

Sample Translation

The Utopians

(De utopisten)

by Louise O. Fresco

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Translated by David McKay

[pp 90 – 100]

III

1

‘Good morning, Mr van Straten. Welcome to our programme. And welcome to you, listeners. Here in our Hilversum studio, I’ll be spending of the first hour of today’s show talking to Michiel van Straten. Michel, how do you feel this morning, after hearing the unexpected news of your appointment? I may call you Michiel, right?’

The host stared imperiously at Michiel, who had no choice but to murmur assent.

‘Michiel van Straten was appointed two days ago as Minister for Technology and the Environment, replacing Tricia Koomen. She finally withdrew as candidate following allegations of fraud in the newspapers. This appointment completes the new coalition government, which can at last get to work after its rocky start. And about time too, two whole months after what have probably been the most difficult coalition negotiations in our country’s history.’

Michiel, none too eager to talk about the coalition, coughed, barely interrupting the host’s flow.

‘After briefly studying medicine, Michiel van Straten turned to political science. He’s been active in many fields since his student activist days. He’s a veteran of the environmental movement and the founder of Amsterdam’s Environmental Information Centre, affiliated with the...er, let me see, the Interuniversity Institute for Environmental Issues. So his appointment to this new government has come as a surprise. But insiders already knew that Michiel was the ace up the Progressive Party’s sleeve. So, Michiel, again, how do you feel?’

‘Very well, thank you.’ Michiel said, his thoughts on the previous night and evening. It had been barely an hour since he had reluctantly disentangled himself

from Lydia's warm, supple limbs and headed, reeling a little, for the kitchen and the dirty dishes to fix himself an espresso with Lydia's new machine. It had been a party to remember for the rest of his life, a turning point. A chapter of his autobiography was finished – no, more than that, the first volume. At least, that was how it felt. And now he was starting a new, blank page, full of anticipation. The end of the previous chapter was in part about Paul and Claire – he realised that, as, of course, did they. From now on, he was on his own, supported by others, perhaps, but without the bonds of intimacy formed only when you're young and reckless.

'First of all, congratulations on your appointment as minister. You must have thrown quite a party, Michiel.'

'Oh, just a few friends over for dinner, just a modest get-together.'

'That's your style, isn't it – selective and discreet? And yet you've been active in a movement that isn't known for mincing words. It's a striking contrast. Are you a man of outspoken conviction, or just the opposite?'

'My convictions are clear, but that doesn't stand in the way of modesty when the occasion demands. Modesty is a question of style, not content.' In fact, modesty was the last thing Michiel was in the mood for. Through the glass pane of the studio his press secretary, Son Frederiks, was fixing him with a piercing stare.

'Could that be what makes everyone so comfortable with you – your ability to avoid taking a stand?'

'But I do take a stand,' Michiel said, staring back at Son. 'I am keenly aware of my pivotal role at this historic moment. Now more than ever, we need to –'

'Journalists call you the hidden force, the wheeler-dealer, the activist who became a scientist and, above all, a negotiator. Would you call that an accurate description?'

'Hmm...' Michiel hesitated. The questions were getting on his nerves. It was always the insecure interviewers who made subtle insinuations. He'd have to work hard to present an image of himself that would satisfy this man.

He gave it a try. ‘Isn’t everyone a hidden force in some sense? Don’t we all have a secret side – or at least, some unspoken, unknown part of ourselves?’

‘Right, right. I’m tempted to ask you more about the hidden corners of your personality, but not just now. Today I’m interested in Van Straten the deal-maker, the diplomatic negotiator, the scientist and the former activist.’

‘Again, those are your words. I prefer to talk about the quest for compromise, a compromise that everyone can live with, but linked to a long-term vision. I think of myself as a bridge-builder, bringing parties to the table and helping them find truly innovative solutions. That’s who I was as an activist – to use your term – and that’s who I am now. And please, don’t overstate my contributions to science. I worked in an environmental studies department for a while, that’s all. And negotiating just seems to come naturally. It surprises me too, sometimes.’ This type of mock confession was always a good idea; it made the interviewer feel that he had stumbled on something original. Was Son Frederiks looking more contented now?

