

Brilliant indictment of the 'backyard network'



Marjolijn Februari

The Literary Circle

THIRTY-YEAR-OLD Theresa Pellikaan is typical of the wealthy middle classes – with her respectable background, successful husband and house in an apparently sleepy, yet powerful, rich village. ‘Money is what you have, it isn’t for talking about,’ she feels, and art is a spiritual occupation.

Her former schoolmate Ruth Ackermann, brought up in the same village, has made waves with an international bestseller, yet none of the villagers ever mention her achievement, not even the literary circle of Theresa’s father, famous civil rights scholar Randolph Pellikaan. The circle isn’t interested: they only read ‘literature’.

But there’s a dark secret in the village. Slowly it emerges that the bestselling author’s father, a former member of the literary circle, was the deputy director of a company which supplied contaminated glycerine to Haiti. Not knowing what to do with the contaminated consignment, he had turned to his high-placed friends for advice – thereby making them accomplices.

Februari brings to light a shameful episode in Dutch history. In the nineties the Alphen company, Vos BV, deliberately supplied heavily contaminated glycerine to Haiti, which was then used in cough syrup, resulting in the death of seventy children and leaving dozens handicapped. The case was settled, and even though the Public Prosecutor’s decision not to prosecute has been challenged several times, it has never been reopened.

In *De literaire kring* (The Literary Circle) Februari paints a dark picture of the right-minded class society in the Netherlands in which such things can happen. It is an indictment of the ‘backyard network’ where there’s always someone whose backyard borders on yours who can help. ‘You don’t have principles, you have a network,’ one of Februari’s characters says to Randolph.

This novel is about looking away, ‘Not doing your job, keeping your mouth shut, looking the other way, referring to regulations you know are wrong, hiding behind superiors whom you know don’t give a shit about the world.’

A modern social critique, *De literaire kring* is a fluent novel full of irony, playing masterfully with the conventions of chicklit and women’s thrillers. Februari draws on a variety of sources, from the Oprah Winfrey Show to works by Aristophanes. Ironically, the novel has appeared on countless reading lists of reading clubs in rich Dutch villages.



photo Klaas Koppe

Marjolijn Februari (b. 1963) studied Art History, Philosophy and Law. She was awarded her doctorate for a thesis on the clash of economics and ethics. Her debut novel, *De zonen van het uitzicht* (The Sons of the View), appeared in 1989. *De literaire kring*, which is more traditional in structure, is her second novel. She has also published several collections of essays and, since 1999, has been writing a Saturday column for *de Volkskrant*, often on the subject of justice and morality.

The combination of erudition and breeziness makes The Literary Circle an extremely enjoyable book. Despite the seriousness of the subject, it is light in tone, refined in its humour.

DE VOLKSKRANT

Februari conjures up an intriguing world, which she immediately confronts with a parody. That’s what’s called the absolute grip of a consummate novelist.

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Sample Translation

The Book Group

(De literaire kring)

by Marjolijn Februari

(Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2007)

Translated by Wendie Shaffer

[Section from the opening pages, pp. 9-16 and pp. 39-49]

The sugar shaker tumbled off the table. Just when things were going so well for Teresa. She had time on her hands and was sitting one Saturday morning reading the newspaper in the café of the orangery on the outskirts of the village.

Apparently there had been an uprising in Kabul in protest against the arrival of UN military and the paper's front page showed a photograph of a grinning Taliban soldier beside a Humvee that had been blown to bits. Beneath this report, an interview with film star George Clooney ('read more in Show News') who promised to do something about it. Teresa leafed through the paper, zigzagged across the pages of home affairs, examined all the photos of Clooney, read the film reviews, and having reached the Births and Deaths tossed the paper onto the table with a sigh of relief. She didn't know any people who had their deaths announced in the *Telegraaf*, and today she wasn't interested in the family affairs of total strangers. Pulling her mobile out of her dark brown Paddington Bag that lay on the chair beside her, she looked around for the waiter and in so doing accidentally caught the eye of a tall, lanky man who was bending over the reading table selecting a newspaper. 'Do you mind if I come and sit beside you?' he enquired, pulling up a chair.

"Mind" is not exactly the word I would choose,' observed Teresa dryly.

