

Anton Valens

## **A Wagon Full of Devils**

(Een wagon vol duivels)

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Translated by Laura Vroomen

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On the face of it, in the more than twenty years since my first visit, Stanley's home had remained all but unchanged. It was a large open-plan space with a wooden floor and bare white walls. The room was quite deep. The kitchen was on the side facing the street, and this is where we nearly always sat. The light poured in through two big windows and the glass doors of a French balcony. It was a grey light, because of the tall buildings across the street. Often, regardless of the weather, we'd lean over the balustrade and watch the ever-changing flow of tourists and day-trippers while the tea was brewing. This part of the flat had a direct connection with the very heart of the city. It was always buzzing.

A narrower and darker section, not unlike a wide corridor, led to the back room. From the kitchen, it looked a long way away. It's where Stanley's bed stood, a sofa covered in a white throw and a television set from the nineties.

All in all, the flat felt empty. But that's not to say that the floorboards weren't strewn with all manner of flotsam and jetsam: a deconstructed bike, row upon row of shoes, books and other paperwork, an *I Ching* held together by brown masking tape, vacuum cleaner parts, an African mask broken in two, children's drawings and small artworks. It was all scattered across the floor, something for everyone. What little furniture there was, such as an old-fashioned toddler's school desk, had been taken from skips. I'd describe the ambiance in the home as, for want of a better word, shabby asceticism. The squatter's look. The place wasn't spick and span, but certainly not filthy either.

It had always been like this.

But not really. The familiar feel of the place obscured the fact that once upon a time, before the renovation, the flat had had a different layout. The first time I visited Stanley at home – and for many years after – there had been a white, cast-iron bathtub on brass claw feet in the dark, narrow middle section. It had been hooked up to the water mains via a makeshift system of copper pipes and garden hoses. I'd once made a small painting of this

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tub, I remember, in pale greens and whites, featuring Stanley (a primitivist representation) in a distorted pose in the foreground.

These days, Stanley had a more or less normal bathroom.

There had been a piano too, I recall. It hadn't come back after the renovation. It was at the Colony now, where it was rarely used.

Prior to the renovation, the kitchen – a sober affair – had been in what was now the back room. Post-renovation, Stanley gained some extra square metres at that end, giving the room its current shape. East-facing windows, a spacious balcony overlooking the peaceful interior courtyard. So the kitchen had moved and had also become a bit more modern and less makeshift, while the rear of the flat had been expanded and the cracks in the ceiling patched up; *that's* what had changed during all these years.

I regret that I can't remember my first visit to Warmoesstraat. What was the occasion? We had met at Markus's, that I do remember, when he was still living on Sint Jacobsstraat. When was this? In those days, Markus and I used to paint in his attic, which had a view of Nieuwendijk.

Markus had bumped into Stanley at a gay bar. For some time – a few weeks or months – they had a sexual relationship. I didn't know the ins and outs, and it wasn't any of my business either. But on a few occasions I happened to arrive at the attic on Sint Jacobsstraat to paint (I had my own key) only to find Markus in the company of a tall, dark bloke with a sultry, brooding look on his face. They were sitting opposite each other, I recall, with the low table that Markus had inherited from his grandmother between them. They'd sit facing each other for hours on end, without a word, slurping tea, Markus having his diluted with a splash of milk.

Who was I at the time? That's difficult to establish with hindsight.

I think I was still seeing Josefien back then. The GP had referred me to a counsellor. I didn't understand why.

Where was I living? I was more or less nomadic, sleeping either at Josefien's or in my studio. My book collection was stored in supermarket bags. I painted islands.

My mother, although divorced, hadn't yet managed to win over her later boyfriend, who has since passed away. My brothers and sister were going through different stages of puberty: early, middle and late.

How did the Dutch national football team do? Who won Wimbledon, the Tour de France? Knowing myself, I would have been aware of these things, although I don't think I

owned a TV. But all that knowledge has evaporated. Mobile phones had yet to be invented. My father had a car phone, a walkie-talkie-type contraption, which was quite a big deal.

Somewhere in that impenetrable mist, Stanley and I had grown close, but the exact circumstances in which this process had been set in motion – which incidentally proceeded at the speed of tectonic plates – can no longer be established.

The love relationship between Stanley and Markus fizzled out, but they remained friends. Every now and then they'd have dinner together. One evening, when it was cold and dark early, Markus asked me to come along. We walked from Sint Jacobsstraat down Nieuwendijk, and then through a small alley towards the stock exchange. Markus was practically running; in those years when he lived on the corner of Nieuwendijk, he'd developed a real knack for slaloming around the tourists and shopping crowds. He'd part the river. I followed in his wake but struggled to keep up with him.

