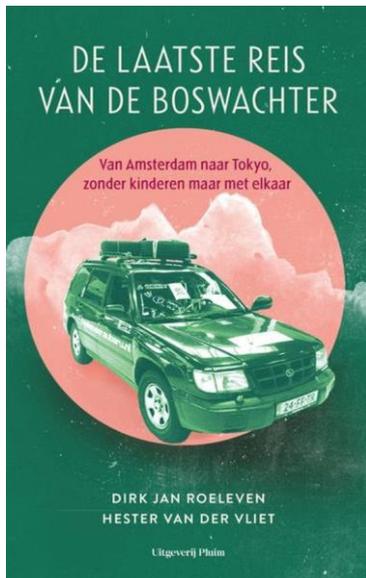




Dirk Jan Roeleven and Hester van der Vliet

– *The Forester's Last Journey*

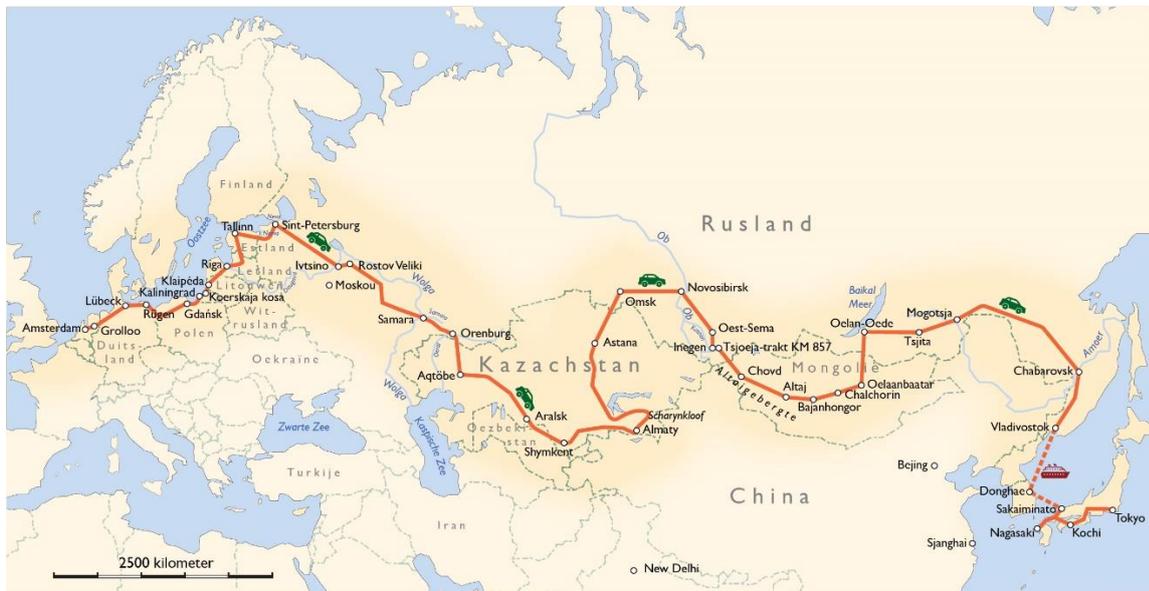
73.000 words. 149 pages. Published in 2021 by Pluim Publishers.



Dirk Jan Roeleven and his wife Hester van der Vliet make a promise to their Subaru Forester, nicknamed 'the Forester': when he's done 500.000 kilometers, they will return him to his birthplace in Japan. And that is how they start a 23.823-kilometer journey, with neither air conditioning nor any knowledge of car mechanics, across worn-down Russian concrete, Mongolian desert roads and Kazakh steppe-highways to Vladivostok, where the ferry to Japan departs. Away from their hectic lives and with only each other as company they face an unexpected test of strength, and finally find the time to properly reflect on their involuntary childlessness.

