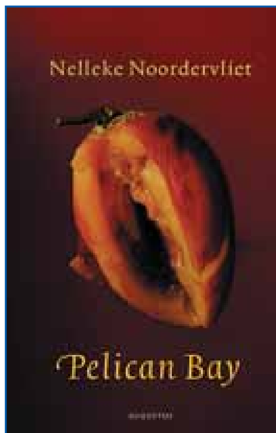
History is dangerous ground

photo Roy Tee

Nelleke Noordervliet

Pelican Bay



After her father's death writer Ada van de Wetering is left burdened with feelings of guilt. Did she really make her adopted brother Antonio's life so miserable that he returned to the Carribean when he was eighteen? Had Ada threatened him with a knife during a vacation in France? She can't remember. Ada gets on an airplane to find out the truth. A second reason for her trip is that one of her ancestors, Jacob Rivers owned a plantation on the island. She doesn't know much about him except that his pregnant wife was murdered – a crime for which an innocent slave was hanged.

Ada is also interested in this colonial question because in the 1960s her parents had brought Antonio to Holland as a kind of modern slave, partially out of guilt for their own prosperity, but also to save their marriage. During her research, as Ada comes to know more about her family's colonial past and meets Antonio several times, both questions become interwoven. In beautiful, alternating chapters Noordervliet describes the situation on the Rivers plantation two centuries ago. The question there is whether Jacob himself possibly murdered his wife, Fanny Fenwick. Fanny had had an affair with the slave Plato, so the child she was expecting could be black – an unbearable humiliation for Jacob.

With a probing style, Noordervliet evokes a dark and therefore often repressed page of Dutch colonial history. Precisely by connecting it to new forms of colonialism she shows how the past affects the present, as is shown by the story of Antonio. After all, he too was abused; seen as a sort of carnival attraction who at school was only allowed to give talks about slavery. Perhaps that is why he takes revenge by hiding cocaine in Ada's luggage. She is subsequently caught but she doesn't betray him – out of guilt, but also out of love. In *Pelican Bay* Noordervliet shows all the ambivalences that adhere to the colonial past. However painful the past may be, Ada manages to become reconciled with history.

Nelleke Noordervliet's (1945) first book was *Tine or The valleys where life lives* (Tine of De dalen waar het leven woont, 1987), a fictionalized biography of the wife of Multatuli. After that followed *The Angel's Eye* (Het oog van de engel, 1991) and *Paradise Lost* (Uit het paradijs, 1998), among others. Her novel *The Name of the Father* (De naam van de vader, 1993) was awarded the Multatuli Prize and was nominated for the European Literature Prize. Noordervliet writes essays and criticism and has a weekly column in *De Volkskrant*.

Pelican Bay is a complex, intelligent novel, not only due to the two skillfully interwoven story lines, but also because rooting in history is dangerous ground, full of pitfalls. Noordervliet demonstrates the significance of the historical novel, in which she excels.
TROUW

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RIGHTS
Augustus
Herengracht 481
NL - 1017 BT Amsterdam
TEL. +31 20 524 98 00
FAX +31 20 627 68 51
E-MAIL augustus@vug.nl
WEBSITE www.boekenwereld.com

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Foundation for the Production and Translation of Dutch Literature
Singel 464
NL - 1017 AW Amsterdam
TEL. 31 20 620 62 61
FAX +31 20 620 71 79
E-MAIL office@nlpvf.nl
WEBSITE www.nlpvf.nl

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An interview with Nelleke Noordervliet

Kicking out the past

by Margot Dijkgraaf
(NRC Handelsblad, 16 August 2002)

translated by George Hall

The principal characters in Nelleke Noordervliet's new novel are exiles. 'Exile is sense of being only temporary, that you are tolerated.'

Pelican Bay by Nelleke Noordervliet is the first book to appear under the auspices of Augustus, Tilly Herman's new publishing company. Noordervliet herself is relaxed and bronzed from a recent sailing holiday. Though not from the Caribbean where the book is set, even if the ideas underlying the book were born during a stay on the British Virgin Islands years ago: a woman, cut adrift; the history of slavery; dependence on Western tourism.

Pelican Bay is a deft, expansive, semi-historical novel. It is adventurous and often funny, and makes compelling reading. The story of Jacob is told by Noordervliet's other protagonist, the twentieth-century author Ada. She believes that she is a distant descendant of Jacob Rivers, who once owned a sugar plantation on a Caribbean island where he lorded it over a hundred slaves. She visits Pelican Bay in search of material for her new novel. Ada is going through a crisis: her father has recently died, her marriage is heading for the rocks, and she is obsessed by memories of her adopted brother, born on the Caribbean island and since disappeared. Ada settles in at a ramshackle boarding house run by Ma Edith, an elderly woman of English origin, who runs the place in an unorthodox way, caring little for normal tourist standards. 'Tourists arrive at places without really being there,' says Noordervliet. 'The paradox of the full tourist resort is that nobody is there. Wealth is dreadfully boring. Do this for me, fetch me that. And it happens. Of course, poverty also means misery, but at least you have something to aim for.'

It's as if the characters in *Pelican Bay* are constantly engaged in looking for something, are adrift, don't belong anywhere. 'They are all exiles,' Noordervliet confirms, 'outcasts from a trusted environment, from the warmth of a family, from a loving relationship, from a country. I wanted to research how people deal with the question: Where do I belong? You're born with certain inalienable properties; your place of birth, for instance, your race, your family, but if these suddenly come up for discussion and are questioned, all other certainties falter too.' Jacob is exiled to Africa, where he does everything that God and the Calvinist minister from Zeeland forbade him. Ada moves to a tropical island previously unknown to her, and wallows in drink, drugs and sex.

'Exile pardons a lot of excesses,' says Noordervliet. 'You can indulge in all kinds of irresponsible behaviour. Jacob compensates for his lack of love, and his lack of contact with God and religion. Ada, too, falls into a black hole. At such moments, it is a relief to be somewhere else, because there nothing is expected of you. Some people feel at home anywhere, they feel at home in their own aura, and approach the world from there. I have only one place where I am at home, and that is in the street where I was born, in Rotterdam. You can create an artificial home at other locations. You rationalise, tell yourself not to. You know the feeling you sometimes get that your joints are askew, that you have to crack your fingers or your knees? To me, exile is the constant sense that you are askew, that you are temporary, that you are merely being tolerated.'

Flux

Eighteenth- and twentieth-century lives are intermingled in Noordervliet's book: 'In the eighteen century, as now, waves of people were on the move, religions met one another, cultural differences became apparent. They were and are times of ferment, temporary upheaval, and they have ongoing consequences.' In a certain sense, Ma Edith, the white Englishwoman who married a black man for love and settled on a Caribbean island, creates a bridge between various generations and periods. The fact that her sons are not white does not bother her and the men themselves don't suffer any hardship. 'Of course, in the past, everybody wanted to be white,' says Noordervliet. 'White was the boss, white held power. That tide has now turned. Black pride has arrived and the blacker you are, the better. Black self-consciousness is a marvellous form of emancipation. The future lies in fusion. This is not merely an ideal, obviously things will evolve this way. We have only had motorised transport for a hundred years. Prior to that, on distant trade routes in the times of the horse and cart, miscegenation took much longer. Biologically speaking, humans develop slowly, but technologically we have jumped into a high-pressure cooker.'

Ada experiences more during a few weeks on *Pelican Bay* than she would have done in months in the Netherlands: she drinks too much, hallucinates, falls in love, and struggles with the monsters lurking in the shadows of her past. She discards her shield of irony and realises that she has never loved her father no matter how hard she tried – a worthless father, similar to others we have encountered in Noordervliet's previous novels. 'Ada's father is pretty horrid figure, who blames his daughter for everything that he himself has done wrong. But if people think that I have a score to settle with my own father, they couldn't be more wrong.' The author laughs. 'The father can also stand as a symbol, as a representative of the dominant culture, as the legislator, and it is in this context that you should always be questioning.'

