

A powerful novel with a social conscience



Adriaan van Dis

The Walker

MR MULDER seems to all appearances to be an upstanding gentleman, gliding through life, impeccably dressed, aloof to the hustle and bustle of the world around him. Because of a sizeable inheritance he can afford to idle

away his time, and so he leaves Holland for Paris, where he leads an anonymous, solitary existence. One night he witnesses a dramatic fire in a building occupied by illegal immigrants and transients. People throw themselves out of windows in blind panic, as the crowd below looks on helplessly.

From that day on Mulder finds himself with a new pet: a dog which survived the fire has adopted him. Mulder tries to shake him off, but the dog follows him everywhere. The dog seems to mirror the suppressed, instinctive side of Mulder's personality: everything the man shies away from, the dog seeks out. The animal also has an infallible memory for the people he knew before, and he opens up a new world for Mulder.

In searching for the cause of the fire, Mulder encounters a motley group of characters, like the whisky-soaked priest Bruno, a one-legged beggar woman and a taciturn Chinese who is never without his pull-cart. Mulder also starts to develop warm feelings for Sri, a mysterious woman he wants to save from the life of an illegal immigrant with a fake passport. But she is less than thrilled by his offers of help. 'I want to live my life without feeling guilty,' she says. 'Me too,' he replies. 'That's why I want to help you.'

But all Mulder's attempts to do the right thing come to naught. He is a believer without a god, a man committed to the idea of 'doing a little good'. But his ideals are no match for a city teeming with unrest and racial hatred, where riots in the banlieus are an ever-present threat to society. *De wandelaar* (The Walker) is a powerful, socially aware novel as well as an emotionally involving story of a loner who tries to give his life meaning in an ever more extreme world.



photo Merlijn Doornik

Adriaan van Dis (b. 1946) debuted in 1983 with the novella *Nathan Sid*, which won him the Golden Dog-Ear for the best-selling literary debut. Highlights of his ever-expanding oeuvre are the novels *Indische duinen* (*My Father's War*, 1994, winner of the Golden Owl), *Dubbelliefde* (*Double Love*, 1999) and *Familieziek* (*Family Fray*, 2002). He has also published a number of travel novels on China and Africa, like *Een barbaar in China* (*A Barbarian in China*, 1987), *Het beloofde land* (*The Promised Land*, 1990) and *In Afrika* (1992).

Adriaan van Dis is a master of self-effacement, and ironizes in a subtle manner the yearning to 'do something' about the suffering in the world. He has succeeded in writing a novel that rubs the reader's nose in today's news.

NRC HANDELSBLAD

De wandelaar is a witness to powerlessness and anger, and yet also of empathy with the tormented metropolitan society in the Western world.

ALGEMEEN DAGBLAD

A topical novel that poses urgent questions. The unity of time and place ensures that the narrative remains compact, while the pace and fluent style do the rest.

ELSEVIER

The fact that De wandelaar emerges as an invigorating reading experience is due to the deft style that is Van Dis's trade mark. Smooth sentences, elegant and acute phrasing, apt characterization, it's all there.

BRABANTS DAGBLAD

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My Father's War (*Indische duinen*). London: Heinemann, 2004. Also in German (München; Wien: Carl Hanser, 1997 / Rowohlt Taschenbuch, 2000), in Italian (Baldini & Castoldi, 1996), in French (*Actes Sud*, 1999), in Norwegian (Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1995), and in many other languages.
Doppelliebe (*Dubbelliefde*). München: Carl Hanser, 2004. Also in Spanish (Maeva, 2002).
Fichue famille (*Familieziek*). Paris: Gallimard, 2003. Also in German (Hanser, in prep.), and in English (Heinemann, in prep.)



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Sample Translation

The Walker

(De wandelaar)

by Adriaan van Dis

(Amsterdam: Augustus, 2007)

Translated by Susan Massotty

[The following excerpts have been taken from pp. 7-12, 62-69, 73-75, 118-121 and 211-216]

The dog had seen it all. The story has to begin with him. With his dancing around in front of the window and jumping out of a burning house. But first Mr. Mulder—who will later give the police a different name—takes his nightly walk.

It's a cool spring evening. Mulder, in a duffel coat, leaves his house. The taps on his leather-soled shoes click on the sidewalk, he leaps over gurgling gutters to avoid getting splashed and lingers by the windows of the old print shop whose owner displays a new collection every week—he's never gone inside, though every evening he swears he'll buy an old map of Paris, one with his own street on it. The church bells in the square strike eleven. At the café on the corner, Mulder straightens up under the critical gaze of the customers on the sidewalk, even though none of them will remember that he went by. He fishes a feather out of the fountain. Once he reaches the park, whose gates are locked at sunset, he quickens his pace, until he passes the old *École des Ponts*, where he briefly runs his fingers over the lowest bullet holes in the dark façade; he could find them with his eyes shut. He leaves his neighborhood, comes to a boulevard that has seen better days—so many half-empty, poorly lit restaurants—greet the waiters staring outside as they wait for late dinner customers, and pauses in front of a window to watch lobsters, with their claws bound, dance inside a fish tank. The route never varies, his routine is always the same. The repetition is reassuring: it's the round he makes every night before going to bed. On his doctor's orders. And always alone.