The man stiffened slightly and then began to smile. 'I asked more or less out of politeness.'

'Hmm', said Teresa.

He leant forward, both hands gripping the arms of his chair. An idealistic headmaster, she figured. And suddenly her cheerful springtime mood was dampened. She prayed that he wouldn't want to start a discussion with her. She had held such pointless debates about world news hundreds of times in the village café and right now it was the last thing she wanted; what she wanted was to go home, run a bath with pine and lavender oils and drift away in its luxurious warmth. And then, at the precise moment that she picked up her bag from the

chair and tossed it onto the table with a determined gesture that ought to have made it clear to the man – who was still smiling politely – that she was not in the mood for any chit-chat, something happened that was to involve her irreversibly with people who up till then she had only been aware of in the foreign news columns of the newspapers. It was as if a fine layer had been taken from this shining spring day and held up to the light, and behind the pearly white of the healthy structure dark shadows– which had not been visible upon earlier inspection – suddenly appeared. That moment was the start of a fundamental moral revolution. The sugar shaker tumbled from the table.

Well, not exactly tumbled off, against any reasonable expectation, the Paddington Bag did not remain where Teresa had tossed it but slid towards the other end of the table where it lightly nudged the sugar shaker – a glass jar with an old-fashioned spout – standing dangerously close to the edge. Teresa shrieked ‘Oh!’ and shot forward, causing Victor Herwig, seated ten yards away at the bar drinking a cup of coffee, to look up. He recognized Teresa immediately and also took in her tricky situation, with the sugar shaker wobbling indecisively on the table’s edge and the man with the newspaper looking on helplessly and unhelpfully, and since Teresa was after all Teresa, he decided to save her from her fate. With one hand he grasped the edge of the bar and catapulted himself from his stool, reaching her at the very moment that Teresa, furiously attempting to catch the sugar shaker with her right arm stretched over the table, knocked her mobile off with her elbow so that it exploded against the wall and then, spinning in slow motion towards the ground, shattered at her feet. ‘Aaah!’ she cried, and bent sideways to observe how the small screen pronounced one final, impenetrable message, and then – just as Victor made his final leap and Teresa rose dejectedly with the broken bits of phone in her hand – the sugar shaker finally fell from the table.

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The village nestles at the foot of a hill. A minor road runs through the centre but few cars pass through the village and you don’t often see queues at the traffic

lights there. Most drivers turn off at the previous village. If there does happen to be a traffic jam during rush hour, drivers will bide their time window shopping. If your car has to wait right at the traffic lights, you can admire the window display of the patisserie. Mini raspberry tarts, kirsch meringues, and with each changing season artfully made marzipan fruit and vegetables. The next car in the row can scan the window of the estate agents and see what local property is for sale. Every lost city dweller gazes longingly at the impressive photos of country dwellings and farmhouses with their stables, in full colour mounted on a white background. And it is just as well that they cannot read the prices from this distance; so they can cherish just a little longer their dreams of exchanging an Amsterdam apartment for a castle in the provinces. Then the traffic lights change to green, the car drivers accelerate, and within ten seconds the village is behind them.

Not much happens here. But then, not much happens in the rest of the country either, the villagers say. Which is true. Any Netherlanders who have been abroad, aid workers in the slums of Brazil or directors of financial organizations in Washington, are bemused on their return by the triviality of the Dutch news. Which, although it has changed with the arrival of immigrants into the Netherlands, still remains very parochial. Big news inevitably takes place in other countries and at most is imported into the Netherlands after a while in a simplified version. For real grown-up stuff, the Netherlands is completely dependent upon imported crime, imported conflicts, imported beliefs and religions. There's not much local news of any significance.

As much as an exotic disquiet is taking over the country, it has passed the village by. It is astonishing how unexciting the place is – that is, if you do not share an enthusiasm for cross-country bike rides and sheepfolds but fancy crowds, discos, neon advertisements or the smouldering criminality of the slums. Hubcaps being stolen from a Mitsubishi Colt parked in front of the chemist's makes the local paper here. The castle at the village's edge is occupied by the same noble family of a hundred years ago. On days when her grandchildren

tumble around the grounds, the baroness telephones the three-star restaurant a couple of miles away on the main road. ‘Lisa, do you still happen to make potato chips?’