Dirk Jan Roeleven (1961) works as a filmmaker, creating items for a variety of Dutch TV programs. His writing debut *The New Bicycle*, which sold over 15.000 copies, takes the reader on a journey from Italy to The Netherlands and shares Roeleven's thoughts about his father's early passing.

Hester van der Vliet (1961) is a film producer with a focus on documentary film. Since 2000 she has been working as a senior producer for the Dutch broadcaster BNNVARA.



Cossee Publishers, Kerkstraat 361, 1017 HW Amsterdam, the Netherlands | For more information, please contact Stella Rieck: rieck@cossee.com or visit www.cossee.com/foreignrights. | For translation grants visit www.letterenfonds.nl/en/grants for more information.



Press – *The Forester's Last Journey*

“What a book! This is truly a grand odyssey. I can't stop reading and occasionally it moves me to tears. Beautiful!”- Matthijs van Nieuwerk, Dutch TV presenter

“Incredibly good. A very honest, emotional, and moving book. Exciting, too!” Jellie Brouwer, *Kunststof Radio 1*

“I'm in love with *The Forester's Last Journey*. From their experiences and encounters you can draw so many life lessons. The most important being to dream, dare and do!” – *Algemeen Dagblad*

“A compelling travel story, though not just that. This book contains an emotional, sometimes painful thread. The authors have found a fine balance. **The combination of adventure and introspection which leads to the question “What are we doing on this earth?” works wonderfully. A special book which deserves a special place in Dutch travel literature.**” – Jo de Ruyck – *Het Nieuwsblad*

“Beautiful, beautiful book.” – Martine van Os, *Tijd voor Max*

“A travel story which turns the perspective outward and inward: a glance back at unwanted childlessness. A lovely read, free of overly bombastic language, Roeleven shows how he and his wife deal with childlessness.” - *Trouw*

“Finished it in one go. Very special!” – Bert Kranenberg, *Bert op 5*

“A combination of a road trip storyline and the wish to have children, relationships and pent up past frustrations. Rather heavy but extremely well-written, which is exactly why everything in this book matches so perfectly. One moment it's about the Russian roads and the other it's a heavy discussion between two people who have failed to speak their minds during their lifetime together. **Add a heap of exotic locations and extraordinary characters and you have a very special book indeed. A book about the love of travel, love of cars and love for each other.**” – *Mixed Grill*

“Definitely worth a read. Not only is it written in a very readable manner, it’s also a recommendation for everyone planning or wanting to make a big road trip.” – *Youngtimer Magazine*

“This is a moving and inspiring travel story about a couple mourning the children they never had.” - *Flair*

“A book that calls for a good glass of wine.” – *De Morgen*

“I finished *The Forester’s Last Journey* in one day, moved by the honesty and candor with which the open wound of unwanted childlessness is described. **The book really stays with you. For whomever has or wants children: don’t take them for granted. For those who are unwantedly childless: this book will help others understand what that is like.**” – Hetty Nietsch, journalist and documentary maker

“A compelling, educational, thrilling, beautifully written tale of a bizarre trip from Amsterdam to Tokyo. At the end of the book, writer and documentary maker Dirk Jan Roeleven throws an entire box, which he carried with him the entire time, containing a collection of articles and newspaper clippings about children and childlessness, into a Japanese wastepaper bin. Does that provide closure for him and his brave wife Hester? I truly hope so.” – Alex Roeka, singer

“I finished this book in one go!” – Sinan Can, *Sinan’s Atlas*, Radio

“An interesting, touching, extremely personal and true story.” – *Arts & Auto*



Sample – *The Forester's Last Journey / From Amsterdam to Tokyo, childless but together*

© sample translation, 2021, Anna Asbury, pages 13-31

'Dear Mum, we're in Vladivostok. Unbelievable, right? After everything we've been through. All those kilometres, all those people. I'm sitting in our hotel writing with a view of the Sea of Japan. The sun is shining brightly. It's eight in the morning. Dirk is out for a quick run, across the city I've been curious about all my life, because it sounded so exotic and because it's so far away. In a little while I'm going to get our dear Forester ready for the big ferry journey to Japan. I miss you. If only I could sit next to you on the sofa for a moment with a lovely cup of tea, while you drink your glass of whisky. Just seven more weeks. I love you. Hester.'