It wasn't far. Markus came to a halt in front of a tilting building supported by a system of beams as thick as masts. The façades of this section of Warmoesstraat appeared to form part of a gigantic old ship that was stranded here, right behind De Bijenkorf department store. On the ground floor an unlit sex shop. It was closed at this time of day. Markus rang the bell, banged on the door and shouted up from the street. We waited. Markus grumbled: 'Stanley is always late.'

Then we heard the jangling of a bunch of keys. Because it was dark, we couldn't make out Stanley's silhouette on the other side of the window. Markus followed Stanley among the display cases with toys and video tapes to a door at the back of the shop, and I in turn followed Markus, who was swallowed up by a black hole. There was a smell of broken-down bikes and old paper in there. Once my eyes had adjusted, I noticed that Markus was climbing a flight of stairs.

If I'd known then that nearly a quarter-century later I'd be writing about Stanley, I would have written a brief account of this first evening on Warmoesstraat. Because I saw myself as a painter first, as I have done for the best part of my life, and didn't factor in a future as a writer, I failed to do so. I don't regret that – that's just how it was back then. So instead of trying to fictionalise this first evening, I'll confine myself to describing the pattern that characterised this and subsequent, similar evenings.

Stanley didn't like cooking. Once a week, he'd go to his mother in Wormerveer and bring back two shopping bags filled to the brim with high-calorie and nicely seasoned food in Tupperware boxes. But when we came over for dinner, he did cook, or at least he would have

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made a start by boiling water for the rice. On the cluttered counter, which appeared to have been salvaged from a skip like the rest of the furniture, were a smoked mackerel, a bag of cashew nuts and a tin of garden peas.

Markus would quickly peel off his jacket and take over the helm. He'd gather together a few onions and cloves of garlic, dig a jar of pepper and a jar of curry powder out of the cabinets and rickety drawers and pour oil into a wok. The cooking was done on a grease-splattered two-burner hob, which had been hooked up to a gas bottle.

Markus and I were timid lads and both during and after the meal, we'd listen attentively, and without getting a word in edgeways, to the older Stanley's war stories. If truth be told, I had the greatest difficulty understanding these anecdotes, which could take up to an hour or longer. Stanley would talk a hundred miles a minute, forget to indicate who was who, sometimes yell at the top of his lungs, or suddenly jump up to enact part of the anecdote. He would go off on tangents, very long and winding detours that would ultimately, in a surprising or cryptic way, lead us back to the main story. Once in a while, he'd roar with deafening, shrill laughter. Or he'd pretend that someone was bashing his brains in. Yet there was a great seriousness underlying everything.

An important and regularly recurring subject in Stanley's table talk was the Colony, a run-down, windowless building in the middle of the block. His battles with the council, which wanted to impose a compulsory purchase order to build luxury apartments, with superintendent Oeverhaus of the Building Inspectorate, who had it in for him and who tried to get him evicted until the day he retired, with his neighbours, the architect, the engineer, etc., as well as the tunnel to Warmoesstraat he was digging and other even more ambitious plans and fantasies regarding the Colony were a test of our endurance.

One evening was almost entirely taken up by what in later years I came to refer to as the Military Service Medical Story. We were all part of a generation that had known conscription, so we each had our own Military Service Medical Story (or, to be precise, a story about dodging the draft). But whereas mine and Markus's had strong opportunistic overtones, Stanley's had a heroic tinge, because he'd trumped the army psychiatrist on immutable moral arguments, mainly by not answering his questions at all.

Other tales weren't situated in the Netherlands but in Surinam. His father played a starring role. All this only began to make more sense to me later. Back then he stated bluntly and not so subtly: 'My father was murdered by Bouterse.'

Now I think: Stanley doesn't want anything to do with the Surinamese because he blames the people of Surinam for sending his father to his death. Maybe he blames himself,

thinking it was his duty to save his father and he'd failed. This thought evoked bouts of him speaking of his hatred of his father. These culminated in the Knife Scene in Paramaribo, in which Stanley, incandescent with rage, had narrowly missed his father's wrinkled hand with the kitchen knife he was chopping vegetables with.

During these meals on Warmoesstraat the point of this and related life stories was wasted on me. But the emotional charge, the tone, didn't escape me. And that endeared him to me. Why was that? What was this vague sense of recognition?