‘There’s not much demand for them’, replies Lisa – she had been deputy chef at the Astor Hotel in Paris – ‘but I can make them if necessary.’

‘Good’, the baroness is curt – after all, it’s no business of hers how much demand there is for potato chips in the restaurant, ‘bring me a bowl of them. And a packet of cigarettes.’

Apart from that nothing happens, it’s true, unless you count the pine martens wiping out the squirrels, or country lads sometimes driving sozzled into a tree in the middle of the night, or during one of the hottest summers for years, a bird with exotic plumage being observed on the village outskirts which just possibly might spread a mysterious African virus – but that all blew over, the excitement of the inspections and the red plastic tape sealing off the meadow behind the cheese factory. Now all is peaceful and you could say that the village is ticking over quietly at its own pace; far from the madding crowd.

It had been a long winter, the snow covered the fields for days in early April and during the previous months the entire village was regularly cut off from the outside world. Teresa cancelled her appointments and stayed at home – safe and warm, watching coverage of the traffic chaos on the late night news. She hoped to spot her husband John’s car somewhere in those endless queues of traffic. Not that she was worried, he would certainly have been given a cup of instant coffee by the army, out in full force to rescue the stranded drivers. Once or twice she thought she saw him, but then it was always another dark blue Audi with a businessman at the wheel. What kind of tie had he taken with him on this trip? She couldn’t for the life of her remember. He was rather conservative in his choice of ties, so that man on the phone with the loud stripes couldn’t be John. Every day at the end of the news bulletin the weather forecaster promised yet more snow and the authorities made another desperate plea to people to stay at

home. But John travelled abroad so often that he regarded these soft-hearted Netherlanders with a kind of detached sympathy; they believed that they too had bad weather now while in fact the conditions in the Netherlands, he told Teresa when he phoned her from Schiphol airport to say that he was on his way home, were nothing compared with American winters.

‘Winter in Ameriga is cold, Teresa sang softly.

‘What is gold?’ he had asked.

‘Wishing I had known enough of love to leave love enough alone’.

‘What are you going on about?’

‘Well, you try getting home first’, Teresa answered in a maternal tone, ‘and then we’ll figure out just how bad it is in America.’

It would in any case teach him a lesson if he were stranded at night-time in the middle of nowhere. He’d become something of a meteorological snob what with all that travelling around with business-class information, the Sat Nav giving him the latest weather developments – clouds, rainfall, wind, temperature, warnings of thunderstorms and the forecast for the next few days. It wouldn’t hurt him at all to spend an hour or two in the fresh air while the soldiers busied themselves hauling his car out of a ditch – then at least he might feel how even the Dutch frost can burn through your clothes faster than fire. It wasn’t his fault, she thought to herself, it wasn’t due to any particularly reckless character trait. He had simply grown up in a city and this had shaped his attitude to the weather; he only knew about it from hearsay. So, with a certain concern, she watched the chaotic scenes on the motorways for a little longer, and then when the news items started repeating, she zapped to TellSell. She listened to the Americans attempting with religious fervour to sell a new-fangled vacuum cleaner, briefly considered phoning the sales-enquiry number, decided after all to switch off the television and went to bed. He would manage all right.

On two occasions during that winter when Teresa had woken early in the morning and looked out of the window she had seen John sitting in the car, just beyond the garden hedge. The driveway up to the house was impassable, even the

local snow plough had given up the attempt halfway along the lane, and so John had got stuck in his car several yards from the front gate. The dashboard lights were on and reports lay open on the steering wheel, and there he sat, apparently deep in conversation, gesticulating energetically into the dark. Both times she had gone back to sleep, and when she got up a couple of hours later he was shaved and showered, eating breakfast. Had he slept in the car? Oh no, at home, he'd got back at a reasonable hour, nothing to worry about, don't be ridiculous, this morning he'd spoken to someone in Berlin, it was much worse there. The Germans were having to climb up onto their roofs, which threatened to collapse under the weight of snow, and shovel it off. You never had anything like that in the Netherlands.

