

The meaning of happiness

Kees van Beijnum

Paradiso



From the very first pages of his new novel, Kees van Beijnum puts the reader on edge. After six months, scientific researcher and happiness expert Mart Hitz, married father of a fourteen-year-old girl, decides to leave home for his mistress Karin. However, nature is stronger than he is: when he comes home, to announce his decision, it is to find out that a dyke has broken and that the villagers – Dana, Mart’s wife among them – have been evacuated to the

bowling alley. But when Mart goes there and doesn’t find her, a dark, winding hunt commences. Along with the police, his in-laws, and his daughter, he follows the leads of the few witnesses and slowly becomes mired in quicksand as he discovers that she, too, had a secret life.

The essence of this compelling novel lies in its title and literally so, since the eponymously named Amsterdam rock-music temple is where Mart first met Karin, a young single woman who surprised him by being open to a boring, married man as he saw himself. *Paradiso* is really about the meaning of happiness, too. Ironically, Mart Hitz, by profession a happiness expert, gropes about in the dark when it comes to his own happiness, and heads for doom.

Paradiso’s power is its tension, which contrasts so strongly with the shrouded lyricism of the style. Thus the realistic relational drama gains an almost existential depth. Van Beijnum doesn’t hesitate to give his story a moral, which flows naturally from the drama’s seriousness. People have everything but they forget to appreciate it. Cliché this may be, but under Van Beijnum’s skilled pen, it is revealed as a fresh and penetrating insight.

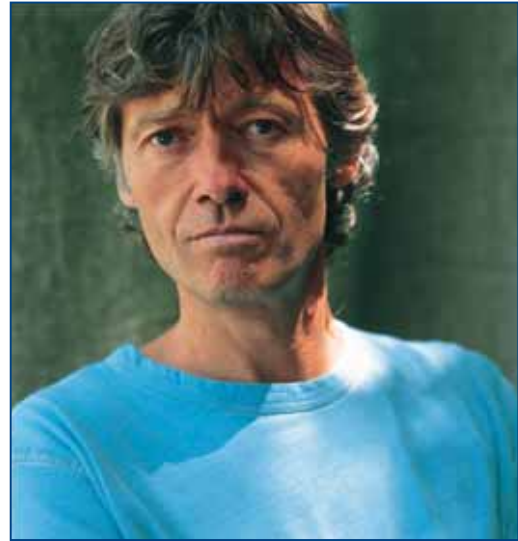


photo Wim van de Hulst

Kees van Beijnum (b. 1954) made his debut in 1991 with the true-crime novel *Over het IJ* (*Across the IJ*). His steady novel production that followed, with as peaks the autobiographical *Dichter op de Zeedijk* (*Poet on the Zeedijk*, 1996) and the amorous *De oesters van Nam Kee* (*Nam Kee’s Oysters*, 2000), made Van Beijnum one of the best Dutch literary storytellers. Van Beijnum, who also writes movie scripts, has a sharp eye for the rules of a good story. Rather than playing an intellectual game with his characters, he supplies them with a warm heart and heightened senses. Despite the sobering truths of his novels, as in *De vrouw die alles had* (*The Woman Who Had Everything*, 2002), a mother-son drama, and *Het verboden pad* (*The Forbidden Path*, 2004), about the underbelly of social work, his work reads as if you are watching a cathartic movie. ‘You have to love your characters, but you also have to send them to the brink,’ Van Beijnum said in an interview. ‘That’s where the real drama is – the truth and the pain.’

An admirable novel. Van Beijnum continues to write heart-wrenchingly beautiful plots and it works: as a reader you are very moved by this novel. Impressive. HET PAROOL

*A wise narrative about loss and acceptance, an incredibly exciting parable about human imperfections... With *Paradiso* Van Beijnum is shown at his best.*

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Sample Translation

Paradiso

(Paradiso)

by Kees van Beinum

(Amsterdam, De Bezige Bij, 2008)

Translated by Michele Hutchison

[Pages 11-27]

Hand in hand they walked amongst tourists through busy streets. They looked at a shop window where shoes were displayed on gold-coloured stands like museum pieces. They walked and walked. Café terraces loud with conversation, bars where the lights still had to be turned on, open-topped cars, men with wafting hair and sunglasses. She was wearing a black dress with thin shoulder straps and a low-cut back, from one of those little shops in the Jordaan. He admired the way she made the cheap clothes look stylish, the lightness with which she dealt with him, with his self-conceit and his reserve. What would it be like to be able to walk through the city every evening with her? Shows, exhibitions, dinners, back home together. Venice, she'd never been there.