As soon as Ada settles the score with her father, she can let the past rest. Noordervliet: 'If you drag the past around with you, you constantly see the

present in the mirror of the past. This means you can never really occupy the present, this moment now. We are plagued by that past; it keeps forcing itself upon us. Now and again you simply have to kick it out, and when you do, there is enormous release. If you can't cope with it, put it away in a cupboard, lock the door, and throw away the key.'

Moral judgement

Of course Noordervliet realises that this statement is ambivalent: after all, her book deals with history and how people deal with the past. At a certain moment, as she's writing, Ada asks herself, whether or not we are entitled to sit in moral judgement on the past. 'We are seriously preoccupied with good and evil in the way we currently look at history,' says Noordervliet. 'This has crept in since the Second World War. Before, national history was all to do with glorification and justification. As soon as history is seen as playing a role in our present-day lives, we are forced into expressing a moral judgement. We are now living with the consequences of slavery, so you have to ask yourself what moral judgement you can make about those people so long ago.'

During the course of the book, Ada manages to free herself of her status as victim, which was to do with the perverse influence of her father and the disastrously carefree and uncommitted upbringing of the sixties and seventies. Noordervliet: 'I loathe the extreme standpoints of the sixties. If you were progressive, you had to accept the entire package, and I always found that unsettling. I think people were genuinely damaged by that attitude. If you made your own choices, you were dismissed as middle-class, bourgeois, which no one wanted. Many adoptions in the seventies – made with the most idealistic on intentions: look what we're doing for our fellow humans – failed. Egoism wrapped in altruism is always difficult to discern, even when it's your own. Antonio now reflects Plato then – helpless until they resist. Antonio now was free and could return to his roots, Plato had to get by in a different way. We have progressed over the centuries.

Tombstones

In her search for material for her novel on Jacob, Ada encounters an elderly Jewish couple that have set themselves the task of clearing and maintaining the neglected Jewish graveyard on the island. They brush earth and leaves away from the tombstones so that the texts again become legible. 'It is a genuine act of piety in regard to the past,' says Noordervliet, 'completely gratuitous, an act of compassion. The people lying there have been dead for more than a hundred years. They have loved, hated, cherished their illusions and, somewhere in the nooks and crannies of time, been happy. They have been reduced to letters on a stone. Why should we want to be more than letters on a stone? You don't have to

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leave much behind. It’s enough if someone clears your grave, remembers your name. That’s the basis of history.’

At the end of the book, Ada decides to stay and help the Jewish couple maintain the tombstones that would otherwise crumble and disappear for ever. Ada has abandoned her search for the ultimate truth, has found ‘herself’, has become more humble, sadder but wiser. Noordervliet: ‘If you lose certain illusions, you can find happiness, a certain tranquillity of mind, as Madame de Châtelet described it in the eighteenth century. We have come to see happiness as a total realisation of our fantasies, while the essence of happiness lies much more in contemplating reality and finding peace there. You should not project reality as being more beautiful than it is. That is the real conclusion of the book.’

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Sample translation from

Pelican Bay by Nelleke Noordervliet
(Amsterdam: Augustus, 2002)

Translated by Roz Vatter-Buck

Jacob

PROLOGUE

The magistrate on his horse is sweating. He has stomach ache. He might have to dismount on the way to relieve himself among the sugar cane. He wished he'd stayed at home, not just because of the diarrhoea. He's not exactly relishing the task ahead. He felt so tired and sick when he got up that morning that he barely had the strength to tuck his shirt into his trousers, and he doesn't feel much like leading a manhunt for a murderer. Not to mention the sickening sight of blood and death. The mess and the fuss. The revolting stench. The grief of Jacob Rivers, owner of Pelican Bay, and the slaves, quickly looking away. The trouble something like this stirs up in the whole community, as if life isn't hard enough already. The report to the governor. He shudders at the thought.

The coast road is dusty, from the sand which the hot relentless wind, blows up. His horse's mane is matted with salt. The only time the heat of the sun is tempered is when a cloud drifts over. It is about three o'clock. The magistrate takes out his kerchief, wipes the sweat from his throat and neck, and looks round to see if the men are still keeping up with him. He notices his foreshortened

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shadow and is suddenly keenly aware of his own presence in this place at this time. Why is he here and not somewhere else? Why not in rainy Sussex? The sun retreats again, the shadow disappears and with it his ambivalent thoughts.

Shipmaster Burke, a good friend of Rivers, jumped into his saddle the minute he heard of the murder. He's riding right behind the magistrate. After him comes a merchant's clerk, then the assistant harbour master and finally the astute owner of five rum shops. The last three are in the civil militia, which is responsible for security on the island, and they keep their weapons at the ready. The slightest incident could provoke further violence. Their throats are dry with fear and they are spoiling for revenge even before they know what actually happened. The doctor has come with them to officially establish the cause of death and sign the death certificate. He is unarmed, apart from his doctor's bag. Bringing up the rear, riding bolt upright is the slave who reported the murder, grave-faced and dressed in the typical white man's shirt, trousers and jacket with the bare feet and headdress of the African. The magistrate does not trust him. The magistrate trusts no one, and educated, well-spoken slaves least of all.

They trot alongside a stretch of waving green sugar cane, not yet high enough to be harvested, but certainly tall enough to hide a man. Now they pass a newly planted plot, fertilised with rotting bagasse. The sickly smell turns his stomach. The stench of death. A cotton field suddenly offers a wider view and he breathes more easily; on it black backs, bent in toil, straighten at the sound of hoof-beats. The slaves turn to watch them silently, until the overseer cracks his whip. They start singing, but are silenced. The magistrate can smell their sweat, or is it the smell of goats being rounded up by three children, a little further along way on, on a bit of wasteland? His stomach is playing up. Each time his bowels go into spasm, he bends low over the neck of the horse. Salt stings his eyes. Nearing Rivers' house, he slows his horse to a walk and signals to his men to be on the alert. You never know what you are going to find: a runaway slave, maybe a bunch of maroons looking for cattle to rustle. The plantation is rather isolated. An old woman slave squats by a couple of huts, next to a smoking fire. In the shade

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lies a sick man, who raises himself on one elbow to watch them pass. His face contorts, and the magistrate is unsure if it is in a sneer or a grimace of pain. He wants to lash out at him; he would like to see him vanish into the scrub, scrabbling and whining like a dog. His horse is getting nervous and he can only check him with great difficulty.

The magistrate doesn't want to go on. He stops at the entrance to the tamarind-lined drive that leads to the plantation owner's house. Further on, but out of sight, is the factory: the sugar mill, the boiling house, the refinery and the distillery. There the workers will be gathered, their hate veiled in humility. That's where he will have to uncover the truth. He squeezes his buttocks together and steers his horse into the shade of the tamarinds. From the clammy woods on the distant mountainside, he hears the heavy drone of the proscribed goombah drum.

The house's wings are spread in welcome; the airy, shaded verandas around the ground floor hold the promise of rest and cool; the monumental mahogany door stands open. The dark maw of the house, yawning wide, draws the reluctant magistrate closer. No one's to be seen. They dismount. The harbour master and the rum shop owner stay with the horses, keeping a lookout. The slave rides on towards the sugar mill, where he claims his presence is required. As he speaks, he looks directly at the magistrate, who feels guilty though he doesn't know why. Slaves never look him straight in the eye, they are not supposed to, any more than he would touch a slave, unless it was to hit him with a stick. A wave of pain floods through his belly. He can't hold it any longer. It's too far to the latrines. Against the back wall of an outbuilding at the side of the house he empties his bowels in a rush, gasping and retching. And he hasn't even seen the body yet.

The hallway, with its shiny wooden floor and whitewashed walls, is cool and still. Is there any muffled sobbing to lead the way? No, nothing. The doctor coughs, making the magistrate jump. Which way? They tiptoe to the back of the house where they assume the bedroom to be looking around, warily, apprehensively. Death has decked the beams with its ghostly bunting, draped its shroud over the paintings like a garland, spread its sulphur like a mist through the

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rooms. His men let him approach the door first, which stands ajar. He pushes it open. For a split second, he feels he has chanced on something. Later, he will push the door open time and time again in his mind to try to see what he sees now. Before the full effect of the shock sinks in, he notices Jacob Rivers' attitude, which if he were to describe it, he would call one of triumphant despair. Is it grief and regret, or contradictorily hate? The magistrate is puzzled as to why he should think this, however briefly. Later, he will not remember exactly what he thought he saw. Now, any doubts he might have vanish as he takes in the scene before him.