It was during that same long winter that John became a member of the book group. He had just got back from a short trip and was sitting in his study going through the post when Teresa's father Randolph came rushing in with a book, wrapped in the paper of the local book store, and smacked it down on the table in front of his son-in-law. The time was ripe! The book group could do with another intelligent member.

'Heavens above', John reacted, 'what would I want with a literary club? I never read books. The last novel I read was *The Firm* by John Grisham. And I bought that in a mad rush. At an airport. I thought it was the latest bestseller about Heathrow management.'

Placing his hands against the edge of the table, John wheeled back his chair a short distance until he was quite close to the large bookcase, which was filled with recent and authoritative works on business management. He stopped, tipped back his chair and folded his hands behind his head. He had shaved early that morning and already a dark stubbly shadow was washing over his cheeks, giving him a villainous air – quite undeservedly, since he was a guileless and lovable man. Even on those days when he had just shaved, some of his business contacts, because of his swarthy appearance, would inquire discreetly where he came from.

The Netherlands. And your parents? Netherlands. This reply generally produced restrained indignation in the inquirers who felt they were not being taken seriously and ascribed this to the arrogance of an immigrant who, starting at a disadvantage, had worked himself up to the top of the financial world a little too fast.

These days John liked to use the confusion to his own benefit. Adopting a slightly extravagant manner and by revealing as little as possible about his background, he used his ostensibly foreign appearance to create an air of superiority and slight menace. Together with his eminent position, his dark, disdainful intelligence created not only the impression that he was a perfect example of the successful advance of the immigrant, it could also suggest to business contacts that he had access to the corridors of power in countries where no westerner had ever set foot.

Thoughtfully, he ran his hand over his stubbly chin and then shook his head.

‘Novels! I’m too much of a barbarian to converse about novels with your learned lawyers.’ When Randolph failed to react to this, he continued: ‘Don’t you have another club I could become a member of so I could earn myself a position in this village? Isn’t there a Diners’ Club or something?’

‘The book group is the best’, replied Randolph firmly. ‘And you are eminently suitable for a literary club. Sooner or later every person with a sense of responsibility joins a book group. Here, this is what they’re going to read. Carlo Emilio Gadda, 3 December at 8 o’clock, at Lucius’s house. Ask Teresa how to get there.’

[pp.39-49]

If anybody could have saved the sugar shaker, it was journalist Victor Herwig. He was feeling on top of the world. He had escaped the polluted city and half an hour ago had finally returned to his native village and he was happy. The severe

Dutch winter had passed and spring was bursting out all over. The minute he left the motorway, he had opened the windows of his rented car and had smelled – no, experienced from a change in his way of breathing – the air becoming fresher the nearer he got to his family home. He had taken an early exit and so had to drive along a road that wound through the fields, and the mere sight of the tenant farms with their red-and-white shutters brought tears to his eyes, after so long an absence. What a day for a reunion, what weather to fill one with delight! The orchards in blossom, the small bridges across the waterways repaired and freshly painted, ducklings like small paper boats on the water, a red tricycle at the roadside, the splendid castle, the sawmill, a buzzard in the sky, two young women standing talking on a freshly-raked patch, their hands gently gesticulating as they chatted, and everything smelling of the Dutch countryside. This is great, he sang to himself in the car, just great!

And half an hour later here he was sitting drinking coffee in the café of the orangery belonging to the small castle at the edge of the village. He looked about contentedly. He remembered how, in his childhood, this building had been used as a garden house and a furniture storehouse, but when he was a student they had managed, after much string-pulling, to get the local council to grant permission to convert it into a Grand Café with a terrace at the front and an imposing driveway through the castle grounds. So now twelve tables stood ready, with white linen tablecloths and starched table napkins, waiting for the guests who would begin to wander in around noon, to partake of a little veal and lemon juice or a pastry followed by coffee. Potted palms adorned the entrance and on the wall opposite Victor hung a series of photographs showing the artist Marcel Broodthaers entering the Brussels Palace of Fine Arts in the company of a camel. Twentieth-century photographs that contributed strangely enough to the nineteenth-century feel of the place. Possibly the creak of old floorboards and the indescribable melancholy of real nineteenth-century objects was missing – but that was because everything here was new.