Except that he does enjoy walking part of the way with a deaf-mute Chinese man pushing an overfull shopping cart, stuffed with the materials he needs to fold cardboard boxes into splendid cocoons, a new one in a different doorway every night. Mulder likes to think that the two of them share a silent friendship. He has yet to meet a more civilized madman. Under his appraising eye the Chinese man decides to bed down by the glass doors of a travel agency, and—inspired by the

satellite pictures of the fan-shaped rivers in the window—begins to build a Sputnik that will shelter him for a single night. A wine box is turned into a helmet. Mulder leaves him to his delusions and walks on until he reaches the statue of the Marshal, where he turns back, though not without first checking the dates carved in the plinth. To train his memory, he is trying to learn thirty-four of the Marshal's heroic deeds by heart. On the way home he recites them softly to himself, terrified of losing the Battle of Alzheimer. That too has become one of the rituals of his round.

Sirens wail in the distance. A familiar bedtime sound. Disaster usually ebbing away, but tonight creeping steadily closer. The sirens swell, encircle the streets, get louder and more urgent by the minute. Cars slow down, pedestrians hesitate at crosswalks. Blue lights flash against the houses. Boys race by on scooters, trailing agitation in their wake: lights flick on, windows go up, voices call out. Someone tries to tune into a radio station. A few blocks away the sky changes color. The odor of burning wood drifts past the buildings. A bicyclist turns around, grins and points to a glow above the church towers. Silhouettes that Mulder knows all too well, since his apartment overlooks them, and yet they have never appeared as black and menacing as they do tonight. Fearing that the fire might be in his street, he takes a quicker route, but gets so confused on the winding streets that he ends up twice at the same intersection. A rowdy bunch crosses the street, whooping it up on the way to something terrible. He joins them, his heart pounding wildly. Thank God, they go past his street.

Seldom has anyone walked toward a fire with such a feeling of relief.

When an ambulance with flashing lights can go no farther and young men refuse to move out of the way, Mulder wants to turn around, but the crowd keeps pushing him forward. At the next corner he smells the heat, and his resistance melts. Even at this distance he recognizes the burning building: a squat whose door was always open. A black man is poised precariously in the gutter, preparing to jump, while women and children hang out of the windows on the top floor. Wailing people huddle together on the sidewalk, shivering, half-naked,

their faces streaked with soot, while firemen carry away the victims. The ladder truck has trouble reaching the building; the street is too narrow for such big equipment.

Spectators jostle each other to get a better view. The fire spreads to the building next door, a roof collapses. Through the smoke, voices cry out for help. A woman on the fourth floor threatens to throw her child out the window. The ladders aren't long enough. The firemen shout instructions, forming a safety net with their arms. Mulder averts his eyes and hears a dull thud—a scream rises from hundreds of mouths. As a fireman carries the child off in a blanket, Mulder belatedly attempts to catch it with his eyes.

A strange silence descends on the street—the muffled sounds that follow a panic: the wounded being carried away, extra hoses being uncoiled, copper rings being coupled together, red-and-white tapes being stretched into a cordon, hissing water, steaming smoke. The spectators are also silent, and their excitement turns to shame.

A fireman rakes the squat with a searchlight, and all eyes search along with it. The beam glides over a cracked marble plaque beneath a window on the second floor, the letters light up. Mulder whispers a name—a name from another era. Then, all of a sudden, as if summoned by the light, a dog appears in an upper-story window. The animal dances on its hind legs, reaches out to the arms of a shadowy figure. Or is it prancing around by itself? The ladder is quickly moved upwards. But the dog doesn't want to be saved, it runs over to another window. The fireman swerves sideways. The spectators below are mesmerized by the pantomime between ladder and dog. The silent game creeps into their language: they speak in gestures. A second ladder is slid into place, but the dog opts for its own method and jumps, all alone, through a frame of sparks. (Or was it thrown out?) A gasp spreads through the crowd. The dog sails down close to the wall, paws outstretched. A fireman halfway up the ladder catches it, loses his balance and lets it slip out of his grasp. But the dog's fall has been broken and there's no thud: it lands on its feet, dances over the asphalt, spins dizzily in circles, then

picks itself up, shakes ashes from its coat and steps unbroken out of a cloud. Someone claps. The dog barks. The silence has been broken and the shudder gives way to a cheer.

A policeman steals closer and grabs the dog by the scruff of his neck, but the dog bites him and runs into the crowd, growling. People trip over each other, two women break through the tape. Mulder also steps aside, but not in time—he has nowhere to turn when the dog jumps up against him, covering his coat with paw prints.

“Does that dog belong to you?” the policeman asks.

“Never seen him before,” Mulder replies, shocked.

“But he seems to like you.”

“Maybe he’s been blinded by the smoke.”