Suddenly they were in front of Paradiso where fifty, a hundred people were packed together, talking, waiting. Behind them, the roofs of the high buildings in reddish evening light. She pulled him into the crowd and, eyes shining, conjured the tickets out of her bag. It was a year ago, she said, reminding him of that distant evening after a drinking session with two friends which had begun early in the afternoon, the extra tickets they'd given to the two young women at the door, at this very spot – Karin and her friend. He was moved that she'd surprised him this evening, she him and not the other way round.

He stood in a jeweller's in an alleyway picking out a necklace for her, or earrings, diamonds with sapphires perhaps.

They squeezed their way into the auditorium. It was packed and the heat was draining. They drank beer from plastic cups and found a good place by the pillars, at the edge of the bustle. On stage, the brass section was sweating, their instruments reflecting the spotlights in a soft multi-coloured haze. The big man himself sang his way through his repertoire with effortless impassivity. Hits of yesteryear. Nobody was interested in his new songs but the good-natured courtesy of faithful fans is very forgiving. If he walked down the street tomorrow in his pyjamas, they'd part for him in breathless silence. He took disciplined sips of water from a bottle. He didn't seem aware of his audience. He used a towel to

dab at the wet strands on his broad forehead. He'd grown fat but was still graceful; it had something to do with his footwork. When he looked up at the ceiling he seemed to know everything. At the end of the concert, he would bestow an indulgent smile on the audience. At the front, near the stage, young men and women peered through camera lenses, searching for the right angle, a moment of genuine ecstasy.

He recognised that compulsion, that doggedness. Concerts, bands, trying to get his hand in, days of hope but also of despair: can I do this? He'd develop and print at night, immediately after the concert, at home in his parents' attic, in a black plastic cupboard, fighting sleep and the acrid fumes around his head. Back then he smoked a packet of rolling tobacco a day.

He put his arm round her waist, her hand reached over to his hip in the darkness. She rocked against him, singing along quietly, her head slightly tilted back. The tedious concerns of her existence were miles away. From her side he looked at her, cloaked in shadow. Unexpectedly, not speaking, she turned her face towards him and gazed at him for a long time. The depth of the bass tones vibrating through the floor under his shoes, the coal-black silhouettes on the balcony, the stage that seemed to float in the light, his hand on the small of her back, it was like a night swim in the sea; long, slow strokes. He was so sure of himself. He recognised the feeling welling up inside. He kissed her throat.

They lay on the mattress in the sitting room like two impoverished students; the open windows let in the cool night air. She wasn't wearing a nightdress, her bare leg stuck out from under the sheet up to the curve of her buttock, the skin on her face was dull. Strange, how she could change. Late last night she'd lain naked on the wooden floorboards, letting him study her with speechless intensity from his place on the mattress; that image of her body, her hand between her soft thighs, cut through him. As children, she and her sister had collected money for starving Africans.

Their clothes were piled on the table. There weren't any curtains. The flat was rented from a second cousin who'd gone off to Peru with Unicef. Some of his stuff, including a racing bike, was stacked up in the bedroom until the end of the month. He thought about her new life here, tried to imagine it against the backdrop of these essentially drab rooms on the second floor. He pictured himself coming in and going away again. That was as far as he got, time after time his train of thought got stuck at that point, like a song whose lyrics escape you. He stared at her for a while, he was exhausted but too awake to sleep. Now and again her breath faltered and he felt her body move. Somewhere in the building a toilet flushed. He felt as if he'd been drinking for days. He resolved to take up tennis again.

