Did I care more for her than she for me? Was there anyone who cared about more than just getting her into bed? I tossed and turned and tried to think about it. What’s the difference between kissing someone at a party or in the kitchen? As long as I hadn’t a more convincing argument I could just as well keep my mouth shut. The more I thought about it, the more I despised myself. I felt like a cheat.

She was on the balcony shoveling coal when I came in the next morning. I waited by the hearth until she was done. She asked if I wanted tea. I watched her while she poured. ‘About yesterday – that was humbug. I was jealous. I can’t stand other men pawing you. But my theories are on the house.’

She laughed and sat down next to me. ‘And which of your theories did you discard last night?’

Right away I felt myself resist. ‘None. I still feel exactly the same. I can’t stand you kissing someone else. It disqualifies you. But I love you and then it gets ridiculous.’

She listened with a smile. ‘We must be very much in love if we’re already making pronouncements. Neither of us is at our best.’

For some reason that annoyed me. We drank our tea in silence. I asked if they had decided which train they’d take.

‘We’ll go this morning after all. Eefje is expecting us to be there early. I’d much rather have stayed here. She gave me a puppy-dog look. ‘One more day with you... The advantage, though, is that I’ll get to sleep in your bed. Although I’m afraid I’ll miss you there more than ever.’

‘Careful, it creaks.’

She either didn’t appreciate my remark or chose to ignore it. ‘Couldn’t you stay a few more days so we can take another bike ride together?’

‘Nicolien’s parents are counting on us.’

She sighed. ‘All these awful social obligations.’

Her discomfort amused me. She started setting the table. I slouched back, and as I watched her my irritation wore off. I followed her motions and knew I loved her.

She eyed me coyly. ‘Once you’re back in Amsterdam, could I come meet you for coffee sometime?’

‘Two weeks from Monday Nicolien will be at her parents’.

‘I’d also like to meet you in town for dinner.’

I shrugged my shoulders despondently.

‘Oh well, we knew this,’ she said.

Later that morning they left for Amsterdam. Nicolien and I stayed behind with the child. We did the shopping together. I walked awkwardly beside her, with the vague sensation of being strangers. It occurred to me at the curb as I helped her with the stroller and our hands met. I was struck by the timid, skittish way she did her shopping. Standing in the doorway with the child, I caught myself observing her with a combination of wonder and envy.

At home it was conspicuously quiet, a diffuse stillness, as though the house was too big. I tried to read, but couldn’t find a book that held my interest. No one has ever written honestly about a ménage à trois. I rested my feet on the table, stuck my hands in my pockets and stared at my shoes. My head was a void, where snippets of conversations, gestures and events loomed and then faded away

before they could assume clear contours. I had so much trouble formulating my thoughts, it was as though I'd forgotten how to think. My mind resisted any attempt at remembering my resolutions. The question receded before I could even start on the response. It elicited a sense of helplessness and hopelessness that gradually took on the character of an answer.

I lazed away the afternoon, ambled around the house, played some records and waited until dinnertime. After that Nicolien put the child to bed. I stood on the balcony. The kitchen light was on. Across the way three or four windows were illuminated. The street was lit by a streetlamp and the headlights of a stationary car. It was calm. A tingling chill in the air. I listened, my arms resting on the railing. Not a sound. There was a stack of newspapers on the balcony, and two bottles of milk. Through the kitchen window I could see Rosalie's bag hanging on the bathroom door. The kettle was on the stove. I closed the door and waited for Nicolien with a sudden feeling of revulsion. The hopelessness of it all made me want to put a bullet through my head. Now that she wouldn't leave him, it couldn't go on any longer. But when I passed by her coat in the hallway, I swooned with desire. I buried my face in the collar and caressed the fabric. It was ridiculous to have to make these kind of decisions, even though I knew it was the only way.

That night I lay awake. The party would be in full swing. I had no illusions about her behavior. When she drank she became reckless. I imagined the scene, sick with jealousy, and I cursed the reason she had given for it.

They returned, slightly bedraggled, late the next morning. She rushed at the child and cuddled it as though she hadn't seen it in months. That irritated me. When she finally joined us, I eyed her suspiciously.

'Was it really so bad?' asked Nicolien incredulously.

'Worse,' he said.

'Maybe it was just us,' she added. 'He sulked in the corner the whole evening.'

'The truth must be told,' he lay his hand over her heart, 'I missed you two -- and you, Maarten, most of all.'

'Me too,' she said.

'Seriously! Couldn't you stay another few days? Why don't you just celebrate New Year's Eve here?' He looked at Nicolien.

'We promised,' she said hesitantly. She looked at me.

'And the to-do if you two were really allowed to kiss,' I said.

'Would you slap me?' he asked Nicolien.

She hesitated. 'No,' she said shyly.

'Jesus!' he said, surprised. He laughed.

'You see, Paul?' Rosalie chimed in. 'Nicolien, he'd like nothing better.'

'I would, though,' I said, annoyed.