“Do you know who the owner is?” The policeman angrily inspects the teeth marks in his glove.

“I have no idea.” Mulder feels uncomfortable. The dog does seem to recognize him. The animal wags his tail, whimpers and tries to jump into his arms. Mulder makes a few unsuccessful attempts to push him away. The dog clamps his teeth into his coat and buttons, and starts climbing up his body. He leans down to pet him, but is appalled by the filthy fur. The dog’s tail has been singed, his paws are bleeding. The animal looks up at him beseechingly. Mulder talks to him, saying the things he used to say to dogs. And it helps: the dog calms down. Or are they calming each other down? Despite the soot, the slobber and his repugnance, Mulder kneels down and pulls the dog up to his shoulder. People nudge each other. “You see,” a red-faced woman exclaims, “it *is* his dog.”

The policeman lifts the tape and leads Mulder and the dog out of the cordon, past the staring residents, past the murmurs. Their voices blend with the drunken commentary of a tramp and the phone call of a kid on a scooter, bragging about having monitored the police scanner: “Two buildings on fire. At least eleven casualties. Just carted ’em off. They say there’re bodies inside.” Mulder has stood for too long among these people, their feet wet with water from the hoses, hungry

for disaster. And he's no exception. He takes another look at the name on the marble plaque and continues to stare at it, lost in thought, but the dog, draped around his neck like a smelly rag, kicks him back into the present. "I'll take the dog with me tonight," he says to the policeman. "A bath will do him good."

They walk past an emergency vehicle, where a priest kneels beside a stretcher. The dog whimpers softly. The priest looks up and beckons. "He knows this man," he says. "Let him say goodbye." The dog wriggles out of his arms and sniffs at the stretcher. A slight wag of the tail—that's all the man gets. Both the dead man and the dog are given a blessing. Mulder is standing in the way, so the policeman urges him to move on. "Bring the dog to the station house tomorrow afternoon." In the meantime he needs to jot down a few facts. "Name?"

"Martin," Mulder says. "Nicolas Martin." An impulse, blurted out on the spur of the moment. The police take pictures of the spectators, including one of Mulder and the dog.

* * *

Two major fires in one week. On the outskirts of the city this time, one in a cheap hotel, the other in a shelter for asylum-seekers. Illegal immigrants and refugees were once more among the victims. Newspaper headlines screamed their outrage. Arson could not be ruled out. The minister ordered an investigation into all rundown and overcrowded fire traps. Maps and lists were printed in the papers. Threats were scrawled on walls. While TV cameras rolled, the mayor guaranteed that all those ordered by the fire department to leave their homes would be rehoused in safe accommodations. Rumor had it that those without papers would be deported. Since then whole families had been lying low. The police held full-scale ID checks in the suburbs. A man was shot dead, an innocent child wounded. Local residents banded together. To vent their displeasure, every weekend they set fire to dozens more cars than usual.

The unrest seeped into the city. Silent marches held in honor of the victims ended in riots. Projectiles were thrown at police cars. Young people congregated in marketplaces and squares. The waiters in the corner café voiced their disapproval in no uncertain terms.

And Mulder?

Mulder walked his dog, pausing beneath the pale green canopy of a plane tree pruned in the shape of a parasol. He admired the acrobatic exploits of the gardeners, using long pole trimmers with whirling blades to clip the rows of chestnuts into straight lines, and inspected the work being done in the orchard of the Senate, where the budding branches were bound according to a fixed pattern—spread out flat like an open book, or shaped like a menorah or a triangle. The order that the city failed to achieve elsewhere was strictly enforced in its parks. The suburbs might burn, but no one walked on the grass. Nothing was better watched over, fenced in and tended to than that. Mulder saw only the neatness.

And the dog?

He jumped onto the waist-high wall surrounding the park so he could look directly into the eyes of his new owner. They were now walking on the same

level. Cheek to cheek. The dog seemed to want to say something to him. But Mulder turned away. At night, too, he avoided those expressive eyes at the foot of his bed by throwing a blanket over the dog's head. Every time he did it the dog shook off his blindfold and went on staring. Mulder was unable to sleep. He hid behind a paperback, but the panting on the other side of the book annoyed him. He ate an entire box of chocolates, opened a bottle of wine, spread creamy cheese on pieces of toast—then remembered his cholesterol and gave half to the dog. By that time they were both so wide-awake that he had to open another bottle—a heavy Bordeaux. And the night was still young.

“What do you want from me?” he finally burst out.

The dog was silent. But his eyes said: I lick a beggar, and you wash my nose.

You watch a man get kicked to death and worry about the crease in your trousers.

You give money to tramps, but don't dare shake their hands.

You pet me, but you also pet the thirty jackets in your closet.

You dress for the outside world, but don't let anyone into your life.

You turn up your nose at drunkards and drink two whole bottles by yourself.

You scoff at the shady characters at the Funeral Mass and steal a candle from the Virgin Mary.

You say you don't believe in God. But who do you call out to in the middle of the night?