Jacob Rivers stands beside the big four-poster bed, his left arm around her shoulders, his right hand – red with blood – raised. Her head lolls at an unnatural angle, the throat hacked through with a machete. She has been harvested like sugar cane. Even more ghastly is the gash in her belly, from which spills a full-term foetus, as if the child has been dragged back by the heels by grim death as he tried to crawl from his mother's womb. The doctor pushes the magistrate aside and hurries to the bed. His first concern is the foetus, which he frees from the gaping wound, then he cuts the umbilical cord, holds the child up by its ankles like a rabbit and slaps its bottom.

'Breathe!' orders the doctor. 'Breathe!' His voice reverberates around the hushed room. But hours have passed since the deed was done. Life will not be dictated to. The doctor takes the baby to the window and examines its tiny corpse in the light that filters through the blinds. He clutches the child to his breast, grabs a shawl from a chair where the woman, when still alive and singing, had laid it such a short time ago, swaddles the infant and lays it tenderly and lovingly next to its dead mother.

The shipmaster has already led his friend from the bed. The doctor beckons to the magistrate. They need to examine the woman's body together. There's blood everywhere. Her eyes are still open, the image of the murderer still imprinted on the dead retina. When the doctor closes her eyes and folds her hands over her belly as if to cover the shame of her wound, a last sigh escapes her severed

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windpipe. A bloody bubble forms and bursts, a drop spattering onto the magistrate’s hand. He would like to run away in horror, but the dignity of his office prevents him.

The merchant’s clerk studiously examines an engraving on the wall, hand before his mouth, shoulders heaving. The doctor bends down and retrieves the machete from under the bed. He hands the murder weapon to the magistrate, who hasn’t a clue what to do with it, until the doctor gives him a pillowcase in which to wrap the thing. Perhaps its owner can be traced. Without a word, they leave the dead in peace, pulling the door to behind them. The women will see to the bodies.

On the other side of the hallway is Jacob Rivers’ office, where the shipmaster has installed his friend in a chair at the desk. He pours him a glass of rum and passes the bottle round. The alcohol loosens the knot of pain in the magistrate’s stomach, and cautiously, he passes wind. He moves away to escape the smell of his own fart and takes another slug. Then he realises that all eyes are on him, the men waiting for him to speak.

‘Who was it, Rivers? Did you see the murderer?’

Jacob Rivers says nothing. The big Dutchman with his weather-beaten face shakes his head. He stares at his right hand, where his wife’s blood is beginning to dry in dark clots.

‘How did you find out? Where were you? Who discovered the body?’

‘The cook.’

It is the first word they have heard him utter. As if his own voice has breached the dam, Rivers lays his head on his arms and weeps.

The kitchen, a long hut with thick walls and a high chimney, is built next to the house. The wide fireplace, contains a brick block with openings on top for the cooking pots and openings at the front through which smouldering charcoal can be seen. Earthenware and tin vessels are ranged on shelves, and pokers and bellows hang from the wall. There are jugs and dishes. In the hearth are two ovens. On the large, scrubbed work table a lump of dough, sprinkled with flour,

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sits next to two dead, plucked chickens, their broken necks lending them an uncanny resemblance to their murdered mistress. There is a smell of burnt bread. In a corner of the room, a figure swathed in a white apron is rocking to and fro like a tree in a storm. The cook. She mumbles to herself, crying out now and again.

'Mie jammer yu, tee mie kries yu, tee mie neem steen feeg mie hogo.'

'She is mourning for Mistress Rivers,' says the clerk, who can understand some of the cook's patois.

'Finger seg yu, no seg mie.'

'I think she's saying she didn't do it.'

'Who was in the house this morning?' The magistrate speaks slowly and loudly.

The cook shies away, afraid of being hit. She repeats her incantations. No seg mie. No seg mie.

'Were there any strangers? What did you hear? What did you see?'

Now, with the big, pink palms of her hands, she fends off the magistrate, who is shouting and growing red in the face. The pitch of her lamentations rises a tone or two.

'Hit her,' orders the furious magistrate, who is too much of a coward to do it himself.

The clerk glances round, hesitating. The shipmaster and the doctor have stayed with Rivers, and the harbourmaster and the rum shop owner are still keeping watch. 'I don't think hitting her will help,' says the clerk. 'She's beside herself.' He giggles nervously.

Rivers' plantation has two sugar mills: one windmill and one driven by oxen or slaves. The windmill is for ever being repaired; it's hard to get spare parts. At the moment, the second mill is being made ready for the next sugar harvest, which is due to begin. It is January and the first fields are almost ready. The channels which take the juice from the mill to the tanks have been cleaned, the stills scoured, the sheds swept. Dried chaff lies in heaps ready for the fires under

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the cauldrons, in which, step by step, the juice is cooked, refined and ladled into the cooling vat. Specialist work. Enormous hogsheads wait in the refinery for the cooled wet sugar. The molasses will drip out of the bottom, leaving the brown muscavado inside. Rum will be made from the molasses. Nothing is wasted.

Rivers came originally from Zeeland and his name is actually Van de Wetering. By the time he took over the plantation from a wastrel who had squandered his money in London and hocked his land to the hilt to pay off gambling debts, the place had been badly neglected by a drunken, hard-handed Irish overseer. Rivers suffered setbacks in the beginning, when sugar was fetching less and the island was plagued by a series of natural disasters, rebellious workers and corruption, but now he has things pretty well under control. Mortality amongst the slaves has dropped and there have been fewer runaways; the future was looking good. And now this.

The slaves and the overseers are waiting for the magistrate in the boiling house. It would be unthinkable for him to travel even that short distance from the house to the factory on foot. He sits proudly erect on his horse, in order to make an impression. It is easier now he has emptied his bowels. The cook scurries along in front of him. The boiling house is a large, airy construction: a thatched roof on wooden poles; the wind can come and go as it pleases, but not the sun. All the same, when the fires burn under the cauldrons it can be as hot as hell in there. The magistrate dismounts. He always finds it difficult being solely in the company of blacks. He feels threatened. At the gates of Hades.

Jacob Rivers' sixty or so field slaves are crouched on the tamped earth floor, in grey cotton trousers, armed with pickaxes and hoes. The house slaves stand slightly apart. They are better dressed, better fed and look down on the others. The skilled men – coopers, the boilers, the bricklayers, the carpenters, the potters – are leaning against the cauldrons. The slave who reported the murder is among them. He calls himself the manager.

The magistrate is not sure how to approach the matter. He can see that some of the slaves are crying, and from grief, not fear. He can tell the difference. That

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confuses him. He clears his throat. There's little point in questioning them. For the most part they haven't got the sense they were born with. They're even too stupid to perpetrate any decent kind of crime. Or at least they pretend to be. Or they lie. He addresses them curtly, telling them to immediately report anything suspicious they may have seen or any information they may have that could help the investigation, or else there will be the devil to pay. Truth will always out, and any slave who lies will soon become a very hungry slave or a very dead slave, make no mistake. Now back to work. He gestures to the skilled workers and the house slaves to remain. They are made of smarter stuff, and may be more devoted to the planter. Like dogs. Blacks are dogs. They need to be treated like dogs.

The field slaves scramble to their feet. But they stop dead in their tracks as they see Jacob Rivers approaching, his shirt and jacket covered in blood. A wail escapes the lips of a young woman and the rest follow suit. It's not play acting or ritualistic; it is genuine and spontaneous. The magistrate can see that. And Jacob Rivers offers no objection when the eldest slave kneels before him, kisses his hands, stands and presses his forehead to Rivers' own.

'I need your help,' says Rivers. 'I cannot imagine that any of you is guilty. I know you loved her. But perhaps there is, nevertheless, one amongst your number who had reason to kill my wife and child. Let me know who it is who feels he has been wronged by my wife. Or by me. Keep your ears open and listen for he who boasts of the sharpness of his knife.'