Things were still quiet in the café, a few customers in the background seated on Thonet chairs talked softly as they ate their apple cake, and a soothing species of world music sounded through the loudspeakers. Behind the counter, the bartender stood polishing wine glasses.

‘Not much has changed here’, said Victor.

‘Should it have?’

The man clearly did not have a local accent. ‘You’re from Amsterdam’, suggested Victor.

‘Hmm,’ said the man, ‘D’you think so?’ He placed the glass on the bar in slow motion. Cool, thought Victor, in a generous mood, cool bartender.

‘You’re not around here either.’

‘Botswana’, replied Victor. ‘I came back from Botswana the day before yesterday. And before that from Liberia. I’ve been in some quite distant places this past couple of years.’

‘Army?’ queried the waiter, convinced that throughout the world the Dutch army was standing ready to maintain peace, if necessary with a heavy hand.

‘Newspaper. I’m a foreign correspondent’ – and that was a weighty title that he never used but here in this early-modern setting it suddenly appeared appropriate. ‘I’ve been working abroad for a while. Observing economic developments, following the political scene. That kind of thing. Does the local mayor still live across the way in the woods?’ The waiter shook his head, he didn’t know, and unhurriedly picked up another glass.

Victor ran his hand through his hair that was still full of the African sand – he hadn’t washed it since he’d got back; if he shook his head, or so he expected, it would shower into his coffee. And not only was his hair still full of sand and dust, he still felt the comforting warmth of the tropical sun in his bones, and stretched out his arms for a moment, fingers interwoven, palms outwards. It was the last day he would be able to walk round like this, then he would have to adapt to the climate and put on warmer clothes. He surveyed himself with curiosity in the mirror behind the bar. With his slightly tousled hair – he had driven with the car

windows rolled down – and his shirt wide open he imagined himself as a young version of Harvey Keitel, and this vague realization aroused an indefinable craving for a cigar. He rummaged in the pocket of his combat trousers to find if he had a box on him. He gave a sigh. Now that he was sitting here, he finally had the sense of being back again. He wouldn't leave for a while, Victor repeated to himself once more.

Wrinkled, sun-tanned and full of energy he sat in his home village on a bar stool exchanging words with an arrogant waiter, and feeling good-humoured he pulled from his back pocket a newspaper article that he had folded into quarters and put there that morning.

'Here, have you ever heard of Ruth Ackermann? She's written a novel. *The Summer of the Canvas Shoes*. Seems to be a huge hit.'

'Yes, it rings a faint bell,' replied the waiter, drawn in despite himself by the smell of the news, now that he was talking to a serious correspondent.

'Hold on, I've got another article, with a photo.'

Victor unfolded a second sheet of newspaper. It contained a reportage by the journalist Kiki Jansen. She was following the talented and promising young writer Ruth Ackermann on her triumphal procession through Europe and had just published her first article in a series: 'In Frankfurt with Ruth Ackermann' proudly proclaimed the headline across a double page spread.

Earlier that morning Victor had fished the article out of the pile of papers and magazines lying beside his bed waiting to be read. Every book supplement, every newspaper and every book catalogue he came across was full of this new work – the fifteenth impression was being announced with fanfare and the novel had only been out three months. And not only had a large advance been paid before it appeared, the book had also been published simultaneously in three languages and had immediately become an international bestseller. A film version was in preparation. For a while Victor had leafed back and forth through the jubilant reviews about the unrivalled Ruth Ackermann and her brilliant book *The Summer of the Canvas Shoes* – not because he was suddenly possessed by a deep

enthusiasm for the Dutch novel but because when he read the name of the author he immediately recognized it as that of a former, embarrassingly shy, classmate. And filled with a mixture of nostalgia, agitation and pure journalistic curiosity – he was to have a short holiday before he started his new job – within two hours he had climbed into the small rented car and driven from Amsterdam to the village where he was born and where years ago he had sat in the same class as Ruth Ackermann.

The waiter scrutinized the photograph. It showed a young woman, not particularly distinctive looking, with short dark blonde hair and a somewhat diffident expression. He was trying his hardest to see something unusual in her. ‘Looks quite nice,’ he said.’