* * *

An hour before his appointment, Mulder went to the café to bolster his courage with booze. Whisky, an odor the priest wouldn't notice. He casually asked the waiters about Père Bruno. How long had the priest been at this church and did he ever come to the café? Scornful laughter. The solidarity that had united them directly after the fire was gone, they wanted to have less and less to do with the priest. He did more for those people than he did for his own parish! The oldest waiter showed him a newspaper clipping. Here, would you believe it? A grinning Père Bruno beside the strong man on the political right. Their man. But that same priest was actually a nigger-lover and had talked the mayor into putting those people up in hotels. They loafed around, held up their hands for more and had the sheets changed daily—all at the taxpayer's expense.

Mulder offered the waiter a drink and in exchange heard the latest rumors. A work crew had supposedly found a body in the basement, on the day the owner put up a FOR SALE sign. The property was owned by the mafia. No, they didn't appear to be friends of the local church. Foreigners always hung around there, too many foreigners. "You can see lights shining at all hours of the night," the waiter said.

"In the bell towers?"

"The place is crawling with blacks."

The dog recognized the house of the Dominican brothers, since he stopped at the right door and eagerly sniffed the threshold. As Père Bruno led them through a maze of corridors, Mulder also stored the monastic smells in his memory: tobacco, heated-up leftovers, wet washcloths, stale booze. For a moment he was afraid he would have to join the monks in the refectory, but the priest received him alone in a room showing obvious signs of wear. The wallpaper, paint and orange curtains were flaked and tattered testimonials to the 1960s. The brown rug bore traces of long-established habits: a path to the sink—where there was also an electric kettle and a jar of instant coffee—a bald patch in front of the overflowing bookcase, cigarette holes and stains on either side of an armchair that had

absorbed the human form: the seat was concave, the back and armrests shiny. Père Bruno indicated that Mulder should sit across from him at the high table. He emptied a chair and swept aside a stack of letters and papers. The dog lay down under the table. “His usual place,” Père Bruno said.

How long had the dog lived with him?

“Not quite a month.”

Mulder slid back his chair and saw that the dog was lying with his nose on the priest’s shoes, drooling in delight. Afraid of betraying his jealousy, he didn’t dare say another word about the dog. Triple X was likewise dealt with quickly: he was alive, but had not been heard from since the fire. The priest feigned indifference. Further questions were pointless. Suspects? Arrests? And what about the charred corpse found in the squat days after the fire? No, Père Bruno couldn’t shed any light on that matter either. Besides, what business was it of his? A priest can’t discuss the secrets of the confessional. “The dog,” he said impatiently. “That’s what you came here for. Do you want to get rid of him?”

“No,” said Mulder decidedly. “But do I have a right to keep him? Or am I depriving someone else of his company?” And he talked about his search for the owner and the memorial services and the comfort that people seemed to find in their gods.

Père Bruno scrutinized him in silence. “Who isn’t seeking comfort?” he asked.

On the wall behind him was a black crucifix, a hideous object. Mulder tried not to look at it, but the image was so compelling that he felt the need to say that he was a confirmed atheist.

The priest smiled apologetically. “Don’t worry, I won’t try to save your soul.”

They exchanged a few stilted sentences. There were long silences. They resorted to the weather: spring . . . Yes, it had finally gotten milder. Paris could be gray in the winter, but now, with all the green leaves on the trees . . . The priest lit a cigarette, picked at a blob of food on his jeans. His shirt cuffs were frayed, and his sweater had also taken a vow of poverty. Mulder blew a bit of

fluff from his pale yellow pullover. Their clothes clashed. After the dog and the fire, what else could they share?

A bottle of whisky.

Père Bruno took one out of the cupboard and grinned. “To ward off malaria.” Yes, he had been a missionary in Chad for thirty-two years.

“Coming back here must have been quite a shock.”

“I had no choice. Africa had exhausted me. Though, believe me, Paris is also a desert.”

“Except that no one dies of hunger here,” Mulder said, his voice hoarse. The peaty flavor burned his throat.

“Here people are hungering after sincerity.”

Sincerity, in a church? Mulder looked as if he had been stung. But he didn’t dare ask the priest what he meant by that. He needed more whisky, to wash away that word. A large glass . . . Sincerity! Had that pompous High Mass for the three fire victims been sincere?

The priest looked at Mulder in surprise. “Now that you mention it, what was a self-proclaimed atheist like you doing there?”

“I didn’t stay long,” Mulder replied. “The dog recognized some sinister-looking guy. In fact, I noticed a bunch of shady characters at the funeral . . .”

“Upstanding citizens.” The priest laughed. “I’m sure you’ve heard the story. The whole neighborhood has been talking about it.” He shrugged. What could he have done? The bodies had been claimed by a filthy rich couple who had manipulated the press and the politicians. It seems they owned the building. Albanian mafia. A dubious situation. Afterwards everyone felt embarrassed. “Yes, I let myself be used by those people. That’s what you’re thinking, I can tell. But I’m good at begging for funds, which is also why I decided to come to Paris, to a small but wealthy parish. Even at a distance I can still do something for the church in Africa.”