He got up and walked over to the window. There was a new moon in the sky. A fly spun furiously on the windowsill. The city. The night. The city incinerator flared up, glowing red. Surgeons slept like lambs next to their wives. He looked around at the room and the basic furnishings that had been gathered together. She had big plans for the walls, something to do with loam, and wanted to replace the chairs and cupboards. Her best friend's sister was an interior designer. He'd be no use to her, he'd outgrown cutely furnished flats. Dance parties in the attic, bicycles in the stairwell, some forms of romance were best revisited in the form of an anecdote only.

"Have you been awake long?" She turned onto her back and pulled the sheet up to her chin. The boxes of books and CDs he'd carried upstairs were piled in the corner of the room.

"A while."

"You're worried?"

He tried to find the right way to put it.

"About us, right?"

"I've made a decision," he said.

She sat up, wrapping her arms around the sheet that was pulled taut over her knees.

“I’m going to tell Dana.” He hadn’t been planning to say this, but he said it. The words were in some ways familiar, he’d tried them out a few times in his thoughts, toyed with them, but still, as he spoke them, he felt totally unprepared.

“When did you decide that?”

“Last night.”

“All of a sudden?”

“You did it.”

“No!” She looked down so that he couldn’t see her face. She stayed like that, shoulders hunched, motionless, as if she had to ignore his presence to get through this moment. He felt himself drift away from the familiar world, heart pounding. He thought about what to say but the words fluttered around out of reach. The situation suddenly seemed absurd. His half-formed desires had extended no further than visions and daydreams, until now. He hadn’t made a decision, far from it; they’d never spoken openly about future plans. What did he mean to her? A married man she was in love with, someone she could reminisce about to her friends at some point, when she was in a nostalgic mood. *Of all the men I’ve known in my life...*

“What do you mean, no?” They didn’t seem like his own words but someone else’s, an actor playing a victim.

“I don’t want this.”

“Why not?” The buzzing of the fly on the windowsill rose in crescendo.

“What I did today is totally separate. That’s my responsibility.”

“Don’t you want us to be together? Really together?”

“Of course, but listen, Mart...”

The relief brought a new flood of words welling up in him. “No, I’m sure. I’m going to tell her. I don’t want to carry on like this.”

“I’m not asking anything of you, I’m not pressurising you. I knew that you were married, had a daughter...”

“I want to be with you. I don’t want you to live here on your own. Let’s look for a flat in the centre, somewhere on the canals.”

“I don’t want you to give up everything for me.”

“It’s not just for you.”

“And what if it doesn’t work out between us?”

A shiver ran through him, like when you turn into your street and see an ambulance in front of your door.

“That’s up to us.”

She stood up, the sheet glided rustling from her body, it was as if she was rising up out of the sea mist. The attractiveness of her small, rounded breasts was unsettling.

She came over and embraced him by the dark window.

“Are you sure?” she asked. “If you’re not, you mustn’t say it. You can’t do that to me.” He couldn’t see her face. Her nails slid over his ribs. At home her parents still ate all their meals in silence.

“I’m sure,” he said hoarsely.

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Unwashed, a trace of her salty smell under his clothes, he drove away from her. The sleepy suburb in the first light. She now lived only a few minutes from the place he’d grown up, as if fate were playing tricks on him. The shops were closed. Tugs and ferries left foaming wakes on the wide, dark water of the IJ. As a boy he’d caught perch and eel in the river, he’d played football on the wasteland and later, as an adolescent, he’d spent sluggish summer days lying on the banks listening to soppy songs on his headphones, in a strange sort of immobility, deep in concentration as though waiting for the reality of the songs. In December he and his friends stood freezing on the ferry. The first photo he’d taken and printed himself was of two seagulls above the dock. The streets of his youth, blocks of three, four storeys, thousands of little homes. The curse of poverty, an ingrained acceptance of decay. Years of monotony passing by. There were no cinemas, no museums, no historic monuments. The small island in the shadow of the real city, there on the other side of the water, where lights burned in the restaurants in the evenings and stories of parties and addicted actors did the

rounds. What he'd learned here was to hanker after a connection with a larger world. His ambitions, however unfocussed and timid they'd been at the time, had been born in this place. She can't stay here, he thought, over and over again as if trying to impress it upon himself.

