

## Marvellous portrayal of human failings



# Thomas Rosenboom

## Sweet Mouth

**S**WEET MOUTH, the title of this doorstopping fifth novel by Thomas Rosenboom, is borrowed from the author's childhood when he was occasionally allowed to give himself a 'sweet mouth' by stuffing handfuls of sweets into his mouth all at once, producing an immediate sense of well-being.

The title is of course a metaphor for the world conjured up here by Rosenboom. He describes the lives of the villagers of the fictional Angelen on the banks of the Rhine, a place thrown out of kilter by an excess of feeling. When a beluga whale comes swimming up the river, the village is captivated by the animal and is swamped by a wave of emotion.

Rosenboom plays on all our senses at once in his story of obsession and tragedy. *Sweet Mouth*, like all Rosenboom's novels, excludes any possibility of a happy ending, as even the prologue suggests. The outcome, in essence, is contained in the short story that tells of the catching of the white whale called Moby, which precedes the main body of the novel. The final sentence of the prelude runs: 'Yes, he had his freedom back. But he was alone.'

The loneliness in *Sweet Mouth* is that of two men, Rebert van Buyten and Jan de Loper. Rebert van Buyten is an outsider who settles in the village as a vet and soon has the villagers eating out of his hand, more by chance than by his own wisdom or skill. Rebert is a typical Rosenboom creation: unduly self-effacing, somewhat anxious, acting on misguided impressions of other people. Jan de Loper is in many ways his opposite. Born into wealth and the owner of a beautiful house on the edge of Angelen, he cannot resist brightening his empty life with practical jokes. He garners fame by travelling across Africa and by walking to Paris in slippers, then writing it all up in the local press, until the braggart becomes a hero in his own village.

The two men grow increasingly and fiercely competitive. Jan de Loper does not shrink from the most childish of tricks, even dressing up for St. Nicholas' Day as the saint's helper Black Pete and throwing sweets in Rebert's face. Both are battling for the favours of the charming Louise Benda, although in truth they are trying to gain the attention of the whole world through her. The mild-mannered vet and the compulsive joker grimly struggle to break out of their isolation, to be alone no more.

Anyone who reads the prologue will know their efforts are in vain. Angelen is the stage on which Thomas Rosenboom's marvellous portrayal of human failings is played out. *Sweet Mouth* inspires laughter but ultimately, more than anything, humility and compassion in the face of human loneliness.



photo Allard de Witte

Thomas Rosenboom (b. 1956) is the author of bestselling, much-praised novels like *Gewassen vrees* ('Washed Flesh', 1994), *Publieke werken* ('Public Works', 1999), *De nieuwe man* ('The New Man', 2003) and the novella *Spitzen* ('Point Shoes', 2004). His novels, set in well documented historical backgrounds, always have an ambitious main character and a riveting plot. In a subtle, often cruelly humorous way, his characters are led to inevitable ruin. All this makes his novels real page-turners. His work has been translated in German, French, Hungarian, Spanish and Danish.

A typical Rosenboom novel: tragic and amusing, ominous yet hopeful.

NRC HANDELSBLAD

The charm of the book: it tells its story through an apparent naïveté in a moving and simultaneously wonderful way about the motives and mechanisms that lie at the base of human relationships. [...]

Between the charming lines the story holds a sense of oppression.

DE STANDAARD

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Sample Translation

*Sweet mouth*

(Zoete mond)

by Thomas Rosenboom

(Amsterdam: Querido, 2009)

Translated by Barbara Fasting

## Prologue

The men who caught him were fishermen, but they were hunters too, for he was both fish and mammal – a whale, white and small: a Beluga dolphin.

At low tide the stakes were placed, at high tide he came over the banks, and when the water dropped, he couldn't get back: the channel was closed off. Later on, when the tide went out, he was grounded and the men waded up to him. That's how they captured him, in the Eskimo manner. Except that they were not carrying axes, and the last man was pulling a sloop. The English zoo that had ordered him wanted him alive and intact.

'What a fine specimen!' one of the hunters exclaimed.

'And still young!' another added.

'But completely white already!' the third added.

'And the eyes, so red... as if he's been crying!' said the fourth.

'So, let's wrap him up and send him on his way!' joked the man with the sloop.

The loud voices carried as far as the coastal road, where the first spectators were gathering, some in their shirtsleeves. Spring had come at last, and the day was sparkling and clear, without a breath of wind. The breakers nibbled sluggishly at the beach, and the sea lay spread out, flat and motionless beneath the sky. Until suddenly someone pointed to a spot far beyond the shallows. Without warning, the water spurted upwards and the surface became turbulent: it was a mother dolphin whose child had gone missing: together with the family and the rest of the herd, she was in the process of smashing the whole smooth mirror surface of the water to smithereens.