“Don’t they have their own religion in Chad?” Mulder asked. It came out sounding more belligerent than he had intended.

“Oh, many religions,” Père Bruno said. “Muslims in the north and traditional African religions in the south. They worship their ancestors and talk to spirits. There are plenty of religions. Except that in our district none of those religions thought to build hospitals and dig water wells. You can fight any number of diseases simply by teaching people a little hygiene. Children don’t get the nutrients they need during the first two years of their lives, so their brains don’t develop properly, and these are the people who will have to rule Africa one day. We feed those children, we take in the urchins who are thrust into our care—we, the Catholic mission. Of course we help them, we’re following the dictates of our religion. Christ asks us to. We also rescue animists who would otherwise be killed by Muslim rebels from Sudan. Do you really think we try to make converts in between massacres? When we’re nursing twelve-year-old rape victims, we don’t harp on the sanctity of the unborn. Ours is a practical religion. We act out of charity. We set an example. What have you got against that?” He angrily stubbed out his cigarette and took an ill-humored gulp of whisky, then another. “If I may ask, Monsieur, what do you do for a living?”

“Nothing,” he said defiantly. “I do absolutely nothing.”

“A man who doesn’t work blames my Church for helping people in Africa. Interesting.”

Mulder plucked at the tablecloth in embarrassment. Religion was another subject they had better avoid.

But the whisky thought otherwise. After a second glass, Mulder said, “You can also heal without bringing God into it.”

“Maybe *you* can, but I can’t.”

They smoothed over their differences with a third glass, then a fourth. Mulder praised the whisky’s aroma.

“Religion plays an important role in Africa,” Père Bruno said absently. “They say that God keeps His secrets there.” He stared silently into space, at a dusty mission post in his head.

The last of the bottle worked miracles. They exchanged smiles. “I can’t believe in a god,” Mulder sighed.

“You can only believe if you know what doubt is.”

What a platitude, thought Mulder. You can turn the devil into a saint, if you’re clever enough with words. “I don’t mean this as an attack,” he said, in as friendly a voice as he could muster, “but isn’t your religion—like all religions—based on a fabrication? A magnificent fabrication in your case, with a fine tradition that has brought forth great thinkers and artists, but a fabrication nonetheless. And yet we can’t live without one. How else would we give meaning to our existence? Your religion could be called an erudite form of animism. With spirit-imbued wine, spirit-imbued bread, spirit-imbued statues. All over the world, in the farthest reaches of the earth, people seek to explain their birth and death, to find a guiding principle by which to lead their lives. And the answer always comes from above, even though the whole thing was dreamed up here on earth.”

Père Bruno listened while shaking his head. “How can you be so sure? Don’t you have any doubts?”

“I’m filled with doubts. Though not, as it happens, about religion. And even less about human creation.” Mulder had to laugh at himself. “I’m convinced that the human race is a chemical process that has gotten out of hand. We were created by the explosion of some supernova and fell to the earth as the mutated cells of another planet.”

“So we come from above after all!” Père Bruno suddenly lifted his arms toward heaven, catching his baggy sweater on the tablecloth and accidentally sweeping it off. The ashtray clattered to the floor, followed by a pile of papers. The dog raced out from under the table.

“But there’s nothing supernatural about it. It’s earthly science.”

“What do you mean exactly by a ‘guiding principle’?”

“A desire for rules, something to hold on to. Mapping the differences between good and evil. Defining such concepts as honesty, solidarity, forgiveness, punishment.”

“That doesn’t sound very chemical,” the priest said. “Can you express those concepts in an equation? Forget it, no scientist can prove that God doesn’t exist, just as we can’t examine goodness, truth, generosity and love under a microscope. And yet they do exist, even for an unbeliever like you. That may be the essence of what we call God.”

Père Bruno stood up and fetched another bottle from the cupboard. He held it up triumphantly, satisfied with his own argument, and steady-handedly topped up their glasses. A drop too much for Mulder, who lost his temper and snapped, “Meanwhile people blow up themselves and others in the name of God. The most despicable politicians claim to be carrying out God’s orders. Racists shore up their arguments with His word. Some God!”

“Religion can make bad people worse. Yes, I know. And good people better.”

“And what does religion make intelligent people do? Interpret Biblical inconsistencies in such a way that God becomes an even greater mystery? How can any sane person kneel before a man nailed to an instrument of torture? A mythological figure. If Jesus had been hanged, would the Church worship a rope?” Mulder’s voice broke, he had to grab the edge of the table for support.

“We should be grateful it was a cross,” Père Bruno said dully. He was tired, but he didn’t know when to call it quits either. “Why do you have to make it all sound so banal?”

“Life *is* banal.”