Our mission is almost complete. After 500,000 kilometres of loyal service we're bringing our Subaru Forester back to its birthplace in Tokyo. It's ready to board the ferry for the crossing to Japan, where nothing more can happen to it. We did it! As always I've brought cash to buy myself a coffee, but today I spend it on a tall, scarlet rose which beckons me from a covered shopping arcade. The most beautiful gift imaginable for my darling at the Equator hotel. A red rose in Vladivostok. Symbol of love and of Rosa Venus, the name of the little one we never had.

THE PLAN

It's at the foot of Mont Ventoux that I mention to friend B. the wild scheme of returning my old Japanese car – a Subaru Forester – to the factory where it was conceived, once it has clocked up 500,000 kilometres, as thanks for services rendered. We're sitting among old vines in a rented vineyard with a view of the famous bald mountain in Provence. It's hot. Fervently, we talk about the imaginary road trip to Tokyo. How far would that be? And is there a ferry to Japan?

B. is good with a smartphone and discovers in no time that it's 11,124 kilometres, that it takes 122 hours and that that means it's pretty much a piece of cake to drive from the Netherlands to the Russian port city of Vladivostok.

At that moment my wife Hester emerges from the cool kitchen with a plate of freshly cut fruit. 'What are you two talking about?' she asks when she notices me speaking in more hushed tones.

I feel caught in in the act, but blurt out, 'We're going to Vladivostok and then by ferry to Japan. There's a road from here to Vladivostok. A long, empty road, I think, with the same monotonous view of perpetual birch forests for days on end. We can have a good long relaxed talk about life. Wonderful, right?'

'Okay,' she says right away, to my pleasant surprise. 'I'll come along, on condition that you listen to me properly if I get the feeling something's wrong or that there's danger.'

I promise.

'And I want to be through Siberia before the first snow falls.'

Pouring a cool Solange, we toast the Pact de la Provence & the Noble Art of Getting Lost.

It's easy to make plans on holiday in the subtropical South of France, but once back in the sober reality of the Low Countries, doubt sets in. The look in the eyes of people when you say you're going to drive to Japan. The incredulity. 'Are you out of your mind?' 'By car?' 'How far is that?' 'Can you get that much time off work?' 'How will you afford it?'

But the idea has a hold on us, and half a year later, it's time: the odometer jumps from 499,998 to 499,999. I grab my phone to record the magical moment in motion picture. It happens on the Antwerp ring road, on the way past the Sportpalais: the digital counter of the old Japanese car jumps to 500,000. Half a million kilometres.

Hester and I high five each other. I kiss her on the cheek – she has a firm grip on the steering wheel – and tap our Forester's dashboard five times, like a warm pat on the back for a great achievement. I thank it for all those safe kilometres.

In the distance I see the port cranes and container walls. Nearby are blocks of flats covered in satellite dishes. A historic event, cruising with a view over Antwerp, the low sun over the old city centre.

I post a Facebook message in which I joyfully announce our up-and-coming road trip to Japan. To our amazement, the clip is shared far and wide, even outside the Netherlands, in Austria, Germany, Canada, the United States and Australia, countries where our Forester apparently has plenty of relatives. Joy based on a series of figures, delight about numbers, flitting by, changing nothing fundamentally.

We drive languidly onto the five-lane motorway towards Utrecht. The little engine hums in satisfaction and the radio plays music by Berlioz. Vladivostok is still far off. I reckon it would take us five months to make the journey at a leisurely pace. The route we calculated at Mont Ventoux was the shortest: if you drove eight hours a day you'd be there in fifteen days. If we aim to take five months, we'll certainly get there, with plenty of nice diversions. In order to avoid the cold we need to be in Vladivostok by the end of September. If we're in Japan in early October, we can spend a couple of brief months exploring the country. The final destination might be the birthplace of our Forester, but we'd like to see more of Japan than just the Subaru factory to the north of Tokyo. The southern islands look beautiful, cities such as Nagasaki, Hiroshima, Fukuoka. Really it's nothing less than a dream, and now I understand what people so often say when they hear our plan: 'Lots of people dream of doing this kind of thing, but you're actually doing it.' Then that look, midway between admiration, envy and disbelief.