‘However you want to put it, the fact is that so far you’ve managed to avoid making enemies and to initiate compromises between the political world of The Hague, the business sector, and the environmental movement, making skilful use of your scientific insights and your numerous connections. And with this new appointment, it seems you’re reaping the benefits.’

‘Initiate compromises? No, I’d say I’m more of an honest broker, a catalyst.’

The journalist ignored this remark. Squinting at his notes, he moved on to his next question: ‘So, do you see your current office as a reward?’

‘The point in life is,’ Michiel said, sitting up straight, ‘the point in life is to strike a balance between destiny and self-determination. We’re all born with the cards life dealt us, if I may use that metaphor.’

‘A simile, actually,’ the interviewer said, looking up from his papers. ‘But I asked whether your new appointment is a kind of reward.’

‘Those cards,’ Michiel continued, ‘are our fate. Some people are fortunate enough to be attractive and intelligent, and from a good background. Others are

not so lucky: they're poor and unhealthy and don't have a university education. But the way each individual responds to his fate, to the opportunities he is given – that's where you find the real differences between people, the differences in character. I try to make the most honest effort possible, and I don't consider the office of minister a reward, but a challenge, a mission. Even a sacred duty!

'And what would you say are the cards in your hand? Are you holding the joker?'

Michiel bit his tongue. The sheer stupidity of the man. He didn't even know how to listen. The kind of opponent you have to win over with charm. Flashing a smile at the interviewer, he nodded amiably. He was relieved that Claire and Paul were not really radio listeners, and Lydia was probably only just waking up to his voice on the clock-radio, and would forgive him everything.

He spoke at the speed of dictation, remembering Barend's instructions, 'That's an interesting question, of course, though I don't believe there is a joker. I've been dealt a decent hand, and I'm grateful. Given my talents and my potential, I think it's incumbent upon me to use them for the public good. I see myself as someone you can rely on, diplomatic but not afraid to speak the truth. I have integrity, I respect science more than special interests. We can change the world. That's what I believe.'

'Which is just what I'd like to talk to you about. Van Straten the dealmaker, but also Van Straten the prophet. What can the great wheeler-dealer do about a problem as thorny as the environment?'

'Prophet...' Michiel groaned inwardly. Forcing his face back into a smile, he tried again, with all the energy he could muster, to say his piece about his country's vigour and enthusiasm, the importance of the environment for the future, and the need for responsible citizenship and socially engaged science.

'Isn't responsible citizenship just a fancy way of saying that the government plans to spend less on the environment? Will citizens be left to fend for themselves?'

‘No, quite the opposite. We all have to do our best, at every level. Government is essential, because it coordinates the process, but it can’t solve these problems on its own. Each and every citizen is also a consumer, making choices that affect the environment whether consciously or unconsciously. So he, or she,’ – Michiel knew how important it was to win over the women in the audience – ‘can decide to do more or less to prevent, or create, environmental problems, by thinking about what he or she buys, and where.’

‘But without a lot of money, there’s not much you can do, is there?’

‘On the contrary. Everyone, every man and woman in our country, and all over the world, can make a difference. We can all recycle our waste paper, for instance. And we can take the bus or train instead of driving.’

The interviewer fell silent. I’ve gone and made it too complicated again, Michiel thought wearily.

‘I shan’t ask how you travelled to our studio this morning, tempting as that would be. No. Tell me more about yourself. What kind of consumer are you? When was the last time you recycled paper or glass?’

‘Oh, I’m a man of simple tastes. I don’t need fancy cars, or big houses, or trips to the other side of the world. Yes, I make conscious decisions about what I consume: I use energy-saving light bulbs, I turn lights and appliances off when I’m not using them, and I don’t make unnecessary purchases. It’s always a good idea to read the label before you buy anything.’ Michiel pictured Lydia’s house, with its chandeliers and scores of table lamps, and thought back to their last Christmas holiday, in Curaçao. Oh well, he wasn’t officially living in her canal house on the Prinsengracht. And they really were trying. Lydia always bought free-range chicken and organic walnut-fig bread at the delicatessen round the corner. He suddenly recalled the rock-hard lumps of bread that Claire used to bake with biodynamic flour in the blackened oven on Marnixstraat; the contrast made him smile.

‘You have an air of contentment, Michiel. Do you consider yourself a living example of an enlightened citizen? Is it fair to say that you are the model for the rest of the Netherlands?’