Nearer – the men had almost reached him – the white dolphin also lashed the water with his tail. It was all he could do, now that his body was pressing more and more heavily into the sand, too heavily for him to even move his head. Why had he swum away from his mother, away from the herd? Wasn't that something the young animals never did? Something they were never allowed to do? He must

be really inquisitive, and naughty into the bargain, to wander off so often, always when no one was looking, going off alone in search of adventure, warily slipping into the shallow bay, but not warily enough, so that now, surrounded by the men, he found himself more alone than ever. Oh, yes – they'd seen him before, and had speculated that he might come back, not knowing that it would be so soon, – this afternoon: the first time, the first high tide after the palisades were in place...!

Spirits were high and the men – who waved occasionally in the direction of the coastal road where a mother with a child on her arm now stood watching – stayed close to the helpless half-stranded fish, patting him good-naturedly – even jovially – on the shoulder. In high spirits, they were urging him to join in the laughter, as if he was a friend they had played a clever trick on, to be a good sport and see the whole thing from the funny side. This went on for some time, until the sloop was brought alongside and heaved to, and the white dolphin, together with the water pouring in, was pushed, rolled and – once the boat had righted itself – finally scooped on board. The duckboards were taken out; the rounding of his belly fitted neatly into the hollow formed by the bottom, and so in the blink of an eye, with his head wedged beneath the bench, he lay totally immobilized in the sloop: *he had been hauled from the sea.*

One fisherman waved again to the onlookers on the shore, another formed a telephone with one hand, and turned an imaginary dial with the other. Then with the bounty between them, they waded calmly out of the channel, making their way between the stakes, then following the flood line to the slipway on the other side of the bay. Up on the coast road the mother grasped her child's arm to wave to the departing group. 'Say good-bye... bye-bye, big fish!'

The vehicles which had been ordered must have left the city immediately because no sooner had the sloop reached the bottom of the ramp when the breakdown lorry appeared. It backed jerkily down the hill; while the empty sand lorry remained at the top. To prevent injury, a rubber mat was wrapped around the dolphin, then two bands, and a moment later he was floating through the air, as if lifted from the sea a second time. The breakdown lorry drove back up the

concrete strip, engines throbbing, until it was next to the sand lorry. After lowering the dolphin onto the platform, removing the bands, and adding several cubic metres of water, they smoked another cigarette and that was the end of the operation. As the men rowed back, they gazed at the sand lorry, slowly heading back in the opposite direction, towards the city. The dolphin was continuing on his way.

The east coast of Canada was stony and gently sloping. Nothing recalled the six months of winter, the interminable snow and the traces of polar bears and arctic foxes – now the grey-green grass was full of flowers, and birds were busying themselves with their nests. While on the right the land glided past and on the left the sea, straight ahead loomed the city – or rather village, despite the industrial scale of the whaling business. The smoking chimneys grew taller and taller, and the various structures surrounding the try-houses, smoke houses and salt-houses on the perimeter of the harbour, came into view, and the tow truck disappeared around a bend with a blast of its horn. Shortly afterwards the sand lorry turned onto the wharf, heading straight for the hustle and bustle. There were whalers everywhere, smaller cutters, and coal and merchant ships as well; seagulls screeched and rust gleamed. The sand lorry, proceeded at a walking pace past a couple of cranes and parked behind a shed where it would remain for the coming four days.

Next morning a ship arrived that was headed for England, but it had to be unloaded before it could be loaded. In the meantime, an octagonal basin was hastily constructed on the foredeck – chest-high, reinforced, and covered by a horizontal wheel made of steel spokes radiating from a hollow pipe in the centre – and was pumped full of water. It was in this basin that the dolphin would be transported – as deck cargo. When the ship's hold was full of whale oil, stockfish, whalebone and asbestos, he was taken on board: the last passenger. The sand lorry pulled up underneath the crane, and once more he glided through the air, even higher than the first time, and again he was lowered with the utmost care, loaded and received by the twenty outstretched hands of the crew, who

immediately christened him Moby Dick. But given that he was clearly not the white whale of the book, the cook declared that it was a nickname not a name. The crew crowding round the basin in which the whale was now completely immersed and engaged in wriggling out of the bands nodded in approval and admiration. They had not expected such rhetoric from their cook. But the captain maintained that an animal which doesn't have a name of its own cannot have a nickname – after all, a nickname is something alongside or in place of the real name, which has to come first. You don't give a tree a nickname. A name ... fair enough. That's what the Indians did, and once there was a name, then of course a nickname wasn't a problem...

While the captain continued musing aloud on the matter, Moby – whose name was Moby for the simple reason that that's what they called him – embarked on his first lap round the centre pipe. He swam clockwise, as he would continue to do during the crossing: the basin was large, but still too small for a four-metre-long dolphin to turn around in. All the same, the men never tired of following his uniform movements. The way he swam, the way he looked around, the fact that he was alive – they could still barely get their heads round it all, and they'd stand there watching him until the captain sent them back to work.