I suggest that in any case we should celebrate my mother's eighty-ninth birthday, assuming she makes it that far, on 14 June, and then get on the road as soon as we can. Hester grabs the diary and sees that the following Saturday is 17 June, the year 2017. The ideal departure date.

As one with a fetish for figures, I believe that the combination 17/6/17 will bring us luck. Of course there's no grounds to believe such a thing, but self-invented incantations don't do anyone any harm. That was why we planned our wedding for 10/10 at 10.10am. We celebrated our wedding with a party on 7/7/7. And since acquiring the Forester, we'd learned that the combination 555 is sacred to Subaru, because they've won a great many big rallies with the cigarette sponsor 555. Hester suddenly shouts out that our trip to Japan will be the Voyage of Round Numbers: on departure we'll both be fifty-five, we'll have been together for twenty-five years,

married for ten, and it will have been twenty years since our last IVF attempt. We depart in exactly nine months.

Written in black ink on the white envelope are the words *For Dirk Jan*. I recognise my mother-in-law's flamboyant handwriting. The letter itself consists of two A4 sheets of printed text. It takes an open tone, but exudes concern about the plan of her son-in-law, who may be well travelled, but wishes to drive over land to Japan with her only surviving daughter, unimpeded by knowledge of automotive technology, in a third-hand Subaru with more than half a million kilometres on the clock.

It begins with practical questions about the costs of another car when we leave our Forester in Japan. 'Will you exchange it for a brand-new model (36,000 euros) or go for second-, third- or fourth-hand?'

She continues on this tack. 'The Subaru runs on gas and petrol. Can you get that combination in all countries? How will you obtain money, foreign currency or dollars? Can you use your bank cards everywhere?'

After the practicalities, Iris writes, 'Now I'd like to bring to your attention what's most important to me – and that's Hester! I know you won't like my questions, but this time you're involving your wife Hester, my daughter, in your adventure. Last night she was standing outside my house on the point of leaving and she levelled an emotional outburst at me: "You don't understand how tired I am. I've got a headache and I'm dizzy." Previously she'd mumbled to herself, "Perhaps I have to face the challenge and overcome my fear." I looked in silence at her contorted face, her weary eyes. I felt helpless and cursed that bloody trip to Japan. Be sure to remember, dear Dirk, that it's *your* dream that benefits when your darling Hester goes with you. Renting your flat out, finances, packing your things, vaccinations, visas, etc., etc., that's a lot to take on. Do you think you can find time to organise everything and prepare? Your loving, worried mother-in-law Iris.'

The letter is a welcome reality check and compels me to consider issues I haven't previously thought about. What started out as a wacky plan is now a serious matter. It's true, I'm dragging Hester along on an uncertain adventure, something for which I have to take responsibility. Almost like having a child together, I imagine.

Meanwhile it's time to inform not just Iris but also my own mother Nel of our plans. Prepared for an awkward conversation, we drive to her care home in Voorhout.

'Hello my boy,' she says, 'lovely of you to drop by.'

I ask how she is.

'I'm all right,' she says. 'As long as I stay sitting in this chair like this, the pain is manageable. But I can't do much more.' After a long life full of movement, this is what's left. Nevertheless she wants to reach the age of one hundred, she says.

'Listen Nel,' I say. 'Hester and I are going to Japan.'

'Japan?' she replies. 'Lovely! Are you going for work?'

I pick up the world map and open it up. 'Here's Japan. And here's Voorhout.'

She follows my finger as it moves across the map. 'We're going to travel by car,' I say.