‘Certainly. Better than she used to. She and I were in the same class at school for six years. Here in this village. She had some problems then, I believe.’

Victor was relieved to think she was now apparently stable enough to have written a book, because the last time he had seen her she was certainly in a bad way.

In a solemn voice the waiter read out the text printed beside the photograph. “‘*The Summer of the Canvas Shoes*: loosely based on Dostoevsky’s *Dream of a Ridiculous Man*. The story of a young woman who is admitted into a mental hospital. She meets a young man there who proposes to her but the next day claims to have forgotten this entirely.” Well, well.’

He gave the article back to Victor. ‘She certainly doesn’t live here anymore.’

No, Victor had reached that conclusion too. He stuffed the reviews back into his pocket and while the waiter walked to the other side of the bar to serve a new client, Victor began to wonder what he was actually doing here. He hummed a snippet from a nursery rhyme, *What shall I do now, what shall I do now?* Did he have a plan? A concrete goal? Was there anyone in the village with whom he could talk about Ruth Ackermann? His parents had moved away a few years ago and he didn’t know anyone who still lived here. All things considered, he had

scarcely any more chance of finding out anything here than if he had simply stayed put in Amsterdam.

That morning when he had driven into the village he had stopped briefly at the book store on the main square. He had bought the novel by Ruth Ackermann. That at least was a start. And while he was paying for the book he struck up a conversation with the young shop owner who was, of course, most excited that the celebrated author had grown up here, in this very village. He said he was making every effort to organize a reading but didn't hold out much hope for it. After all, why should someone who had become so famous come and spend an evening talking in the village church when she was also getting exciting invitations from London and Hollywood?

'Hollywood?' echoed Victor, eyebrows raised.

'It seems so,' answered the bookseller.

'Can't you find someone in the village to act as a go-between, someone who knows her? She might well come if she's invited in a friendly way. There must still be people here who are in contact with her?'

But according to the bookseller there was no one who had ever really spoken to her. Over the past months he had talked to many of his clients about Ruth Ackermann but everyone had directed him to the book group, and all his queries there received remarkably little response.

'Who belongs to the book group?'

'Randolf Pellikaan, Lucius what's-his-name, Jurgen Lagerweij, Gabrielle van Dam, Raoul Kemp. Plus a few others, I think. Do the names mean anything to you?'

'Yes', replied Victor 'they certainly do.'

Thinking back to that conversation in the bookshop he grew curious as to how the book group would judge a bestseller like this, which according to the blurb on the dust jacket was the entrancing, beautifully-crafted and utterly unexpected debut of a great writer. But he could hardly ring the doorbells of the magnificent mansions of the village worthies, who at most had perhaps seen him cycle past on

some occasion when he was about ten. And then, what exactly was he to ask them? He didn't even know what he was looking for. For Ruth Ackermann, yes of course, but she didn't live here any longer. So every source ran dry.

It was at that moment when he was considering once more whether there wasn't anyone with whom he could discuss the matter, that he heard a scream, turned round swiftly towards the conservatory veiled behind many potted palms whence the sound emerged, and there, by complete coincidence (or not), stood his former classmate Teresa Pellikan stretching across the reading table towards a sugar shaker about to tumble off. He leapt into action.

And so it came about that Teresa, in her moment of ultimate despair, beheld an unknown man racing towards her who grabbed at the air and then stood gazing in dismay at the floor where the sugar shaker had shattered on the wooden boards creating an indescribable havoc, scattering sugar grains far and wide on every side so that it hardly required much imagination to realize that it would take weeks before it had all been cleared up and the shoes of the café clients no longer crunched across the floor, and years before the final grains had disappeared from the grooves between the floorboards.

At the same moment, the man recovered his balance. He called cheerfully through the echoing space of the orangery, 'Teresa! Sorry! I tried to catch it, but I was just too late.'

The momentum propelled him forwards, he bent down, kissed her quickly on the forehead, pulled a chair out from under the table and sat down next to her with a plop. 'You've had coffee already I see. Mobile broken? Let's have a look.' He stretched out his hand, at the same time looking up at the nervous newspaper reader who still stood longingly beside Teresa.

'Oh, excuse me,' said Victor, 'am I interrupting something?'