He drove past the church where they used to practise with the band, which now served as a mosque. He paused by his old street. On the brick walls of the entrance they'd scrawled Zenith, the name of the band – he and the drummer, a jittery chatterbox who answered questions no one had asked him. Armed with a pot of paint and a brush they'd skulked through the neighbourhood like guerrillas. Acts of heroism by night. He played lead guitar but to avoid hassle everyone got their own solo – the drummer, the bassist, the rhythm guitarist.

A rusty spring mattress lay at the end of the street. Two bearded men in faded kaftans strode around it, avoiding it with large steps. Boarded-up broken windows, satellite dishes, overflowing bins. He spotted his father's old Nissan amongst the parked cars. He lived on the third floor, had stayed on alone after his mother's death. He was fine here, he claimed, he had everything he needed. A cautious person, constantly trying to minimise risk. If he thought about his father, he pictured him lying on the sofa in a tracksuit, his pale cheeks lit by the flickering light of the television and a pile of free newspapers next to him on the floor. Father was a word he'd learned to interpret loosely.

He drove along the straight, almost empty road. A pale mist hung over the meadows, interrupted here and there by the still, ponderous shape of a cow. The white hour of the flatlands, so wonderfully soft and illuminating and mysterious. When he passed under the viaduct it was as though he were slowly dissolving in this world of dead-straight ditches and channels. His wife was still asleep, his daughter was staying over with a school friend. You chucked a suitcase into the car and drove away. No, it wasn't that easy. The air was already warming up. The radio forecast yet another dry, hot day. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw

something move over the wide fields but when he looked it had already vanished into the mist.

Where the road passed the lake he drew up behind two pick-up trucks full of sand. Similar trucks drove towards him from the opposite direction. One of the drivers dangled a heavy, tanned arm out of the window. Not a leaf stirred and the lake glowed softly in the morning sun. The grass on the waterside was knee-high. A sign warned swimmers of blue-green algae. Wild swans and squat coots bobbed around waiting for whatever was going to happen next. It was all so straightforward here, things just carried on and would keep carrying on, he found it almost incredible. At home he'd take a shower and wait for his wife to wake up.

The trucks in front of him, the noise of their heavy diesel engines and the smoke and sand they left behind got on his nerves, but the road around the lake was too narrow for him to overtake. This was his familiar route and on a normal day it would summon up a certain kind of contentment. Returning from the city, after his work at the institute, after some drinks, a party, a visit to the dentist's, an outing with his wife, these kilometres along the shores of the lake always gave him with a sense of security. Even when he was returning from Karin feeling guilty.

It was possible he might be driving home for the last time now, to the place he lived with his family. His legs felt weak. He imagined himself at home walking over the lawn in his pyjamas, the meadows reaching out towards him.

He passed the island, about two hundred metres from the waterside, which had belonged to his wife's family for more than a century. Thistle Island, they called it now. A small, half-acre of wilderness, boggy, full of puddles and sludge in autumn and winter, firmer and overgrown in spring and summer. His wife had lost her virginity in the summer house when she was seventeen, to a boy called Johan.

He'd known the island before he knew her. During his final year of psychology he'd ventured out among the rushes and the dragonflies with his camera bag and a vague notion of what he was looking for. Alongside his studies, he'd taken an evening course in photography at the academy. It was difficult in retrospect to imagine all those doubts he'd had, the choice between the rationality of science and the drama of photography. It had been different in those days. He could do a lot, even then. He had a grant and some work in a restaurant, it was simple, he did everything he put his mind to, never failed a single exam, he'd had no time to lose.