‘Oh, no, please,’ Michiel quickly replied. He could just imagine Paul’s look of derision, not to mention the expressions on the faces of his former colleagues at Green Alternative and the environmental studies department, most of whom spent several hours a day cycling to and from work with their lunchboxes strapped to their luggage carriers.

‘Let me just say that, like everyone else in our country, I’m a good citizen trying my very best. And as minister it’s my responsibility to set appropriate guidelines so that our collective actions will have less environmental impact. As I said earlier, I have clear ideas about changing people’s habits. There’s a lot of work to be done!’

‘And will you have the budget for all that work?’

‘The budget won’t be a problem. I’ll fight tooth and nail for that. No single other issue is as fundamental to our future.’ Show you’re determined, he told himself. That’s what they’re waiting for.

‘You’ll literally be slugging it out with the Minister of Finance? Or have you other tactics in mind?’

‘I shall use all legitimate means at my disposal to persuade my government colleagues of the importance of my portfolio. I shall be stressing that these issues are the collective responsibility of the entire government.’

‘All legitimate means? That sounds to me like the voice of Van Straten the activist! Would that include civil disobedience?’

‘It includes all means appropriate to my office, supported by scientific reasoning,’ Michiel said, solemnly. ‘It’s not in my nature to pick a fight or be unreasonable, let alone to blackmail my colleagues. Close working relations are the foundation of our team.’

‘Fantastic, fantastic,’ the interviewer said, in a tone that suggested the opposite. ‘And how does Van Straten the prophet envisage the future?’

‘It is my firm conviction that, however small the Netherlands is, we can make a difference in the world. The problems we face are serious – I don’t have to spell them out for you. But in the course of our history, we have learned that if we make common cause with one another, we can build polders and dikes. Our challenge today is not just to prevent flooding, but also to fight for clean air, and to preserve our natural environment. And with our technological capabilities, I know that we are up to the challenge. I know that the people of the Netherlands will do this together, because nothing matters more to us than the quest for a sustainable future, within our borders and beyond, since more than ever, globalization has made us dependent on each other.’

‘Is this the party line, or your personal opinion, Mr Van Straten?’

‘My party, the Progressive Party, is an open organization with an ongoing dialogue, so the term “party line” doesn’t really apply. At least, that’s my experience, which may be limited, but still –’

‘With all due respect, aren’t you being a bit too optimistic about our country? Will your message really appeal to young people?’

‘I’m an idealist, but not a utopian,’ Michael said firmly. Through the glass, next to the sound engineer, Son Frederiks shook his head.

‘Not a what? Whoops, our producer’s telling me we’ve run over time for the interview. Thank you so much, Mr Van Straten. And please, stay in your seat, because it is now time for questions from our listeners. You’re familiar with our format?’

Michiel nodded. ‘I’m looking forward to the questions. But as I was saying, I feel sure that plenty of listeners – including young listeners – are deeply engaged with these issues. I’d love to open a dialogue with them. That’s any politician’s top priority: a dialogue with the public.’

‘Mm... dialogue, er... Ah, fantastic, there’s our first caller now. Mrs Saal from Apeldoorn. You’d like to ask our new minister about the high price of energy-saving bulbs. Interesting point. The floor is yours, Mrs Saal!’

There were questions about the usual topics: recycling, refrigerators, espresso machines, and public transport. Almost all the callers, judging by their voices, were women between the ages of forty-five and sixty, women who represented what was probably the most environmentally benign group in the country, eager to get it all just right. They formed the majority in all the environment and nature organizations. In their flat, sturdy shoes and their formless but gaily coloured windbreakers, they had seized control of the Dutch landscape. Aside from a vague uneasiness about their children and grandchildren, they had no concept of the future of the planet. They simply, firmly believed that everything had been better in the past, and were prepared to vote blindly for anyone who offered the illusion that the idealized, carefree days of their youth could return. They made up a large part of his support base. All at once there appeared before him an image of a country, his country, populated by graceless, middle-aged women, their straight hair cut in a bob or pulled up in a bun, wearing wooden beads and hand-woven clothes. Women who looked more like Claire than Lydia, because, if he was honest with himself, Claire cared more deeply about the environment and a better world than Lydia. At least, the old Claire had. And for the second time that morning, he wondered how Claire would fit into his new life, and what he might have lost.