I couldn't place it. Now I think: a tyrannical father, perhaps, a distant mother, but I didn't think along those lines in the early nineties, didn't think it was possible that such thoughts were even conceivable. Needless to say, *my* father hadn't been brutally murdered by Bouterse or the Surinamese or indeed any other people; my father was still alive. I'd never threatened my father with a kitchen knife. So there were huge, irreconcilable differences as well.

One question to which the answer remained unclear for a long time was what exactly Stanley *did*. It only slowly dawned on me that he was a dancer and that once every couple of years he and a female friend would stage an independent modern dance performance at the Colony, the space he managed. Markus had seen two of those shows and hadn't been overly impressed. 'Spartan, austere, utterly incomprehensible and therefore dull,' was his verdict on Stanley's art of movement, 'no shred of entertainment. It has to be very *difficult*, if anything, *high art*. He holds too much back, he really ought to let go a bit. He's capable of so much more than he lets on, but none of that's *allowed*...' There was a note of irritation in his voice.

'Dance coordinator,' I read by chance on a folded note stuck to the bottom of a plate under a pot with an overgrown, withered cactus. When I took a closer look, I realised it was an official letter from Social Services from the late eighties. Speckled with dry soil and particles of dust, it had found a new home after the renovation.

Those first few evenings on Warmoesstraat became shrouded in the sediment of later visits. Stanley stopped dancing; he grew too old. But he continued to manage the Colony and tried to rent out the space. Non-existing organisational skills and a total lack of business acumen meant that it gave him no end of trouble.

Towards the end of the summer Stanley surprised me by providing the musical intermezzo at a literary salon. His invitation arrived too late, I already had plans that evening. I was sorry about that, because knowing such gatherings and the loyal audiences they attract I could imagine that Stanley wouldn't look out of place among the poets' recitals.

Secretly proud and openly relieved, he reported back. The audience had been polite. The poets and their friends hadn't lynched him ('My voice is tolerable'). This performance led to a second invitation, for a similar semi-underground session with poets and the like, which had already passed by the time I heard about it. Again, he'd performed one song, *Retournement*, and received applause, not ridicule.

The performances got him thinking bigger and speculating openly about his plan, his ultimate aim, at least for now: his very own solo performance at the Colony.

I must admit that I was shocked when he informed me of this ambition. A risky venture, I thought to myself. Very bold. Should I have discouraged him at an earlier stage?

But there was an obstacle: the Colony was in use seven days a week, from ten in the morning till ten in the evening, by a fanatically training dance troupe, which had hired the space for a whole year. This was Stanley's income.

For some time, this fact got in the way of a performance, but Stanley kept eyeing his chances. He was determined. Pandora's box had been opened, the genie was out of the bottle, and so on and so forth. Late November, early December, he suddenly called me a few times in quick succession. He saw an opening during the Christmas holidays. Between Christmas and New Year's Eve, he told me, the members of the dance troupe would be going to see their parents, who lived in different countries, on different continents even – this particular dance company enjoyed a degree of international renown in *that world* – and the Colony would be empty.

He talked about being hot to trot. It was an expression I heard him use repeatedly at the time: hot to trot. Hot presumably referring to his singing in a solo show. He'd consulted the *I Ching*. An obscure passage had spoken of a wagon full of devils and a dirt-covered swine and he'd seen it as an encouragement.

Throughout this phone offensive I found myself thinking about two things: 1. If this is what you want – you've been going on about it long enough – then go for it, for God's sake; 2. Why are you calling *me* about this? What do you want from me? You seem to want something.

I kept these thoughts to myself. But I did end up expressing them in a more roundabout way. I vented my irritation by warning him in no uncertain terms that if he wanted to organise a solo show at the Colony by the end of the month, he'd better get the invitations out as quickly as possible. By getting involved in this way and in this emphatic tone of voice, I bowed to his wishes to engage with him and his singing. But was that what I wanted?

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He was talking about a page advertising cultural events in the monthly *Vrij Nederland*. Stanley had still managed to largely avoid the computer age. I didn't even try to push him towards the new media, by suggesting a Facebook account for instance. Not to mention tweeting, of course.

I asked: 'When's the deadline?'

'What deadline?'

'The magazine's. If you want to go ahead with your plan, you have to place that ad as soon as possible. Otherwise nobody will turn up.'

'You're right. I don't know.'

'Don't know what?'

'The deadline. But also: is this really a good idea?'

'The performance, you mean?'

'Yes. Ta-ti-ta-ta...'

'That's up to you. You can't expect me to decide on your behalf. But *if* you want to go ahead, you'll have to call the magazine, find out about the deadline and place your ad ASAP, that's all I'm saying.'

Stanley giggled briefly and hung up.