Man and water. A week after he'd chosen the subject of his practical, he was already regretting it. Stubbornness prevented him from admitting it, if only because his teacher and several fellow students had pointed out from the start, with undisguised scorn, how idiotic his theme was. It was to do with the formulation, he supposed; it was indeed quite pathetic but didn't real art sometimes manifest itself in the elaboration of small, simple ideas? The big words came later, like reading a will in a lawyer's office. While waiting for the photographer in himself to emerge, he devoured others' images, hundreds of books of photos, and in one of them he'd happened upon his subject. The book was by an American photographer who took pictures of naked people, gloomy adults and children in empty, shabby apartments. The models posed with shoes on their hands, pushed the soles against the walls and arched their backs theatrically. In the heavy shadowy sections, the artist wrote texts: "*The unfortunate man could not touch the one he loved; his fingers became toes and his hands became feet, he designed his pain.*" One photo in particular had struck him, a quite hazy and seemingly unaesthetic landscape with bushes and trees and something like a pond or a mere in the background. The photo was so unremarkable, so everyday, underlined by the absence of any living thing, that it became an enigma. Casually photographed, apparently random landscapes with one constant: the presence of water somewhere. A whole series on that idea. That was his plan. In each one of his photos a person would be visible, a single person,

a more or less randomly present figure, photographed from far and subtly present, merging into that landscape.

They were long days of looking, of ambling along the waterside, searching, trying things out; days of nagging doubts about his intuition. The water, the reeds, the jetty posts, the treetops, an angler's shoulders; the longer he looked at them, the more photos he took of them, the less he believed in his project.

One hot day, already no longer believing it was going to work, he rented a rowing boat and landed on the island.

There was a small jetty and a simple hardwood summer house with closed shutters, that you couldn't see from the waterside. He pushed his way through the bushes and the young poplars behind the house and found an open, dry spot with tall grass and delicate purple flowers. He undressed and lay down in the silence. He stared in astonishment at the waving treetops and the deep, gaping hole of the sky. The sun shone on his naked body. He stayed there, looking and looking, until there was nothing to distinguish him from the grass, from a tree trunk, from the dull paths in the mire.

He got up and worked his way stealthily through the undergrowth to the water. He stood on the side between the rushes and the sucking mud. He pulled his feet free and waded further into the deeper water. Taking a deep breath, he let himself sink into the cool water and turned on his back, and with long, slow strokes swam away from the side, his arms ploughing through the radiance. The smell of mud, the caress of the white, pappy roots, the flapping of a duck.

When he'd swum round the island, he climbed out dripping. He returned to his place and lay down again, letting himself dry slowly. He was happy, he closed his eyes and all the life around him came to a standstill.

The next day he rowed back to the island, this time with all of his equipment including a tripod and a cable release. He photographed every spot, trying every angle, using himself as a model, seen from behind, a naked boy with lank hair in the corner of the photo. Seven brilliant days long.

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There was a roadblock with police cars and red and white barriers a kilometre outside the village. There was something absurd about it, the horizon clear, the curlews stepping lightly over the meadows, heads raised, like respectable men declaring the land clean and safe. He wound down the window and was hit by a blast of hot air, scented with earth and grass. Two officers in short sleeves pushed the barriers aside to let the trucks through. They put them back again when he tried to follow.

“You need to turn around, sir.” It was a fairly young officer, bending down to look into the car. The edge of a rash was visible above his collar.

“I live just a few minutes away.”

“Nobody’s allowed through.”

“What about those trucks then?”

“They’re taking sand and earth. The dike burst last night. A kilometre further up. Part of the village is under water.”

“I need to go home.”

“Is there anyone there?”

“Yes, my wife.”

“Where do you live?”

“On the Graverweg.”

“Is that before or after the Baeten?”

“Before.”

“Then your wife has been evacuated.”

He parked his vehicle a short way back over the dike, in the yard of the organic farm where his wife bought cheese and eggs. Leaning against the stable, he called their home number first and then her mobile. She didn’t pick up. Behind him cows chafed at the rattling metal bars of the food chute, thumping it hard with the stumps of their horns. He tried both numbers again. Her voice on the voicemail constricted his chest. He walked back over the grass of the dike which showed cracks from the weeks of drought and bright sunshine. A helicopter beat noisily

overhead and swerved slowly over the village. He hurried as if trying to escape. He stopped on a footbridge over the ring canal. Instead of the familiar water there was nothing but mud in the bed, deep black and cut through with slimy channels containing rusting cans and dead fish. Rowing boats and small motorboats stuck out of the sludge like helpless, stranded animals. In the distance a revolving crane was visible, the engines of bulldozers and trucks screeched. A fifty metre section of dike had been washed away, shoved aside, it seemed, like a piece from a giant jigsaw puzzle – dark green grass with darker earth edges. The water that was pumped from the polders into the ring canal ran on two sides to the lower lying houses, flooding their gardens and the surrounding streets. It was more unreal than shocking.