“To you. Because rationalists like you have done away with God and found precious little to put in His place. Ah yes, consumerism. A fine religion: Sundays spent at a shopping mall. Or the decadent materialism of ‘more is better.’ Another fine religion. Ownership as the highest good. Polluting the world in the name of economic growth and then, despite all your scientific knowledge, staring at a hole in the ozone layer. What a bleak prospect. God transcends logic. He is beyond our experience.” Père Bruno took the crucifix off the wall and held it up as if he were an apostle. Mulder looked away. “A leper carved this crucifix for me. With the two stumps that used to be his hands. He worked on it for years, even when it

made him bleed. This piece of wood is imbued with a spirit. And I can feel that. Of course that's just my imagination, but it's an enormously enriching imagination. This cross gives me energy when I pray in front of it. Divine energy. Hope. And you need that in Africa. That's where I really learned how to pray." His voice broke, and he lowered the cross. "You know, it isn't easy to live a good and honest life. It takes a lot of practice. But that practice is what keeps life from being banal. It lifts our lives onto a higher plane."

Mulder was too drunk to object.

The priest hung Christ back on the wall—a bit crookedly. A bell clanged: it was midnight. The brothers were gathering in the chapel. "At this late hour?" Mulder asked.

"And four hours from now too. Not that I have to join them—I have other duties, my church—but I like to take part, to share in the torments of early rising. Sleep deprivation tests your faith to the utmost. Sometimes you're so tired you have to fight off the demons in your head."

"How do you manage to keep going?"

"It doesn't stop me from being happy."

The session was at an end. The priest walked to the door, over the well-trodden path on the rug. Mulder poured the last few drops of whisky over his head and, while he stood eye to eye with the leper crucifix, made a small sign of the cross behind his back. He too wanted to be happy.

The dog saw it.

* * *

Mulder sat down on a bench across from the restaurant with the dancing lobsters. A bored waiter looked out the window, the bus boy fished an unwilling lobster out of the tank. The movie theaters emptied, strolling couples took possession of the outdoor cafés, crêpe-makers spooned batter onto hot grills. The rhythm of the boulevard no longer held any secrets. He had let the dog know that the area around the burned-out squat was temporarily off-limits and had resumed the ritual of his nightly walk. It was better not to flout police orders. So before going to bed he once again patted the bullet holes in the façade of the *École des Ponts* and practiced repeating the dates on the Marshal's plinth; everything was as it should be, except that he missed his familiar Chinese friend, the man who made a new cardboard cocoon every night. He was worried. But no matter who he asked on the boulevard, no one knew where the man hung out. His silent friend was apparently well liked. Waiters swore that it was an honor to bestow a meal on *Le Chinois*. A woman who owned a shop was able to tell him that the man was not Chinese, but half Vietnamese, the son of a French teacher from Diên Biên Phu. Word had it that he had gone to a university, but had become increasingly lonely as a student. "If you never open your mail, you eventually cease to exist. He would have to be born all over again." The woman had directed Mulder to a crushed cardboard wigwam beneath the railroad bridge—the last place he had been seen.

Mulder decided to wait for him. Perhaps he had started coming to the boulevard later these days, now that the evenings were getting sultry and the sidewalk cafés were filling up. Just before midnight he thought he heard the squeak of a grocery cart, but it turned out to be the wheels of a walker. An elderly lady went by, frail but elegant, with pink-powdered cheeks beneath a white summer hat. Mulder stared boldly at her, and she submitted gracefully to his inspection. While continuing to smile, she stopped, rummaged around in her bag, shuffled over to his bench and handed him a coin. He was so surprised that he took it—without the faintest idea of what it was for. But the woman didn't notice his astonishment. She petted the dog, and gave her walker a push. Only then did

Mulder see what was going on: the dog was doing a trick, sitting up with both paws in the air. The little beggar. An old role, learned back in the days when he used to spend hours on benches beside shiftless men. The dog wagged his tail in gratitude. Mulder wanted to return the money, but the woman had happily resumed her walk. He called out to her. She quickened her pace. He caught up to her and made her stop. But before he could say a word, she unclipped a cane from her walker, brandished it in the air and hurried into a hotel, deaf to all apology.

Mulder turned into the first side street that he came to. He didn't dare show himself on the boulevard for a while. The dog didn't understand his embarrassment, but kept jumping up excitedly to the hand clutching the coin, as if demanding his money.

Again they heard squeaky wheels coming closer. Mulder was sure the cane was going to come crashing down on his head. But it was the Chinese man, trundling along with a beaming smile, his cart heaped with more cardboard than ever. Both of his feet were wrapped in brand-new shopping bags from Monsieur Ed—his footwear for a single day. His right hand was also covered with a plastic bag. They were happy to see each other. The dog danced for joy.

They looked for a bench, far from the hubbub. The Chinese man—who as it turns out was perfectly capable of speech—apologized for his absence. For the last few days he had been sleeping by the new library, beneath the bridge. His hand hurt too much for him to fold the cardboard. But he was feeling better now. He removed the bag from his hand and held up four fingers. A musty odor struck Mulder in the face. “What happened?”

“Amputated!” the Chinese man said triumphantly. The infection in his middle finger had gotten steadily worse, until in the end his whole arm had become numb. He had tied a piece of thread just above the knuckle. The top half of his finger had turned black, then fallen off.