A gasp of shock and protest passes through the crowd. The cook faints. Rivers takes a pickaxe and walks out into the sun. They see him measure the distance from the house to the factory with his eye. At the edge of a pumpkin field under a banyan tree, he strikes the pickaxe into the ground and begins to dig her grave.

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Ada

The last flight of the day brought me to the island, a big, green blob of land surrounded by a narrow strip of white, set in glistening azure, a cliché of paradise. We had the setting sun at our backs. The short landing strip was a clearly visible rectangle in an area where nothing else apparently had any straight lines. In a minute, I'd be there. I thought ahead of myself. Once I was down, there would be no going back, the ferries would all be taken out of service and the flights all cancelled just for me. There wouldn't even be a wooden tub to rent and sail away in like the butcher, the baker or the candlestick-maker. I'd be dumped without mercy like a mutineer on a desert island. Except that this was my own choice.

The stewardess sat buckled into her safety belt, her eyes glazed, ready for landing, deliberately avoiding my attempts at attracting her attention. Her doll's head had the varnished almost-lifelike appearance of a Jeff Koons sculpture. I undid my belt and swayed towards her, ignoring cross looks, steadying myself on the backs of people's chairs, as determined as a drunk on his way to the next pub. Surprise in her eyes, then reproach. The machinery ground into action.

'You must remain seated.' Voice of steel.

'Is this plane going back tonight?'

The plane suddenly began its descent and I fell on my knees in the aisle. She bent forward to help me, for appearance's sake, but I fended her off.

'You must remain seated.' Click. You must remain seated. Click. You must remain seated.

I did so. I sat on the floor, while the plane dived, shaking and shuddering. The pilot had to aim precisely at that pocket-handkerchief of tarmac, in a heavy crosswind. The passengers were craning their necks, eager to catch a glimpse of the disturbance. Days later, they would be telling their friends about the woman in the plane who had stood up when you weren't allowed to and stayed sitting in

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the aisle during landing, the kind of nutter who suddenly gets panic-stricken when flying.

‘Can I fly back with you?’ Lashed onto the luggage as cargo, if necessary. I reached out a hand to her. Help, we’re going to crash. The wind will grab hold of us and smash us against the mountainside. We’ll splatter like insects against a windscreen.

‘The flight is full,’ she said off the top of her head; I was sure she couldn’t possibly know. ‘You must remain seated.’ Click.

That was just what I wanted to do. So I stayed sitting in the aisle at her feet. What was I scared of? Did I want to land safely or not land at all? Eitherway, I had to leave the plane when, a little later, her friendly, modulated voice –steel inside a velvet glove – announced that we had arrived and were welcome and that she wished us a pleasant stay. Had we landed in Hell she would have wished us the same. I was reminded of a gruesomely ironic poster that used to hang in the kitchen at home: ‘Visit beautiful Vietnam this vacation.’ Soldiers crawling around shooting, disembodied limbs flying through the air. At one point there was also a photo of a little Biafran with eyes like gobstoppers and not one ounce of flesh between skin and bones. Enjoy your meal, if you can!

Once I was on terra firma, the panic evaporated, leaving me slightly elated. I took a deep breath. I shouldn’t get so hot up. ‘You must learn to accept the consequences of your actions, my dear,’ Huib would say in that slightly sadistic, school-mastery way of his. Whenever he thinks I’m making a fuss about nothing, he comes up with that old-fashioned, Rhett Butler-style “my dear”.

The blustery wind was as warm as the welcoming hot-air blower in the revolving doors of a department store. The island’s flag fluttered on the cheap, prefab arrival hut. The stewardess kept her eye on me. She naturally suspected I might try to sneak back into the plane after her or stay on the airstrip, legs apart, head bowed stubbornly like Eeyore. I waved encouragingly at her. It’s okay, I’m fine. I was, too. She cranked the corners of her mouth up into smile position. I felt a bit embarrassed. I hoped she’d forget about me soon.

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The customs officers were having a field day. All the luggage had been thrown into a heap. We all had to point out what was ours and have it inspected. Not a single bag, case or rucksack escaped the most meticulous search. The passengers – many of them locals – milled around the desk where two sluggish officers carried out their violations. Packages tied with string had to be unbundled and rifled through. There was a good deal of cursing and swearing, and even shouting, but the gentlemen went calmly about their business, with demonstrative thoroughness.

I stood apart from the crowd, not wanting to hurry. I needed delay. My desire to visit the island had become an aversion, an aversion particularly to my stupid pig-headedness in following my whim. Oh yes, Huib, the consequences. Every problem you pointed out only contributed to my determination to come. You thought you were helping me, making sure I was fully aware of the risks. Are you sure, darling? Yes, I'm sure. Really? Really. No, I won't come crying to you when it all goes wrong; you won't say 'I told you so,' and your arms will comfort me as they should, but let it never be said that you didn't warn me.

I looked out through a big, grimy window to the tarmac apron, to where the plane rested; behind it I saw the perimeter fences and, beyond, scrub land with grass and bushes and, further on again, a couple of hills tinted an exaggerated rose-gold in the setting sun. I was not quite there yet. I was still in quarantine. I had drummed the fact that I had to come here into my head like a mantra. The prayer wheel had really started spinning when, a couple of months previously, I had put on Schubert's string quintet in C and turned the volume up full blast to drown out a nagging inner malaise. The music transported me to a place where no excuses were accepted. The hallucinatory final bars ended with a rock-hard commandment: You have to go. You have to go! That commandment refused to loosen its grip on me. I had to go. So here I was.

'This yours, Miss??'

Someone was tapping me on the shoulder. I had evidently not responded to earlier questions. They had already worked their way through all the other

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passengers and now there was only me, and my luggage. And one other bag. I pointed out which was mine.

‘And that holdall?’

‘Not mine.’

I looked outside and saw the plane taxiing down the runway, like my mother turning away and leaving me on my first day of school. A customs officer gave me a penetrating stare, observing my body language, while the other unzipped my case. Triumphantly, he extracted a plastic bag from under my T-shirts.

‘That’s Wipp-express,’ I said.

‘What?’

‘Wipp-express.’ I sang the commercial. Wipp-e-ex-pre-hess. Smile.

‘What is whip express?’ Gravely.

I tried to think of the English word for washing powder, but he had already torn open the bag, smelled and tasted the contents.

‘Soap powder,’ I said, although I wasn’t sure if that was the right term. He was disappointed to see this was true.

My notepad and books were held upside down, their spines snapped. My box of file cards was turned out. All the pots and tubes in my toilet bag were unscrewed. The uniformed fetishists were not to be deprived of the erotic pleasure of examining my intimate toiletries. My heart skipped a beat when one of the two started to fiddle with my laptop, with the curious expression of a precocious toddler. Careful! I was rewarded with a blank look and requested to pass over my hand luggage. My papers were studied by the second officer, who with his fat lower lip looked like a functional illiterate, – but then again you can’t go by looks. He walked off with them.

‘Hey, come back!’ I called. He pretended not to hear and disappeared into an office. The first officer picked up the strange bag and started to open it.

‘That’s not mine!’

‘Nobody else here.’ He looked around in mock-surprise.

‘Well, someone must have forgotten it. It’s not mine’.

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'Can you prove that?' Adept hands opened the holdall wide. Its contents lay exposed like intestines in an abdominal operation.

'I don't have a receipt for it. But I do have one for the case. '

'That doesn't prove anything. '

Out of the strange bag came three rolled-up towels, two cameras, a couple of films, five tins of Twinings Earl Grey, three new sets of sexy underwear in fancy packaging and a padded bodywarmer that would do very nicely at the North Pole. The temperature was in the nineties outside! It appeared that customs was not finished with me yet. Every attempt to explain what could have happened only served to confirm the silent suspicions of the officer, whose fingers were itching to open the tins and cut open the bodywarmer. We waited until the other one came back. It took ages. I brooded over a way to get out of there. A sob story probably wouldn't work since the officer in front of me seemed to be subordinate to the other, despite his apparent lack of intelligence, and therefore not in no position to show mercy. Fifteen minutes later, Fat Lip came back out of the office without my papers.