The residents from the submerged part of the village had been transferred to the sports hall where his daughter played basketball – the few times she didn't cancel – and where he had played tennis in the winter with his neighbour, the owner of an advertising agency, until the neighbour had a gall bladder operation.

With the low sun behind him, he walked over the meadows towards the business park, a rather highfalutin description for a small plot of land with inward-facing tower blocks. Small places, small lives. Important events occurred elsewhere as a rule.

He reached the edge of a new housing development and climbed the wooden fence on the causeway. After jumping down, his shoes sunk into mud smeared thickly over the road. He followed tyre tracks towards the sports hall, his soles slopping noisily. On both sides of the road cars were parked higgledy-piggledy, as if they'd been abandoned in flight. Every parking place at the hall seemed to be taken, including the space on the pavement where a few television and radio vans stood next to a knot of bicycles. The bright light of a tv crew interviewing a couple with young children shone behind the glass wall. A whole army of photographers and journalists eddied about, drawn together like the times they

launched a collective attack on a sporting idol. He walked up with a few tracksuit-clad figures, among them a woman with a small girl wearing pyjamas, cuddly duck clamped under her arm. Both mother and daughter were wearing wellies. An old man with skinny shoulders and smooth, combed-back hair had positioned himself in front of the door. Silent and immobile, a haughty smile on his face, he held up a placard which read: *God Will Save You*. Mart's trouser legs were soiled, his shoes were wet and heavy with caked sediment. He walked in amongst the others as if in a trance.

The floor of the hall was covered with a layer of dried mud. The villagers sat or lay there on rugs and duvets, to all appearances doomed. Some were enjoying the relative luxury of garden chairs they'd brought along. The room was filled with neon light and a shuffling racket, the low rumbling people make in large, enclosed spaces. The air was stuffy, it smelled like a guinea pig's cage.

He crisscrossed his way past the small groups, the archipelago of families, searching. It took him about ten minutes to establish that his wife was not in the hall, another quarter of an hour to convince himself that he wasn't mistaken. With increasing haste, he hurried back through the changing rooms, the toilets and shower cubicles and ran into his neighbour in the jostling swarm, a confident dark-haired woman with sinewy limbs – a nymphomaniac according to her smirking husband, the advertising man, with a fondness for old malts and making shocking statements, so you never knew how much to believe him.

There had been water around his neighbours' farm when they'd been driven to the sports hall in the night, his neighbour told him, not much, but enough to make her worry about their insurance cover. His neighbours' farm, a little higher and thus safer than his own house, could be considered a yardstick. She spread her arms like a film star and said she hadn't seen his wife, not when she left her house during the night, nor later, here in the sports hall.

“Was she all alone, then?” Her straight, elegant nose seemed made for the large sunglasses she liked to wear.

“Adèle stayed over at a friend’s last night and I had to go to Groningen to give a reading. I stayed the night there.”

“She might be in the bowling alley by the lake. There are people there too, apparently. Have you tried to call her?” His neighbour was the daughter of an Italian general who’d been buried in Brindisi, his coffin drawn by a team of six white horses. Recently, for a barbecue in her own garden, she’d worn a dress of rustling red silk and a turban of the same material. The more the evening progressed, the more she’d lost her sheen. A heel came off her shoe and not long afterwards she dropped a bottle of white wine on the patio paving.

“I have – voicemail. She’s probably left her telephone at home.”

“But she could call you.”

He nodded. “I’ll go and look in the bowling alley.”

Outside the sun gleamed hot in the sheer blue sky. He received a text message and read it next to the old man holding up the board with the cheerful message. “Good luck,” it said, “Thinking of you. Love, Karin.” He looked at the screen, at her name in the familiar angular font. He stood there staring at it for a while, strangely numb.