‘At last, a question from one of the men in our audience. Welcome. Mr Vaandrager in Dordrecht, right? Go ahead.’

‘I have a question about the methods. Does Mr Van Straten have an opinion about what methods are justified in the fight for a better environment? And what does he think about the methods used in the past? Is there a line we must not cross, or does the end justify any means?’ The voice sounded rushed and a bit breathless, as if the speaker had just run to the phone.

Before he could respond, the interviewer leapt to his aid. ‘Mr Vaandrager, can you explain what you’re getting at? Can you be more specific?’ The only answer was the *boop-boop* of the lost connection, a sound the engineer immediately

dialled away. Michiel smiled and raised his open palms, as if to say that a fool can ask more questions than seven wise men can answer.

‘I’m afraid our time is up. After the commercial break and this morning’s headlines we’ll bring you Maartje Sandberg, who’s been investigating the role of safe houses for Muslim women in deprived areas. Mr Van Straten, Michiel, the very best of luck in your new role and we hope to welcome you to our programme again soon.’

Michiel said a quick goodbye to the interviewer and made his way out of the building into the nearly empty car park. The driver started the engine as soon as he saw him coming and glided towards him. Michiel ignored Son Frederiks, who was hurrying after him. Post-game analysis was not what he needed just now.

‘See you on Monday, Son, we’ll go over it then,’ he said.

The press secretary nodded, disappointment shading his face.

Michiel climbed into the back seat and put the newspaper on his lap, without opening it. Had he done well? It had been just like every other interview he had ever done; the journalist’s questions reflected inadequate preparation, insufferable arrogance, and an unwillingness to listen to big ideas. These people, with their uncontrollable addiction to simplification! And always trying to make everything personal. What did it matter what kind of light bulbs he used? What mattered was his vision, that was why he had been appointed, not because he wore the mask of the responsible, environmentally friendly citizen. He felt dissatisfied. It was impossible to turn his ideas into sound bites without lapsing into caricature. And then the audience, what a pathetic bunch...! Almost none of the questions had shown any real understanding. He might just as well have become the Chief of Compost and Insulation instead of the Minister for the Environment and Technology.

The euphoria of the previous night had given way to a sense of profound loneliness. It seemed to Michiel as if the rest of the country was indifferent to his dream of a better nation, a better world. Were they all bogged down in complacency, thinking that nothing serious would happen in their lifetime, that a

few energy-saving bulbs and better incineration of household waste would do the trick?

As they approached the Amsterdam ring road, the traffic soon grew dense.

‘The Saturday morning trek to the malls,’ the driver mumbled.

Michiel had a vision of endless Dutch shoppers like hamsters, loading their cars with colourful products that they would lug back to their houses for the sake of their material happiness. Surely this wasn’t the country he wanted to build?

‘No,’ he said, in a surge of emotion. ‘No. Let’s go to The Hague.’

‘I don’t know that they’re expecting you, sir. My instructions are to drive you home and then take you to your lunch appointment in Leiden at twelve-thirty, if that’s all right with you.’

‘We shan’t stay long, but I’d like to pop in at the ministry. We can easily make it to lunch on time.’

Without a word, the driver steered smoothly into the left lane.

To the south, mist was gathering. Flat, black fields slipped past, now and then interrupted by a row of wispy trees on the horizon. But most of all, what he noticed were industrial sites alternating with suburbs, as drained of colour and form as the bare winter fields. It seemed to Michiel as if he were floating above it all, above the peaceful villages and uniform suburbs where a new and better country would soon take shape, thanks in part to him. For the first time, he perceived the full extent of his new responsibilities. From this day forward, it would no longer be about his opinion, or his ability to draw conclusions from other people’s opinions, or about forging compromises, as he had said in the interview. From this day forward, it would be about serious decisions and their quantifiable effects. And from now on, he could ask other people to do what he wanted, without question. He stared at the grey hairs on the driver’s neck and the soft, perforated leather of the seat in front of him and the elegant halogen reading lamp. This was his new milieu. He smiled at his own reflection in the rear-view mirror and, pleased with these thoughts, stroked his clean-shaven chin.