'Please come with me.'

'What about my luggage?'

'This way.' He showed me into a windowless waiting room with a chair. He motioned me to sit.

'What are we waiting for?'

'A female colleague. '

'Why?'

'We are not allowed to search you.'

'You don't even have the right to hold me here! I haven't done anything. I want to speak to the Dutch consul.'

I didn't know if there was one, let alone whether he could help me. You hear the most awful stories about the indifference of the Diplomatic Service, the 'it serves you right' principle. He closed the door behind him without a word.

'A lawyer,' I called after him.

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Left alone, I thought about my things laid out unattended on the table before me. Now they could really stitch me up, they could 'find' anything they wanted to in my luggage. No need even for any sleight of hand. I was frightened and furious, but also quite calm in a funny way, ready to accept the consequences of an un-committed crime. Soon this would be the cell where I while away the best years of my life, missed by no one, visited by no one. Mentally I deleted the names of everyone who could save me, I forgot the telephone numbers of my loved ones, I reshaped my entire future. I hurried past fear towards death. I might as well get used to the worst possible scenario and straightaway. I delivered myself up, half-trembling, half-laughing, because, secretly, nobody believes that the bell will ever actually toll for them.

But by the time the woman entered, little was left of my fatalism. I felt sick and wanted to shit from nerves.

'Get undressed,' she said, in a tone reserved for dangerous criminals. She was as black as the ace of spades and had the bloodshot eyes of a Rottweiler straining at the leash.

'Why?'

'I ask the questions here. Now get undressed.'

She remained motionless, watching me unclothe myself. Slowly and deliberately I folded up each item of clothing and laid it on the chair, as if some mysterious hand might appear from a cloud or a burning bush to stop me, as if a divine voice might reassure me that I need not make this sacrifice, that it was just a test of my readiness. Readiness is all. Now and again she gestured: yes, the bra, too; yes, the pants, too, until I stood before her stark naked, big, blond and terribly white, shivering despite the oppressive heat. I couldn't help thinking she was enjoying her power, even though I was aware of the cliché. In fact she probably felt nothing, and that was worse. No lover had ever looked at me so intimately, so indifferently. I had never been so humiliatingly, clinically and rapidly robbed of my individuality, my warmth, my complexity. My self lay folded up between my clothes. My body was an object of abhorrence and ridicule.

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I agreed that it was. My body was loathsome. She snapped on a thin surgical glove on, spreading and wiggling her fingers to make sure it was on properly.

‘Turn around.’

I could smell her body odour when she came up close, and had a graphic image of her armpits.

‘I have to go to the toilet.’

‘Bend over. Spread your legs.’

She inspected my anus and vagina and pulled out my tampon by the string, convinced, of course, that a string of cocaine pearls would follow.

‘I’ve got my period,’ I said.

She swore and dropped the tampon. A clot of blood slid down my leg. She snatched my clothes from the chair and walked out of the room. Once I was alone again and no longer being looked at, the fragments of my self joined up once more. I could feel the cracks though. I thought I would never be whole again.

The woman came back with a toilet roll, my box of tampons and my clothes. She handed them over and ordered me to clean up the mess and get dressed. She stood waiting at the door, arms akimbo. Hands in her sides. I was cringingly curious about what she was thinking. Was I some insect? Was I, the umpteenth potential drugs smuggler, a familiar phenomenon? Was I not even worth consideration? I wanted her to see me and feel sorry for me. I wanted her to like me. I wanted to make it clear to her that I didn’t take it personally, she was only doing her job. Forget it. She was probably only thinking about the chicken and rice and peas she had had to leave to come and yank the tampon out of my cunt. She was thinking about her rancid bed and the drunken car mechanic she would find between the folds of her sheets. She was thinking about her thirteen-year-old daughter’s legs, which she would break if she got home that evening and found the slut half-naked on the couch with her... Jesus, who knows, maybe her drunken mechanic.

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I wiped my legs and put in a new tampon, retching from shame. Then I wrapped the fallen tampon in toilet paper, laid the package on the chair and wiped the blood from the floor. I got dressed. What now?

'We're waiting for the inspector.'

'What inspector?'

'From the police.'

'Why?'

'To interview you.'

'I haven't done anything wrong. You have no right to interview me! I demand a lawyer. I want to use the phone. I want to speak to the consul.'

No response. She was wearing a light-blue shirt and dark-blue uniform trousers. The waistband cut into her ample flesh.

'How long is this going to take?'

'Don't know.'

'I've reserved a car. The Hertz office will be closed soon and then I'll never get out of here. Is there a hotel near the airport?'

'No.'

'I want to make a complaint.'

So fucking what. We both fell silent. Five minutes. Ten. I kept looking at my watch, but forgetting what time it was the last time I looked, so I couldn't tell how quickly time was passing. Maybe my watch had stopped or was running slow. It must be dark outside by now. Velvety blackness. Velvety freedom. Oh, if only I could disappear into it as if it were a big, dark ear.

'Have you got any children?' I asked, to break the silence and the tension, but she had learned not to get into conversation with suspects.

'This is absurd,' I said, breaking into my native Dutch. 'This is absolutely crazy.'

I enjoyed hearing my own voice speaking my own language. I could reclaim a little power for myself that way. I got up and stood right in front of the guard and tried to confuse her by speaking to her in a language that was foreign to her. It

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didn't matter so much what I said, so long as she showed some reaction, lost her composure, walked off in a huff, anything. I wanted something to happen. I couldn't stand the fact that nothing was happening.

'Apple, balloon, cat, drum, elephant, flag,' I began again in my mother tongue, smiling, flicking words at the shiny school blackboard like spit and paper balls, 'girl, house, igloo, jelly, kite, lemon, monkey, clap hands, Daddy comes, with a pocket full of plums, Oh! Grandmama, what big ears you've got, Oh! Grandmama, what big eyes you've got, Oh! Grandmama, what a big mouth you've got and there aren't many words coming out of it, how I'd love to smack you in that great big gob, how I'd love to twist your fat arm up behind your fat back and stick your head down the bog and pull the chain, how I'd love to know why the hell this is happening to me, why you had to pick on me, why, why, why? Because I'm big and blond and white? Because my number was up? Well, I'm not afraid, if that's what you're thinking. I'm not afraid of the big bad wolf, the big bad wolf, the big bad wolf.'

I started singing. For a moment she looked surprised, but swiftly recovered and looked straight past me. When her eyes slid along my face they expressed no emotion, not even irritation. She did not acknowledge my existence. I put the toilet paper on the ground and sat down on the chair, shoulders hunched, eyes cast to the lino tiles. I considered overpowering her, screaming, crying hysterically, bribing. Nothing. I sat like that for a quarter of an hour. Half an hour. The woman left the room for a moment, leaving her body odour to deputise while she was gone, and then slipped back in. My watch said eight o'clock.

'May I go to the toilet?'

'You'll have to wait.'

'Then I'll piss on the floor.'

She shrugged her shoulders, assuming I was too well brought up for that.

'Then I'll shit in the corner.'

'Go on then.'

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I stuck up my middle finger. The ghost of a smile quivered at the corners of her mouth. She sighed and looked at her watch. She had bright red nails, curved like birds' claws. The drunken mechanic probably felt those in his back. They didn't look too handy for masturbating, either.

I decided to change tactic. I fixed my gaze on her relaxed hair, which fitted her head like a lacquered helmet and looked as if it had been cut not with scissors, but with a hacksaw. Before long her hand went up to the helmet to feel whether it was in place. Just a touch of insecurity.

'Don't look like that,' she said.

'Sorry,' I apologised and looked away, only to let my gaze return. Fascinating, that hair. Or whatever it was.

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing.'

She went away and came back a short while later. 'You can go to the toilet.'

She went with me. The two customs officers were standing, smoking a cigarette next to my disorganised luggage. The tea tins had been opened. I didn't see anyone else. The small bar in a corner of the arrivals hall was closed. It was dark outside. The guard took me to a dilapidated loo in a stinking corridor and posted herself in front of the open door which I wanted to close.