'No', replied Teresa, 'you aren't.'

She reflected for a millisecond and plumped for the stranger with his brazen air who looked so much more dangerously exciting than the skinny villager – and

apparently knew her. Impelled by a romantic spirit of improvisation she added firmly, ‘I’ve been sitting waiting for you all this time. I thought we were going to do something nice together.’

Victor, as if they were still at school together and hatching a plot against one of the teachers, nodded. ‘Yes, we certainly are, darling, we certainly are. Unless this gentleman wishes to say something first.’ But the paper reader understood when he was beaten, muttered, ‘Sorry, what a terrible mess, all that sugar...’ and slunk off.

‘I...’ began Teresa.

‘Just a minute.’ Victor beckoned the waiter who had remained standing disinterestedly behind the bar as the sugar shaker fell. ‘Two glasses of white wine and the menu please. And there’s some sugar on the floor.’

Then he beamed at Teresa and laid his hand lightly upon hers for a moment. ‘You haven’t the foggiest notion who I am, have you?’

7

The appearance of *The Summer of the Canvas Shoes* had escaped Teresa’s notice. Quite a few things escaped her notice. Once upon a time, in the distant past Teresa Pellikan had attended the same school as Victor Herwig and the acclaimed Ruth Ackermann and for six years they had sat in the same shabby classroom of the local grammar school and had their sports lessons on the athletics track outside the village and held parties in the school gym – but now she can remember very little about those days.

Philosophers say that we are defined by our past, by the accumulation of our experiences, decisions and actions, but that doesn’t seem to be true of everyone, or if it is, not many are aware of it: they have forgotten too much. And it is not a question of indifference, but a form of detachment.

On that spring day when Teresa ruined her mobile phone she was sitting in the village café just as she had done on many previous Saturdays. Sometimes John would come and collect her but today he had gone to The Hague to give a talk about climate change, so she had all the time in the world. She had enquired at

the greengrocer's about the mint family: *menta spicata (crispata)* was spearmint, or mackerel mint, an effective cure for hiccups; and she had been to the butcher's and had spoken with Lucius at the delicatessen where he was sampling Armagnac, would she like to try a sip? No, thank you, not at eleven in the morning, and then she had purchased a bottle of bath foam.

Now she sat with an empty coffee cup, reading the paper. Usually, when she considered herself in this pose – which she liked to do – she was reminded of the poem by Yeats that she had learned by heart at school and which – an exception, this – she had not forgotten. '*My fiftieth year had come and gone, / I sat, a solitary man, / In a crowded London shop, / An open book and empty cup, / On the marble table-top.*' The poem was not extremely appropriate because Teresa was only twenty-nine and she didn't have a book lying open on the table, but the mood fitted. She sat solitary at the reading table, a packet of cigarettes before her, with the Ralph Lauren sunglasses she had just purchased and a notebook in which she had jotted down something about pentimenti revealing kindling-wood in underpaintings ('ask that young woman in Wageningen, enquire for M.') and the best cure for worms in a dog.

She could easily have been reading a book. But John, who had become a member of the Book Group, oh of course she loved him but he did let himself get inveigled into things by her father in a way she thought unhealthy. How could he come up with the idea of becoming a member of a club that stood for everything that was wrong with the establishment!? The worthy man... No, Teresa wasn't going to be told what to do any longer by her family and the village notables. She sat at the reading table and perused the *Telegraaf*, initially with a provocative air of triumph: look at me, I'm reading about baby elephants in Artis Zoo and about the Dutch actress Connie Breukhoven, who, clad in a deep décolleté of gold lamé announced the fantastic fact that she had discovered a new anti-wrinkle cream – and I find all this absolutely fascinating, fa-scina-ting! But it gradually turned into a quiet crumpled triumph, she ceased to think about her victory over politically-correct good taste every time she opened the paper. Absorbed in the

contents of the news, she became genuinely involved with the lot of the tiger cubs whose mother rejected them as soon as they were born. Teresa loved this peaceful Saturday routine and somewhere in the back of her head the words of Yeats always sang softly, '*And twenty minutes more or less / It seemed, so great my happiness, / That I was blessed and could bless.*'