'It won't happen,' he assured us. His expression carried a mild ridicule I found hard to stomach. I wondered what they had discussed in Amsterdam. Did they allow each other to fool around? And did they compare adventures behind my back? It only compounded my distaste for the situation. When Rosalie left the room I didn't budge. I longed to be alone with Nicolien again.

Before we left, Paul and I carried the beds back to the upstairs neighbors. Rosalie went with us. There was no one home. The plants were on the kitchen floor and the curtains were drawn, giving the place an eerie duskiness. We glanced into the living room. Paul was amused by the decor. He sat down in a tubular chair, put his hands on his belly and laughed heartily. When Rosalie left the room he leaned towards me, his hand cupped next to his mouth. 'The latest! Nur für Männer!' He looked over his shoulder with mimed furtiveness and leaned a little further forward. 'What's the height of potency?' Grinning, he raised a finger. 'A good one!'

I chuckled, too much on edge to come up with a snappy reply.

'In my book nothing beats an Oldsmobile,' he declared loudly when she re-entered the room.

‘Could one of you go get water for the plants?’ she said. ‘The mains have been turned off.’

He leapt up and took the watering can from her. I followed him down the stairs. I was afraid to be alone with her. He let out a shrill laugh. ‘I’m being followed!’ he said as we entered the house. I hardly noticed a thing he said. It was a relentless tug-of-war between the urge to go back and the resolve that it had to end. I walked mechanically to the kitchen and watched him fill the watering can. It doesn’t have to end, I thought tensely. ‘Give it here,’ I said falteringly. I took the can from him, turned calmly out of the kitchen, walked down the hall and bounded up the stairs. She was standing at the sink, surrounded by the plants. A greenish light shone through the curtains. As she approached me with a vacant expression, I let the watering can hit the table with a thud. My left leg quivered. It annoyed me that I was out of breath. At the same time I realized that I had to leave if I didn’t want to return looking like a complete fool. We let go of each other. She turned away, dazed. I walked unsteadily out of the kitchen and back downstairs. At the front door my shoulder banged against the wall. In the living room I hid my face behind a newspaper, but I was such a bundle of nerves I had to go back out into the hallway.

When I followed Nicolien and Paul down the stairs a half-hour later, I glanced back for a brief moment. In the train to The Hague I was embarrassed about the absurd little wave I had made. We rode through the polder as dusk fell. The irrigation ditches lit up with a steely luster as they whizzed by. My self-loathing knew no bounds.

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Nicolien emerged from the laundry room as I was getting dressed. ‘Why the nylon dress shirt?’ she asked.

‘It’s easier.’

‘I don’t think washing it every night’s easy.’

‘Otherwise I have to take an extra.’ I knew she was jealous and I felt guilty.

‘You never wear your nylon shirt to my parents’.’

‘We’re only at your parents’ for three days, and we’re at Paul and Rosalie’s for five.’

‘Four!’

‘It always ends up being more.’

‘That’s news to me.’

‘Okay.’ I took it off. ‘I’ll pack an extra shirt.’

‘No, just wear it.’

‘No way! I’ll wear one of my junky ones.’

‘I don’t see why you should dress differently for your friends than you do at home.’

‘You’re right, you’re right.’ I went into the laundry room and rummaged through the pile. ‘I actually prefer the shabby look. It’s nonchalant. Masculine.’

‘So why did you put on your good shirt in the first place?’

‘Because I don’t feel like looking like a slob in front of Paul and Rosalie. But that’s just stupid, of course.’ I dug out the two oldest shirts I could find and got dressed in silence.

She went back into the laundry room.

‘You want me to wear my oldest sweater too?’

She didn’t respond.

We ate breakfast without exchanging a word. I was peeved. We packed our things, went to the station and found a place in the dining car. It was stuffy. As

soon as the train pulled out I took off my coat. ‘It’s stifling in here.’ I dreaded the weekend and was feeling grumpy.

‘Then take off your sweater.’

‘Can’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because my shirt’s torn.’

‘Then you should’ve worn your nylon shirt.’

‘Oh boy, that’s a good one! Just now I wasn’t allowed to, because you were jealous!’

She bolted upright. ‘Don’t tell me you changed shirts on my account.’ ‘Of course I did.’

‘And you said you’d just as soon wear a torn shirt!’

‘Why do you think? To avoid a fight!’

‘And now you’re picking one!’

I nodded. ‘Yeah, now *I’m* the one picking a fight!’

‘Then I want to go back!’ She stuck out her hand. ‘Give me some money!’

‘I’m not giving you any money!’

‘Give me some money! It’s my right!’

‘Not a cent!’

She gestured impatiently. ‘Then give me my ticket!’

A man across the aisle looked at us. It gave me a reason to control myself. I suppressed my anger and handed her the ticket.

‘Can I exchange it?’

‘Don’t think so.’

We glowered at each other.

‘Why not?’

‘Because it’s further away.’

‘It is not!’

As we argued like this, I realized I loved her and was heartsick through and through. But I’d be damned if I let on. ‘You’re right, you can exchange it.’ I

looked the other way, straight at the man who was watching us. He averted his eyes. We sat in silence. The train approached Amersfoort.