'The door stays open,' she said. I managed to pee, but I'd lost the urge to crap, even though I would dearly have loved to treat her to the stink of my revenge. When we came back from the loo – she was behind me – I saw the lights of a car approaching. They shone into the hall for a moment, then sheered away. 'There he is,' she said.

The customs officials quickly stubbed out their cigarettes and went and stood with my things behind the counter like market tradesmen. I didn't have to go back into the waiting room. I was glad the ordeal was coming to an end; I didn't doubt for a moment that I could convince the police inspector of my innocence.

At first sight, the inspector looked reliable and reasonable. I naturally assumed that the higher rank represented reason, civilisation, equality. More power meant

more freedom of choice and responsible use of that power. More lenience if necessary, although hoping for this would amount to admitting my guilt. And I hadn't done anything. I had to get that into my head. Any exaggerated denial could be interpreted as 'the lady doth protest too much. ' It was essential to adopt just the right attitude, not to show any trace of a guilty conscience, but to be cooperative and fully understanding. My nerves could give me away, even if there was nothing to give away. I could taste blood. I was sweating. They hadn't found anything, not in my luggage nor on my person. But that strange bag. How could I prove it wasn't mine? I, the unsuspecting traveller, had fallen into a classic trap. I shouldn't have waited until the hall was empty. I should have taken my case out of the pile and pushed in front, hurried, demanded, been bossy, threatened, made things go my way and then I would have been sitting in a comfortable hotel sipping a Planters Punch by now.

Keep calm. Get a grip. A touch of arrogance wouldn't go amiss. A little indignation, even. Demand an apology, then graciously accept it. But if the Twinings tins were full of coke, I wouldn't have a leg to stand on. Or suppose the tea was smokeable. Five tins of homegrown would put me well and truly in the shit. At the same time, I realised that the fact I had lingered spoke in my favour. If I really had been a drugs courier I would never have hung about. The owner of the tea and bodywarmer had smartly escaped the customs' work-to-rule and saddled the last passenger with their problem. But as far as the police were concerned, of course, what they had was a bag full of weed and one person. The fact that that person had a completely different luggage label on her ticket was neither here nor there. Open and shut case.

The police inspector was physically attractive. 'An honest face,' my grandmother would have commented appreciatively, 'even if he is black.' She had always been crazy about Harry Belafonte, and this man looked like him, which made me even more relieved to see him. Someone who looked so respectable would be sure to let me go. But most serial murderers look respectable, too, my more down-to-earth side protested. He glanced at me

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casually and called the two officials into their office to hear their account of the results of the search. Then the guard and I were called in. She just avoided shoving me in the back. I could almost hear her fat wobbling and sloshing around; the legs of her uniform trousers rasped against each other, with the sound of someone planing teak.

The inspector was sitting behind the desk. The two customs officers were at his side, standing casually to attention. Fat Lip lifted his cap and wiped his pate with a white handkerchief. I was motioned to sit on a chair in front of the desk. The guard took up her familiar position by the door, arms folded, looking intimidatingly like an SM mistress. We were all at her mercy. The room was packed and stuffy. No air-conditioning, but a fan above my head, sweeping slowly round and round like a scythe. In a minute it would start to descend and grate my hair, then scalp me, decapitate me and slice me like the butcher putting bacon through the slicing machine. Sweep, sweep. Blood would spray round the room in rhythmic spurts. It was pitch black outside, as we were facing the deserted landing strip, not the barely lit road leading to the main town of the island. I looked into the black hole of the past, to where I came from, and could remember no more. I could remember nothing. Name, rank, number, I thought, name, rank, number.

The inspector flicked through my passport, not looking at me. Nor did the customs officials. One started scratching his crotch. He was wearing a thick gold chain bracelet, bought with bribes, no doubt. I couldn’t see what the guard was doing behind me, but to her I was doubtless a waste of space. No one spoke. The cramped office breathed and sweated. It was a beast of prey, sleeping for the time being. I could see the pores in the walls. The air was moving: in and out, in and out. Passport pages rustled. Visas were studied. He was reading my private life, didn’t look at me. Silence. It was the cold-shoulder tactic. Someone who is ignored seeks recognition, as a criminal if necessary. A confession was on the tip of my tongue, ready to make me visible, become someone. If they were so bent on getting a good catch, I would volunteer. I would rather not be tortured,

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although I would oblige if needs be. Even if they let me go in a minute, for lack of evidence, because not one single gram of cannabis had been found in the tea tins, the humiliation of their rejection and contempt would go with me. I would still bear the stigma of their repudiation. I was overwhelmed by the shame of taking up space, of being there. I hung my head. I had found my true destiny.

‘So,’ said the inspector, laying aside the passport on the desk and covering it with his hand. ‘What is the purpose of your visit?’

I had forgotten how you were supposed to respond to a question like that. Was it better to call yourself a ‘tourist’ or should you opt for ‘business’? There was some kind of rule. So I said ‘tourist’ and meant ‘business’.

‘On business,’ I added.

‘You have to choose,’ he said.

‘What?’ The timbre of his voice was distracting me. He had the kind of voice in which you could almost hear strains of Ol’ Man River reverberating. ‘Tourism or business. One or the other.’

‘Er... business.’

‘What kind of business?’ He sighed wearily and started to turn my passport round and round in his fingers: short side, long side, short side, long side.

‘Personal business.’

He continued to fiddle with my passport, paused for a second and then looked at me. He had kindly eyes, but his mouth was set. I became engrossed in his features, staring at his clean-shaven cheeks, his straight, narrow nose like that of an Ethiopian prince, his mouth the same colour as his skin, but shinier, more silky. His lips were moving; I watched them move, and only then did I hear what he was saying.

‘Go on.’

‘That’s it.’

‘What kind of personal business?’

‘That’s none of your concern.’

‘I’m afraid it is.’

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Now what was it I had actually come for? How should I explain it?

'I haven't done anything.'

'That wasn't the question.'

'What was the question again?'

'What is the purpose of your visit.'

'I'm looking for something.'

'What are you looking for?'

'Information.'

'Damn it, woman, don't play games with me!' He banged on the desk with the flat of his hand, rousing the customs officers from their half-sleep with a jolt. Behind me, I heard the handcuffs on the guard's belt rattling.

'It's a long story,' I said.

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PROLOGUE 2

It begins in Holland, in Vlissingen, two hundred years ago. In London. On St. George d'Elmina. Or somewhere at sea beneath a dazzling, star-encrusted sky. It could also begin in the village of De Bilt, thirty years ago. Yes, it could even begin here, on this Caribbean island, thirty, fifty, two hundred years ago. With a murder. It can begin at any random moment in a handful of crucial places. I pick up a thread of the fabric and follow it, irrevocably arriving here.

Maybe it would be best to set the prologue in De Bilt, in the year 1970. In that year, my parents decided to adopt a child. The same year, we inherited an old sea chest carved with the monogram of the Middelburg Commercial Company and a folder of a quest that had failed. Maybe the chest exercised its influence right from the beginning. My mother relishes the life of apparently non-sentient beings and claims that objects have feelings and memories, that they are more highly strung than the crude human soul and that they store the painful experiences they have witnessed or been victim to in their grooves, their sheen, their molecular structure. The average linen cupboard is therefore saturated with all the tears tragically spilled at its door from those in search of a handkerchief. My mother walks round at auction displays with a self-developed psychic divining rod, faultlessly differentiating between 'right' and 'wrong' tables. Too many bad experiences attract trouble. Positive experiences gather only goodness. Her divining wasn't sufficiently trained at the time the sea chest was dragged into our hall, or else she might have shown it the door.

It stood opposite the brown corduroy couch where my parents were sitting when they let me in on their plans and let me help decide, in accordance with the prevailing ideas about upbringing. In other words; they made it seem as if I had some say in the matter. I was eight. The photos and super-8 films from that time are painfully touching. Can anyone tell me why the colours of yesteryear are so unnatural? Is it simply a matter of chemistry, the pigment gradually fading from

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the pictures, or does the pigment fade from our memories? My parents are acting silly and in love in faded, unisex denim dungarees. I can't remember them ever being so young. Younger than I am now. My mother's mouth is moving: Stop it, Maarten. But there was no stopping him. I'm standing by like a judge who doesn't believe their tales, even then.