She looks at me as if I'm joking. 'By car? Isn't that an awfully long way? And is Hester going along too?'

Hester nods.

'Where do you find the courage?' Nel asks. 'What if something happens on the way?'

'We'll make sure the car's in good nick before we set off,' Hester tells her. 'We'll leave right after your birthday and we'll be back just before Iris's birthday in December. We'll be away half a year in total.'

I see disappointment in my mother's face, but the hysterical reaction from earlier days that I'd feared ('I might die in that time') is absent. She also omits her past emotional blackmail ('If you leave I'll end it all'). 'Could you call me on the way?' is all she asks.

DEPARTURE

Now we have a date and a vague idea of when we want to be in Japan, we start thinking about the route. The southern option, via Central Europe, across the Balkans to Turkey, Armenia, Iran and through Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan to Kazakhstan, Russia and Mongolia, or the northern alternative, via Berlin, Belarus and Moscow, then straight to the other side of the biggest country in the world. Certainly faster, but with less of a thousand-and-one-nights feel.

Hester doesn't want to travel via Turkey, given its leading role in the refugee deal with Europe, bomb attacks, the attempted coup and war in Kurdistan. I feel it would work out fine, but prefer to avoid war in the Forester. A series of coincidences leads us to pencil in a route. We'll go to Moscow via St Petersburg, with a detour to the dacha belonging to the family of Sasha, the producer of my documentary film about EU-commissioner Frans Timmermans, who invited us when she heard of our plan. Then I receive a request via Facebook from a Russian interpreter who interpreted my documentary *Shocking Blue* for a fan from Kaliningrad. The fan would like a signature of Robbie van Leeuwen, the founding member and songwriter. I obtain the signature and plan to deliver it personally. Meeting a real Russian who at least speaks a bit of English strikes me as an opportunity not to be missed. A nice destination plus stopover. This means crossing off Berlin and Belarus, but we can still include the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The capitals Riga and Tallin have been on our wish list for years. I make the obsessive-compulsive decision that the route to Japan can only take us through regions and cities we've never visited before. So no Moscow.

The more we talk about our plan, the more people want to help us with contacts and information. Our neighbour has a good childhood friend who has been to Russia more than thirty times as a tour guide. A week later we're having coffee at Pied à Terre in Amsterdam's Overtoom district and being told that life is better anywhere than in Russia: 'Sometimes when it comes to travel, the idea is more pleasant than the reality. The food, nature, wine, people, the cities and roads in Russia can't compete with a country like Italy. I'm always quite depressed by life there. And if you drive through Russia in a foreign car you can be sure the police will stop you at the drop of a hat, and you'll have to fork out for misdemeanours you never committed. I've enough experience of that myself.'

Hester and I exchange glances. Great!

'That's a lot of loose dollars to keep in our yet-to-be-purchased car safe,' I remark as we cycle home. 'Plus a crash course in Russian. And maybe I should do a car maintenance course too.'

Two traffic lights on, Hester says, 'Dirk, what are we getting ourselves into?'

We receive various pieces of advice, solicited and unsolicited. 'You won't get anywhere without tea lights and matches. On a cold desert night they'll bring you so much warmth in your cabin. And an axe, so that you can chop wood and make a fire' (Mike van der Sluis, sound technician and lonesome traveller in Canada and the US). 'Don't forget to take a nylon stocking. You can put it over your air filter to keep dirt and sand out. And take a bar of Sunlight soap with you, you can use it to stop holes in your exhaust (Jeroen Geurst, architect and know-it-all). 'I'd fly if I were you' (Louis van Gaal, football coach from Amsterdam who prefers to leave nothing to chance). 'Oooh, I've always wanted to do that too. It really is one of my dreams. But Louis doesn't want to. Are you going together? Do it, go for it!' (Truus van Gaal). 'Take my number and don't hesitate to call in an emergency. There aren't many ports on your route, but in Japan we can always help, as we have an agent there' (Hennie Huijgen, ship owner from Rotterdam, Friend of Feyenoord and of my book *The New Bike*). 'This green steel box has been all over the world, 17,000 kilometres in South America and 14,000 in North America. We used it to store our cameras and laptops safely during rallies, you can borrow it' (Leendert de Haan, several times winner of the Tulip Rally). 'Here, take a copy of the road atlas of Japan in English, then at least you won't get lost there' (Doortje de Haan, artist and frequent traveller in Japan).