“It isn't difficult to perform an operation.” The Chinese man admired the pretty little sausage that was left. He was still a bit feverish, though.

“You can’t sleep on the streets in this condition,” Mulder said. “I can take you to the Médecins du Monde.”

The Chinese man waved away his good advice—with four fingers and a stump.

“Listen, you’re entitled to ID papers. I happen to know that you’re a French citizen, so you can get a passport, insurance, medical care.”

“No. I want to be a nobody. I don’t need anyone.”

Mulder threw up his hands in despair. “But you know what they’re doing these days to people who don’t have papers.”

Paper? He pointed to his cart. “I live in paper.”

Mulder gave up. He wasn’t cut out for social work.

There was a short, companionable silence. They listened to the faraway sirens, with the dog as a bridge of understanding between them. Now that they were sitting so close together, Mulder noticed that the Chinese man hardly stank, especially now that he had aired his amputated finger. Dirt no longer clung to him, it was repelled by the gleaming armor of his skin and clothes. Free of smell. Free of money. Was there nothing he wanted?

“Yes,” the Chinese man said. “A woman.” He laughed. “A beautiful woman.”

Before they went their separate ways, Mulder shook the Chinese man’s hand and felt the shortened middle finger tickle his palm. A victory. “Let me look for a woman for you,” he said. “I’ll be your secretary.”

“Secretary”—his friend was pleased with the thought.

* * *

The day after the corpses washed up they were sitting at the table.

“How many so far?”

“More than a hundred,” Père Bruno said. “And still counting.”

“Do they know any more about the ship?” Mulder asked.

“No nationality, nothing. It’s a ghost ship. It’s been drifting in the Mediterranean for weeks without food, water or fuel.” The priest laid the paper with the latest news beside his plate. He had bought it on the way to the restaurant and hardly read a word. After the macabre find on the beaches, the Italian coast guard had boarded the vessel and discovered a floating charnel house. The barely living, sprawled alongside decomposing bodies, had been too weak to throw the most recent corpses overboard. Refugees from Somalia and Sudan—that was now certain.

“Political refugees?” Mulder asked.

No, victims of the drought. People who had left their country because the desert was advancing on their village. There wasn’t anything left for the cattle to graze on. “Here, read it for yourself.”

The priest slid the paper over to Mulder. His eyes skipped from one headline to another: “DESPERATE DEED OF DESPERATE PEOPLE.” “AT LEAST TEN THOUSAND SOLDIERS NEEDED TO GUARD EUROPEAN SHORES.”

“Let’s change the subject,” Mulder sighed.

“Who started it?” Père Bruno replied, and he was right. No sooner had Mulder seen the pictures of the death ship on the news than he had grabbed the phone. He was so unused to watching the news by himself that he had to share his horror with someone else. The priest didn’t have a television, but was glad to hear his voice. They apologized to each other, talked about Ngolo—who had still not been in touch—and about the Prior. No, Père Bruno would not be returning to his church, he had been asked to take early retirement. Too many questions for one phone call. Which is why they were now seated across from each other in the brasserie. For a meal of reconciliation.

Mulder had hoped to get a table in *le paradis*, but the moment the maître d’ caught sight of Père Bruno in his baggy sweater, he mercilessly banished them to

l'enfer, upstairs, among the tourists. Expensive champagne hadn't helped in the least. Perhaps it was better this way, because when they had been waiting downstairs in the reservations line, between the *beau monde* and the *haute volée*, the priest had been sweating like a pig. "I don't belong here," he whispered. The same old story. "What do you mean?" Mulder asked. "Look, over there. Sitting beneath those mirrors are the celebrities I saw at the funeral in your church. You do belong here. And that couple on the other side, all gussied up in their flashiest outfits, are Albanians, aren't they? Enjoy yourself, it's my treat."

Père Bruno felt more at ease in the inferno. With a view of starry-eyed Americans and a stairwell, where toiling waiters kept going up and down with yellow seas of *îles flottantes* sloshing back and forth on trays, mounds of sauerkraut smothered in bacon and sausage, dripping plates of *fruits de mer* and *crème brûlée*—the entrees and desserts recommended by the travel guides.

"I never was good at hobnobbing with the rich, no matter how much I needed their money," the priest said. "Powdered sins, elegant souls—give me the unwashed sins of the poor."

Mulder could smell his words. At first he thought it was the wine, spoiled by a tainted cork, but no, it turned out to be the priest. The man reeked of garlic and tobacco. Not to mention that the dog bite on his hand had become infected, his skin was flaking, weeks of shaving soap had congealed behind his ears and his sweater was an ashtray. As if by neglecting his body he could take on the suffering of all mankind.

Père Bruno perused the menu indifferently . . . His health was poor, he wasn't allowed to eat most of these things. Heart. Yes, his too. It was a strange muscle.

"Believers live longer," Mulder said. "At any rate that's what a recent study said. Come on, let's sin."

They ordered everything forbidden by the doctors.