'Would you like a little brother or sister, Ada?' They said Ada rather than Adie or Dadie; this was a serious occasion. What a question for an only child of eight to answer! If I'd been three, or five, even as old as seven I would have responded with a joyful yes; eight was just too old. I wasn't so sure any more. But I said yes, because it was blatantly obvious they wanted me to, and because I couldn't come up with a good enough reason for a 'no' just like that. I wanted to please them. I did all I could to please them.

My mother skated over the fact that naturally Daddy and she (Maarten and she, because I was allowed to call them by their first names and I didn't want to any more, I'd suddenly started to find it embarrassing) could make a baby, but that there were so many poor children in the world who didn't have a Mummy or a Daddy and didn't have a nice house or anything to eat that it was actually selfish to make one yourself when you could help an existing child. Just as it's better to get a dog from a dogs' home. Well, I couldn't argue with that, especially when they said that they didn't want an old, grumpy dog, but a really young one, a puppy. Then I was allowed to say what kind of child it should be. A little Chinese boy or girl, a little negro from Africa, a little Indian from South America, or maybe a poor little child from Vietnam, where there was a war on. Koreans were on offer at that moment. And should it be a little girl or a little boy? They went into the advantages of having a little brother and the advantages of a little sister. There were no disadvantages involved. I asked what little Indians looked like, whether they wore feathered headdresses. They started laughing and fetched a picture book, *The Family of Man*. I thought it was a mail order catalogue. Pick out the one you want and it will be delivered, postage paid. I chose a little brown child with a big grin from the Antilles or somewhere thereabouts. A little boy.

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My parents exchanged glances. I understood that I had settled an argument, decided an issue, taken a decision out of their hands.

Afterwards, I asked now and again what was happening with my order. My mother kept saying that adopting a foreign child was a complicated procedure and that I had to be patient. By the time I had quite happily forgotten I was going to be a big sister, the little bedroom suddenly got painted (bright blue with white clouds) and one of my mother's friends returned my cot that she had borrowed. I had to go back straightaway with her to her house for a week, because my parents were going to fly over and fetch my little brother.

Eating dinner at my mother's friend's house with her two snotty three-and-five-year-olds, who were still too stupid to leave their vegetables, I was joyfully told how lucky I was. At last I would no longer be on my own. A little playmate at last, a little brother to look after, a little brother to share things with. Particularly this last one. Apparently I wasn't too good at sharing with her two little drips. With every word, the wound in my soul grew bigger. Cheerfully chatting away, they snipped out my heart, tore my stomach in pieces, pricked my intestines with forks and, while they were at it, casually twisted off my head and cast it into the bin. There. That was just about how much I was worth. Nothing.

My mother denied everything later. She had involved me in the entire process and checked regularly to make sure that I still agreed with the adoption and wasn't feeling jealous or left out. I had never shown any sign of either. On the contrary, I had been enthusiastic and had repeatedly and impatiently asked how things were going. This was at the family therapist we were seeing. My mother's neck was blotchy from bottled-up anger. The therapist told her she should express her anger 'towards Ada'. In a fit of triumphant displacement, she let rip, calling me all the names under the sun. I was a pathological liar, a selfish little bitch, ungrateful, antisocial. I was fifteen. I just took it. The psychologist sat with her hands folded chastely over her papers. My father stormed off, slamming the door behind him. The attention shifted to him. My mother ran after him, shrieking, 'Coward!'

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Antonio was a good-looking, brown boy with black curls that felt like the horsehair stuffing of an old chair. He was not a baby. They had run out of babies, my mother said, but this little one had looked at them so appealingly in the orphanage and smiled so nicely at them, standing clutching his bag all ready to go that they hadn't had the heart not to take him. The nuns had taught the two- and three-year-olds to look like that so they would have a chance, too, as everybody wanted the babies, once a child had passed the 'babe in arms' stage, its chances dwindled by the day. My mother has never wanted to accept that. Antonio brought papers with him stating the names and origins of both his parents. The father, as usual, had done a runner, while the mother was unable to care for the child, as she searched for work, food and love on the island where my parents had come to buy a baby.

I was waiting for them at home, with my mother's friend. It was three o'clock in the afternoon. It was snowing slightly, but the snow didn't settle. The light was a greyish yellow, like the unwashed hair of an old man. At the instigation of the friend – I think she was called Friedel, or maybe that was her surname, in any case, she was very soon out of favour – I had done a drawing in which I had anticipated playing happy families: Antonio the radiant focal point, lying in a little crib with a halo à la Baby Jesus and around him my mother and father, like a modern-day Mary and Joseph, and me. To give myself an authentic role – after all, Jesus had no big sister – I had sprouted wings. I was the angel. I was holding the drawing in front of me like a banner when the key turned in the lock and a second later my parents were standing in the doorway with a little scared, shy, dark-brown boy of about three between them, each hand in one of theirs. That image is engraved in my memory and now I know what was wrong with it: they were holding the little boy by the hand, they didn't have him in their arms; they hadn't carried him safely over the ocean. He was standing there like a walking trophy, like a hyphen in the middle of something that was already falling apart. I was too astounded to say a word.

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‘This is Antonio, Dadie. Antonio, this is Ada, your sister. Just speak Dutch to him, he’ll learn it quickest that way.’

As if I spoke any other language! I felt some kind of order needed to be imposed immediately. I taught him how to behave as the youngest child. I filled him in on our habits and idiosyncrasies and pegged out my territory, which was quite sizeable. It was good for him to realise that he had to win some things over. Life was not easy and the fact that fate had allotted him the indescribably good luck to be snatched away from poverty and an early death by my parents gave no guarantee of continued success. I would make few concessions for him, as long as he was aware of that. There had to be rules and I could tell by the delighted but anxious look on my parents’ faces that they were not planning to lay down the law at this stage. So someone had to. I chose my tone of voice from the repertoire of condescending adults.

“Come along with me, now, Antonio, and I’ll show you your room. That’s where you’ll be sleeping and where you can play. But mind you always clear up your mess yourself. And this is my room. Nice isn’t it? You’re not allowed in there. Only when I let you. And you’re not to touch anything. And these are Daddy’s LPs. If you get those out of the rack you’ll be in serious trouble.’

And so I gave him a tour of his new world. My parents looked on emotionally when I finally showed him my drawing and pointed out the figures. ‘This is Antonio. Antonio. You. That’s me. Ada. Ada. That’s Daddy. Daddy. That’s Mummy. Mummy. Say it: Mummy, Daddy, Ada.’

He looked at me in wide-eyed amazement. Didn’t make a peep. Not the whole day. Didn’t eat anything, didn’t drink anything. When they tried putting him to bed that evening, he refused to be undressed, refused to get under the covers. He sat bolt upright in his cot all night, with the side up. Didn’t even cry. In the morning, he had fallen asleep with his face against the bars. You could still see the imprint on his cheek days later. Now I can imagine the terror of the unknown for Antonio; then I just thought he was an ungrateful little brat.

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The better Antonio settled in, the more difficult it became for me to decide on my approach to him. He managed to grasp the language quickly enough and, as far as eating was concerned, he more than made up for the first day's abstention, but he brought little joy. He showed no affection. He was quiet and accommodating. A little over-obliging, underhand even. But then there were the recurring nightmares. My mother put them down to the experiences of his early years. Those were the formative years for a child. He must have seen and experienced terrible things. I rather envied his mysterious past, and wished I had experienced something awful in my early childhood. That would have been made me special too, deserving of careful treatment and bags of attention. I sneakily doubted the significance of such early experiences. What could have made such a profound impression on a baby? Babies couldn't understand anything, could they? And nightmares were never about the past; they were always about now. I could have told them a thing or two about that, but I kept quiet. It seemed much ado about nothing. Antonio seemed almost to be playing the role of a traumatised child for their benefit, and my mother seemed to enjoy making such a song and dance of it all to her friends. I saved him from becoming a softy by chastising him from time to time, playing at being a firm but fair second mother. Despite this, however, I felt hopelessly superfluous. I had been unable to make my parents happy, so they had got Antonio. He was just as incapable of making my parents happy as I was, but they seemed to blame him less for this than they did me. Maybe Antonio saw things differently.