The closer we come to departure, the worse the stress. I still have so much work to finish, but the trip is also a deadline that shouldn't be underestimated. The big issues are now sorted. A Multiple Entry Visa for Russia valid for a year. Car insurance for Russia. International driving licence. Vaccinations. Bank account with sufficient funds. Flat rented out from departure date to start of December. Cupboards cleared out. Car check-up two weeks before departure. Some questions remain open: is there a ferry from Korsakov on the Russian island of Sakhalin to Hokkaido, Japan, that will transport the Forester as well as us? Do we need a visa for Mongolia or not? Where do I buy airmail paper? Are there LPG stations on the way? And if so, where? What LPG nozzles will we need? Will I record the journey in image and sound? If so, how? And how do I get hold of Mi-Fi (mobile Wi-Fi)?

Three weeks before departure, among the preparations for what has come to be called the Big Trip, I go back and forth to New York City for the showing of my documentary about Frans Timmermans, *The European*. Relieved, I cycle along Fifth Avenue to Central Park, past the NYC Roadrunners Club to Upper East Side, where our friend Monique from Limburg and her musician partner Steve from Boston live. This time the road trip to Japan is a central theme at the amply

laden table. Steve loves the idea. ‘You crazy Dutch,’ he says with a grin, jovially slapping me on the shoulder. In no time he has the globe on the table and begins measuring the distance from the Netherlands to Japan in stretches from thumb to index finger with his delicate guitarist’s hands. He almost falls off his seat in disbelief. ‘Compared with the United States, Russia is immense. Is there a road? Are there actually gas stations? I just would like to ask you: WHY are you doing this?’

I look at him without answering. I’m reminded of my PhD student friend C., who when making decisions likes to quote a German philosopher: ‘Es fehlt das wozu – the why is missing.’

The lack of a why is as good a reason as any, I think. Pointlessness as a purpose.

Tomorrow. We’re going tomorrow. Hester’s sitting at the table in the kitchen checking the final things. Chet Baker’s singing ‘Let’s Get Lost’. The wood floor of our apartment is covered in cases and bags. Half a year away from our familiar surroundings by the river IJ. I feel the unspoken tension of the moment, pick up the phone and film a little. Working my way along a string of bags, I eventually come to darling Hester. She smiles. She’s up for it. Vladivostok, always wanted to go there.

As a fully-fledged packer, trained in the SPAR shop in Zoeterwoud by my father Theo and mother Nel, I am the one tasked with loading up the Forester. I set out everything to go in the car on our living room floor. To get an overview. We’ve opted for lots of small bags so that we can easily get things out of the car.

But the next morning when I actually go to load it up, I see liquid on the concrete garage floor, directly under the car. Not just drops, a sizeable pool. An oily substance, not water. When I look a while longer, I see a drop fall into the pool approximately every twenty seconds. What a mess, on the very day of *le grand départ*.

I take a photo and send it to the WhatsApp group ‘The Road To Japan’, set up the previous week, in which, besides Hester and me, we also have Subaru doctor Jeroen and Andra from the communication department. Jeroen responds immediately: ‘Come to Aalsmeer half an hour early, then we’ll get it on the ramp.’

At sunny noon, when we drive out of our street in a sagging, heavily laden Forester, none of the passers-by could know that this car will never return. After ten years here, it’s leaving the street for the last time. The odometer is at 506,342 kilometres.