‘I’ll go home if you don’t take it back,’ she warned.

‘So go home. I’m not taking anything back.’

She glared at me, but her anger was slight. I could see she was sad. ‘Why didn’t you wear your nylon shirt?’

‘Because you were jealous!’

‘So it’s my fault you’re wearing a torn shirt.’

‘That doesn’t bother me,’ I said spitefully. ‘Rosalie fancies me no matter how I’m dressed.’

She paused, reached over and handed me her ticket. ‘OK, you’ve taken it back.’ She tried to look assertive, but without success.

The ticket was creased in the middle. I restrained myself. ‘You’ve crumpled it again,’ I said angrily. Too bad she hadn’t made good on her threat. The hell with Rosalie. I looked at her. ‘And I haven’t taken it back. I took off that nylon shirt because you insisted!’

‘Say what you like. You took it back.’

‘I haven’t taken anything back!’

The train came to a stop. I stood up resolutely. If she wasn’t going to carry through, then I would.

‘What’re you doing?’ she asked anxiously.

‘I’m going home! I’ve had enough of your jealousy. I don’t feel like any more of this nonsense!’ I picked up the bag and got off the train.

She followed me onto the platform. ‘Please come with me!’ She tugged on my sleeve. ‘I take it all back! I’m begging you!’

‘No! I’m going home!’

The platform was full of soldiers. People were looking at us. Two policemen came in our direction.

She started to cry. ‘I’m begging you! I’m begging you! I’ll get down on my knees!’ It looked like she was actually going to do it.

I pulled her up. ‘God damn it,’ I hissed. ‘You’re making a scene!’

‘Then come with me! Paul’s waiting for us!’ She clung to me.

‘Let him wait.’ I tried to pull myself free.

‘I took it all back, didn’t I? It’ll serve me right, every time I see that tear in your shirt! Just come with me! It’s driving me crazy! I’m down on my knees!’

I managed to restrain her. I wavered. ‘You’re blackmailing me with all this shouting. It’s a dirty trick!’

She sensed my indecision and gave me a tug. ‘Look, it’s about to leave! Hurry!’

We ran along the platform and squeezed into the train. It was chock-full. She pressed on, but I stayed put and stared stubbornly outside. Everyone around us could see what was going on.

She looked over her shoulder and came back. ‘Are you going to stay like this?’

‘Yes’.

‘Then we should have stayed behind!’

‘Fine with me!’ I wriggled loose, opened the door and jumped onto the platform. She was right behind me. Just then the train pulled out. I stomped over to the timetables. She hurried after me and grabbed my arm. ‘You’re not really going back, are you?’

Without answering, I scowled at the timetable to Amsterdam.

‘Let’s go have some coffee first!’ She tugged at me. ‘Come on! Don’t make me beg.’

I walked along the platform and sat down on a bench. Damn, damn, damn, I thought. Put an end to it! – The platform began to fill up.

‘Come have a cup of coffee,’ she said.

A train pulled in. I got up and walked towards it.

She followed me. ‘Where’s it going?’ she asked fretfully.

‘To Amsterdam!’ I snapped.

‘Aw, don’t!’ She tried to hold me back. ‘Let’s go have a cup of coffee first! I promise I’ll never be jealous again!’

The two policemen came towards us. People turned and looked. I relented. I was indecisive. We made our way to the cafeteria and went inside. It was packed with soldiers.

‘It’s too busy in here,’ she said. She was still clinging to me. Her face was tear-streaked. I turned around without saying a word. We sat down on a bench outside. She took my hand. ‘Let’s make up,’ she said sadly.

‘No! I’m sick and tired of your jealousy!’

‘I won’t be jealous anymore, honest. Anyway, it wasn’t that bad, was it? Come on, let’s have a coffee. They’ll be so disappointed.’

We went back in the cafeteria and managed to find a table. She suddenly couldn’t find her bag. I went outside, but it wasn’t there. I went back in. We looked on the floor and once more out on the platform. Back inside again. We finally retrieved it from the Lost and Found. When I saw how pleased she was, I wanted to bang my head against the wall. I turned and walked over to the timetables for Amsterdam.

She came up beside me and grabbed my hand. ‘You’re not still going back?’ she asked dejectedly. ‘Just come with me. We made up, didn’t we? Let’s go have a cup of coffee.’

I gave in. We found ourselves a table in the second-class lounge. The next train was jam-packed too. I gave her the silent treatment. She held my hand. I thought of seeing Rosalie again. This couldn’t go on any longer. I had to put an end to it before it became irrevocable. I shouldn’t have given in. We should have taken the next train back and disappeared for good. Pack up and move to Paris. Better to die of hunger than lose your self-respect. When I was alone with Nicolien I could see us making a new start.

At the same time there was a little voice that kept telling me I was being a coward. If I ran away things would stay unresolved forever. I would regret what I had passed up. Her body would pursue me. I’d become a bitter, vindictive man who had lost his decency and was forced to live in its shadow.