This was one of the possible prologues. For the police inspector I had another story: the prologue of the old sea chest, in an abridged form, with the pain omitted.

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PROLOGUE 3

Since his illness, my father's voice had turned shrill. Death whistled his tune in F sharp and my father followed suit, whether he liked it or not. 'Are you still coming today?' he asked on my voicemail. The last word set my teeth on edge, as when nails are dragged down a blackboard. I didn't want him to be ill. I didn't want him to die, not because he was my father and I loved him as I ought to, more because I couldn't stand his whining infirmity. Whenever he shrugged his shoulders resignedly and gave a little sigh, he examined me furtively, to see the effect. Subtly, he made everyone close to him feel guilty for every injustice he had to suffer.

Opening the door to his house, I completely forgot to look down, and found myself facing me. Gottcha. In the hallway, directly opposite the front door a full-length mirror hung above the sea chest with the carved monogram of the Middelburg Commercial Company.

'Is that you, Ada?'

It sounded as if he was sitting in the living room in his Charles Eames chair with his legs up on the ottoman my mother had found too ostentatious. She thought buttoned leather ugly; it reminded her of an anus. He could only bear to sit in it for a couple of hours. Every day, death nibbled minutes off his verticality; he was becoming increasingly practised in perfect horizontality. Just a little longer and he would be a fully qualified corpse, he'd say.

I didn't answer his call. He would see it was me in a minute. Who else could it be, anyway? I went to the kitchen to put a carton of orange juice in the fridge.

'Ada!?'

The lasso of his voice whipped around my neck and was yanked.

'I'm coming,' I replied, but he couldn't hear me.

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Just then the door of the living room opened. When I turned round, I saw him standing there, one hand on the door, the other on the doorframe, arms spread in apparent welcome. His thin, white legs protruded from beneath his burgundy dressing gown. The cord was holding body and silk loosely together. His grey hair, combed back, was too long. It wasn't worth getting the barber to come round any more, he said. You cut it if it bothers you. His eyes had sunk even deeper into their sockets; his cheeks were hollower. He was being scraped out from the inside. Every bowel movement took some of his stuffing with it. He reminded me, for an affectionate second, of my old toy kangaroo.

'What are you doing? Didn't you hear me? I was calling you.'

'I'm coming,' I said and walked over to him. Fear. That's what I saw. Fear lay like a cataract over his eyes. Fear stretched his skin taut over his cheekbones. Fear moved his Adam's apple up and down in his throat like a lift gone haywire. Horrible. He shouldn't be scared. He should die in dignity. I mustn't let him catch me in those bony claws that grew bigger by the day in a last desperate attempt to keep his head above water or else drag me down with him, if he was going, I'd go too. His fear was too intimate for me. For a second I thought he was going to tell me to get out. I cringed. He had slipped down into a bent position. As a girl of seven, I would look up at him and think how tremendous it would be to reach up to his shoulders. Now he barely reached mine. He was losing his balance. Only once he regained it did he dare let go of the doorframe. I took him by the elbow and supported him. Hard, incorruptible bone.

'Where have you been all this time?'

'I was putting a carton of juice in the fridge.'

'No, this afternoon. Why are you so late?' He slumped back in his Eames and shut his eyes for a second. 'Aaah.'

'Pain?'

'Oh, I'm alright.' Yes, in other words. A lot of pain.

'Well, that's good. I'm glad you're alright.'

He looked at me, hurt. Wrong answer.

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‘I want to talk to you about something.’

On the coffee table next to him lay a draughtsman’s folder of marbled cardboard with green ribbons. He laid his hand on it. I glanced round the room. The sun was artistically illuminating the crumbs and dust motes on the glass table. The home help hadn’t been yet or maybe he’d barked at her until she left. The room hadn’t been aired. The smell of sick old man was unbearable. My clothes used still to stank of it in the evening. Once he was dead, I would bury my face in my jumpers, sniffing for traces of him.

‘Where are your library books?’ I asked. ‘Have you finished *Black Athena*?’

My father collected controversial theories. He identified with people who went against current opinion and, as he fervently hoped, were later proved right.

‘Oh, I don’t need any more library books,’ he said. ‘I can manage with...’ The sentence hung in mid-air. That had been happening quite a lot recently. He forgot names he normally reeled off regularly. He stopped in mid-sentence and fell into a staring silence, full of mysterious significance. As if the very word he needed had disappeared over the horizon and he hadn’t the courage to go after it. Then he would dismiss the impression of distance with a wave of his hand. You know. Vague, agonised smile. Where were we, now?

‘Ovid,’ he said finally. ‘Tristia.’

The aggrieved poet lamenting his exile.

‘Why not something less grim? Something elegiac. A nice anthology of Rutger Kopland. Nel Benschop if you must.’

‘Ovid helps me “not to fear my fate when soon the Scythians and the Thracians throng loudly around me”.’

‘What on earth do you mean by that?’

‘Death is exile.’

I saw my father climbing the barren rocks near Tomi wrapped in a winding sheet, as Ransmayr had described, without looking back, gradually becoming enveloped in a chill mist. I wondered if I should take his hand. – Daddy is sleeping in the grass. I can see his hand lying there. His dream is sending

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commands to his fingers, but the fingers don’t carry them out. Jerky little movements. What being has taken possession of him? – It’s no longer a dream curled up inside him, but death lurking beneath his skin. Death reached out to me, asking for my hand. I started back.

My father pulled the green-ribboned file onto his lap. ‘This is the file we inherited with the sea chest,’ he said.

I was familiar with the story. The papers suggested our family could lay claim to a piece of land in the Caribbean, an old sugar plantation. But it was impossible to substantiate the claim. When my parents went to fetch Antonio, they had tried to claim the land too, and had failed. It had been left at that.

‘Everything’s in there. And the papers for... your brother.’

That shrill ‘your brother’ went through my body like an electric shock. The years of silence had been broken. Death breaks all rules. He handed me the file. I picked distractedly at the ribbons, without really hearing exactly what my father was saying about the Van de Wetering family and their seafaring past. The first document was a letter. The paper had yellowed, the ink faded, but it was still perfectly legible. Old-fashioned handwriting. I didn’t read the words, but at the bottom I saw the name ‘Jacob’ written in a firm hand. Later, I thought, later. And closed the file again.

‘Is there anything I can do for you? Some orange juice? Shall I go and rent a video for you?’ I searched for distractions.

‘I want to talk to you about a couple of things,’ said my father. He pulled his dressing gown closer about him and shifted his legs to the ottoman. I imagined the old, flaccid member under the paisley fabric, a dark brown, dead mole; unthinkable that it had ever stood erect and spawned me. That was where I originated from, that expiring carcass in the armchair. He wanted to talk to me.

I didn’t want this. I didn’t want any final confessions or apologies that would haunt me for the rest of my life. I hate ruthless honesty in the face of death. What has been unspoken should remain unspoken. I felt my scalp tingle. I wanted to run away, hug him tightly, smash a vase through the window, I wanted

desperately to be somewhere else. I wanted to turn back time with a mighty sweep and, with some tremendous effort, push the course of fate in another direction.

‘What about?’ I demanded curtly.

‘What I did wrong.’

‘You didn’t do anything wrong. Everyone makes mistakes.’ A contradiction. That’s what you’re supposed to say. So I said it.

‘What I think I did wrong.’

‘I can’t stand deathbed scenes with confessions and forgiveness. You haven’t done anything wrong. I have nothing to forgive you for. Stop it, now.’

If only he might see what kind of a man he had been, and be reduced to hysterical laughter which would turn to crying, like fifteen years before. And yet I had a creeping sense of hope and anxiety. Everything mustn’t turn out all right. Not now. Especially not now, right at the end. Suppose he saw and knew and admitted, how let down I would feel that it had only happened now and not earlier, much earlier. Love me, Daddy. Oh, just imagine if he said it. If only he would say it...