‘It can’t be true,’ I say. ‘We can’t call the whole trip off after all our preparations. Engine broken, game over. On the other hand, the Big Trip Leader will protect us from impending doom, in which case this fits into his Master Plan and we’re saved by the bell.’

Hester is silent. She’s not comfortable with the situation and looks suddenly tired.

I try to cheer her up. ‘Hester, you know that joke about the couple who take their old, third-hand Subaru back to the factory in Japan after half a million kilometres?’

We don’t talk much on the motorway to the garage in Aalsmeer. In a little while, at half past one, friends, family and colleagues are coming to wave us off, but maybe there’s nothing to wave off.

Once our Forester has passed the Waterdrinker warehouses and Aalsmeer flower auction and takes a right towards the Subaru dealer, we see a sea of flags in the distance. In front of the show room is a bright-blue scaffold, like the start line of a time trial for our valiant green Forester to take its place. The dealer’s entire staff are bustling back and forth setting out brand-new cars.

Although we’re not getting sponsorship, we have worked with them on a big article in the Saturday *Telegraaf* and have been patiently giving interviews to car magazines. We hope to be able to fall back on the international Subaru network on our way if need be, but we don’t have any firm agreements in place. Our only real safety net consists of Doctor Jeroen and Master Mechanic Jaap.

Once he has the leaking Forester on the garage ramp, our master mechanic looks less than cheery. He’s seeing oil dripping steadily. Torch in hand, he points to the source. ‘There. To the left. A torn shock absorber dust cover at the drive shaft. I can’t let you leave with that,’ he says. ‘But I’ll need an hour. And I’m not sure if we have a dust cover like that in stock.’

Jeroen looks at me. ‘I don’t think we should repair that now. We’ll never be ready when the guests turn up. I suggest that you leave according to plan at two o’clock with lots of tooting and fuss. Stay away an hour or so until everyone’s gone, then come back and we’ll repair the leak.’

We struggle with the idea of slightly misleading our friends, but we have to admit that it would also be an anti-climax to announce that the departure is fake. Doctor Jeroen: ‘But if we don’t have the dust cover, we won’t be able to repair the car until Monday.’

Hester and I grip each other’s hands. Then we’d be spending tonight in our own bed again.

Jaap goes to the warehouse in search of the part in question. He returns disappointed. ‘Can’t find it. But I had a similar repair last week and ordered two of those parts to be on the safe side. Where can they be?’

You could cut the tension with a knife. Then Jaap emerges from the office, a big smile on his face. In his hand is a rubber thing that turns out to be the part they were looking for.

Less than an hour later, more than a hundred people are standing around an old green former police car: our Forester. On the windows of the showroom I’ve stuck a map of Asia with the global route. It’s attracting plenty of attention. Today’s *Telegraaf* article is also hanging there. I read my own words: ‘I always thought the Forester the ugliest car in the world.’ Sawada-san, the Japanese boss of Subaru Benelux, is here, our network directors have come on their Saturday off,

plus a delegation from the Kazakh embassy, including Jerbol, a James-Bond-like man we can call 24/7, *in case of trouble*.

We kiss friends, past and present, sisters, brothers, nephews, nieces, pets, a newly pregnant friend who was recently assured by doctors she would never have a child. Old rockers in black T-shirts, cherished colleagues, our wedding witnesses, BikeWriters ready to escort their trusty team leader's car to the first traffic lights on their racing bikes. And the mothers, of course, Iris and Nel (aged 83 and 89).

Just after two o'clock, we get into the Forester, CD player on, Alex Roeka's 'Longing for the track' blares from the speakers. I belt it out with him: 'We moeten zo langzaam maar weer eens gaan rijden, tegen de vuile hellingen op..., We should get back to the track, drive up those dirty slopes...'

After a long and happy life, with 506,365 kilometres on the clock, the Forester is ready for its journey home.

We roll down the blue ramp.

The refined drum roll of the boxer engine.

The beating hearts of two lovers.

The direction of travel is fixed.

Eastwards.

Our gaze too.

Outward *and* inward.