"Do you mind if I say a prayer before I eat?" Père Bruno asked.

Mulder glanced around the room.

“I’ll say it softly.” Père Bruno led them in prayer. The standard phrases, though he also put in a good word for Ngolo. And Fanta. And all the victims of the fire, the living as well as the dead. The fire that had brought them together.

The priest glumly spread a dab of *foie gras* on his toast. The world was in a sorry shape, he thought, and it wasn’t going to improve any time soon. Western civilization had failed because it lacked the mainstay of religion. God had been swallowed up in the Sunday traffic. The West could no longer serve as an example, because it no longer had an example to look up to. Only self-interest counted these days. “We need direction, a guiding principle: *caritas*.” Père Bruno assumed his pulpit voice: “So faith, hope and love abide. But the greatest of these is love.”

“The love of priests and nuns?” Mulder asked.

“Not hormonal love, but love of humanity. A simple precept.”

Mulder lost his patience. “I know your hellfire and damnation sermon: blood and woe be upon us. We need to do a better job of sharing, and if we don’t, our egotism will be our undoing. Sooner or later we’ll have to pay the price . . . But greed can’t be prayed away, it’s in our genes, and for good reason. Greed is becoming more and more of a unifying force, whether we like it or not. Globalization has come about as a result of our greed and can no longer be stopped. The whole world already watches the same soap operas. Progress shapes us all in the same mould. One day every skull will have a chip in it to keep us physically and mentally fit for the plagues of an overpopulated earth. Step by step we’re moving towards electronic man.”

The Château Margaux needed to breathe a bit more. But no waiter rushed over to decant it.

“You’re being facetious,” the priest said.

“Me? Oh no, not anymore, I quit. I’ve recently become an optimist.”

“Still, your vision of the future is pretty gloomy, and you don’t look all that cheerful either.”

Mulder craned his neck until he could see himself in the mirror over their heads. (Bags under his eyes from the sleepless nights, a drooping mouth.) “I’m optimistic because I’m not going to grow old.”

“*Après moi le déluge?*” asked the priest.

“*Après moi* succeeding generations, who will manage to cope, just as ours has. Autumn will always be followed by spring. Life is simpler than you think. We seek answers, but there are no answers. Things happen. Both good and bad. You either wind up on the street or you don’t. You either have a heart attack or you don’t. One person is born in the desert, the other in a Dutch polder. The universe is not interested in you and me.”

The priest frowned. “Such nihilism.”

“But we can do *something* in the small space allotted us,” Mulder said. He took a sip, and had another bottle brought to the table. The wine loosened his tongue. “May I say a prayer?”

“You? And you claim to be a non-believer.”

“True. I do believe, but not in everything. I believe in hope, because there’s no alternative.” And he prayed, even going so far as to fold his hands. “I believe in the human imagination. In a few brilliant inventors who expand our minds and broaden well-worn paths to make our earthly existence more agreeable. I believe in people who surround themselves with beauty. In people who make things. Things for their own sake. With their hands. With their heads. And with their hearts. People who spring the locks so that my despair, anger and happiness can escape. I don’t believe in plans from above. Humanity is a plan in itself.

“I believe in humanity, which is here by accident and tries to make the best of it.”

Mulder stopped and shivered, because he truly believed in what he was saying, though he hadn’t really thought it over. It was as if he had stepped outside of himself and unashamedly let go. There were goose-bumps on his arms. He *was* optimistic, though he had no idea why. Or why now? Sick and forsaken. Sitting

across from a malodorous padre whom he was damn well beginning to like more and more. “I believe in doing a little bit of good,” Mulder said tremulously.

“And why?” Père Bruno fixed him with a stern gaze.

“Because it makes me feel better.”

“Doing good? Who decides what’s good?”

“My conscience.”

“But your conscience takes its cues from God. Your notions of good and evil come from the divine well that you spit in. You look down on believers because you feel intellectually superior, but you don’t even have the intellectual decency—or rather, guts—to cite your reference: the Bible.”

“The Bible is a book for a small world,” Mulder said.

The priest waved away his words. “Nonsense.”

“The world is bigger now than a strip of desert between Samaria and Judea. Even the world of Monsieur Ngolo is bigger. We need a new book. Why can’t we admit that God is inside of us, in our collective experience, our intuition? Searching for knowledge of God is searching for knowledge of ourselves.”

The priest slid his chair back and stared at Mulder in surprise. “You talk too much. I’m not used to that from you.”

They did not agree and they never would, no matter how much they drank. It was getting hot in the inferno. The priest removed his sweater, and they began to address each other by the familiar “*tu*” rather than “*vous*”—as befitted the intimacy of a dirty shirt.

They compared the labels on their heart pills.

“Have you really done some good?” the priest asked after a long silence.

“I looked after a dog I loved, and I gave it away. I helped a friend find a woman—a woman I could have loved.”

“You neglected your own needs.”

“But not the needs of others.” Mulder looked at his Réveil du Tsar. “It’s not much, but it’s something, and that’s good, isn’t it?”