After that I didn't hear anything for weeks, and I didn't mind that. I didn't know how to handle something I didn't know how to handle. I admit it sounds vague and woolly.

On Christmas Eve, Nadia and I had dinner with her mother in Bilthoven. We'd decided not to go and see my mother, because it would have been too much, all that driving up and down the country. Deep down there was more to it: Nadia's mother had lost a lot of weight since the summer. This could be her last Christmas. And the relationship between Nadia and my mother had been as tense as the wings of a taxidermy bat, since Nadia, without my knowledge, had asked my mum about my upbringing. That hadn't gone down well.

Around nine p.m. on that twenty-fourth of December, Nadia and I said goodbye to her mother, got in the car and tore along the motorway back to the capital. As usual, Nadia was driving (I don't have a licence). As she firmly gripped the steering wheel in her hands and pressed the pedals with her feet, we spoke on and off, in short sentences, but more off than on. She was tired, longed for her bed. I was actually looking forward to my own world, which would commence later that evening, once she had retired. Spending time in Bilthoven with my mother-in-law, however much we liked and respected each other, still amounted to being in an alternative and not necessarily more pleasant universe.

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We got home at twenty to ten. Nadia disappeared into the bedroom at once. I locked myself into my 'work' space, and less than three minutes after we'd peaceably gone our separate ways, my phone rang. 'Bloody hell,' I muttered, a bad actor in the reality soap of his own life, flipped open my mobile and read 'Stanley' on the display.

'Hello.'

'It's me. Is this a good time?'

'It's ok. How are you?'

'Yeah, fine. Is it too late?'

'What is it? What's up?'

Stanley started the conversation in a tone I couldn't quite place. 'Listen, you know someone with an allotment, don't you?'

'That's right.'

'Do they have any, uhm, woodlice?'

'Are you stoned?'

'No. Seriously, do you know if there are any woodlice? I need photos. Close-ups. Perhaps an image of one on its back, its legs flailing in the air. Audience members!'

He began to laugh like a maniac. I held the phone about a foot from my face. After Stanley had come to his senses again, I brought it back to my ear. And that's how I found out that Stanley had finally made up his mind. He was going ahead with the performance. The plan was next weekend, the final one of the year, starting on Friday evening. The magazine ad hadn't worked out. Because he was too late with the invitations, he was expecting no audience to speak of. But to make the place look a bit fuller, he'd come up with the idea of putting blown up photos of woodlice in various postures on the seats.

He thought it was hilarious. I thought to myself: He doesn't see the audience as horses, ring-necked parakeets or dogs, animals that wouldn't have been too difficult to photograph for his intended purposes, but as woodlice. Does that mean that he sees himself as a woodlouse? Does he see me as a woodlouse?

I reacted tetchily. 'It's *very* short notice. Tomorrow is Christmas. Everybody's busy, or out of town. Sending an email round is pointless now. You'll have to call the people you had in mind, one by one. As soon as possible. I tried to sound firm. 'As soon as you've hung up, you have to start ringing people.'

'\_'

'If you put this off any longer,' I insisted, 'you might as well not bother; nobody will turn up.'



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‘Yeah, yeah, yeah, you’re right. I’ll get cracking...’

But he didn’t hang up. He stayed on the line without saying anything, as if he didn’t know how to ring off. I got a sense that the request for photos of woodlice wasn’t the whole story.

‘Is there anything else?’

‘Uhm, yes, now that you mention it: the intercom. The buzzer on the gate is broken.’

‘That’s not great.’

‘I can get the housing association to fit a new one, but that’ll cost me 4,000 euro, which I don’t have.’

‘No. Besides, it’s too late for that now.’

‘I can’t stand by the gate to let people in *and* be at the Colony getting ready at the same time.’

I understood what he was getting at. He couldn’t do it on his own, he needed help. Of all his friends, he’d chosen *me* as his confidant. Perhaps the support wasn’t purely practical, but mostly moral. I frantically racked my brain. I didn’t have any special plans the weekend he was thinking of.

Without offering much resistance, I let myself be sucked into the role of deputy, manager and dimmer of the house lights. He asked me several times, worriedly, whether he wasn’t demanding too much of me. I kept saying that it was okay, and then he’d giggle gratefully. I think I would have been less accommodating if I’d thought his singing was rubbish. I saw something in it. He appealed to me for help with an artistic enterprise that somehow spoke to me, even though I couldn’t even begin to imagine its impact on an audience at a venue – and didn’t bother trying. I believe that, my irony and cynicism notwithstanding, I felt truly honoured.