Deep in the engine room, the motor fired, and up on the bridge the last of the formalities were completed, the bills of lading signed, the logbook opened. It was twelve noon on 22 April 1966 when the ship put out to sea: wind force 1, the sea almost smooth. At the last minute a couple of crates of cod were brought on board for Moby, and before long he was thrown his first meal and patted on the head for the first time, and the first words were addressed to him. And so it went: the ship slipped further and further away from the sinking coast, where the herd was still waiting, the mother perhaps searching.

After a few days, they left the cold Gulf Stream behind and entered a milder sea. The change was imperceptible on the vast, flat surface of the ocean, but the men noticed it when they hosed down the deck: the splashes of water weren't as icy as before. Anyone who had a few minutes grabbed the front fire hose to

refresh the basin. Everyone's favourite activity was feeding the animal, even though it also meant scooping the faeces out of the water with a tin can. By then not a meal went by without some mention of him. That's how close he had come to all of them, not as fish, but as mammal, warm-blooded and breathing, with a spine that bent the same way theirs did, when bowing or mating: up and down, the way he swam, undulating rather than back and forth in the manner of fish and reptiles. And then his skin: without scales, even without hair, and so smooth and white – his skin was more human than that of any other animal, truly human, like his face, which never altered and yet was forever taking on a different expression, sometimes questioning, at other times comprehending. Everyone who came near the basin invariably talked to him, at first only when no one else was around; later on the embarrassment disappeared and three or four men could be standing round the rim of the tank at a time, taking turns talking to the dolphin, the way children do, often picking up on the comments of the previous speaker, so that they were also conversing with each other.

Halfway through the voyage, which would never end, it was unimaginable that the dolphin had come aboard without a name, and that the name then given was no more than a fabrication, perhaps only a nickname. From that moment on he was not only called Moby, he had truly become Moby. And what of all the other changes that had taken place in him? Although he himself had not altered, not one iota, and no one had tamed him, he was no longer part of the wildlife of the sea. He had been given a name, but he had lost his entire family; he was stolen, although money had been paid for him. He was kidnapped, abducted by people who loved him dearly, and at the same time he had become cargo, a future asset – until the sea could bear it no longer and intervened.

After four thousand miles and seventeen days and nights, the crossing was coming to a close. They sailed into the English Channel, describing a wide curve through the Straits of Calais and up a calm North Sea. Then for the first time since they set sail, towards four in the afternoon, the sky clouded over, the water darkened, and the ship began to yaw on the swells of a storm that could not be far

away, a storm that approached silently, that sought – and soon found – them, wild with joy: from one minute to the next it began to blow hard, and then even harder, from the southwest, force 9, force 10, even a full 11: hurricane force. Everywhere stripes of white froth lay across the black water, one wave looked like the bulging muscle of a thick stewing steak, while another, which seemed made of marble, broke over the ship and was crushed to pieces on the deck. By that time the ship had started to roll so heavily on the seas which were slanting in, that – no matter how slow the movements were – Moby must have gone wild inside his sloshing, churning cage on the foredeck. For fear that the cargo might shift, it was decided to change course and run diagonally before the storm, heading straight for the English coast. When that didn't help and they found themselves in shallow water, the only option was the opposite measure: set course straight into the wind and tackle the waves head-on.

The order hadn't been given yet and the swing had only just begun, when everyone turned in the direction of the storm. It was not until then, when they saw the waves coming straight at them, that it became clear just how high they were, and how irate the sea. With bated breath they stared at the towering crests, the spume that was blown upwards from the surface, and the frenzied water which, now entirely white and with those furious sprays above it, seethed and smoked.

Still listing, they emerged from the turn, and the first gulf hit them head-on, like a direct hit on the nose, so hard and so sudden that there was no earthly chance of going with the blow: without coming up, the ship took the full weight of it, broke straight through the crumbling wall of water and, for an instant the forward deck completely disappeared. That's when it must have happened.

After the blow, and a brief stagger, the ship righted itself, muddleheaded and dazed. Shortly afterwards the storm subsided, and the first crew members ventured outside, heading forward, to the basin. It was empty. Shielding their eyes with a hand, they scoured the sea, but it was far too white to be able to distinguish Moby.

And yet it had happened: in the nick of time the sea had taken Moby back and, in the midst of those foaming billows no one had seen how. No doubt queasy from all the pitching, he had slipped through the spokes and gone to ground beneath the waves. When he remained invisible, the men didn't know whether to laugh or cry. In silence they returned to the bridge, until one of them began to laugh through his tears, saying that Moby must be having mixed feelings as well, and then proceeded to update the logbook for May 9, 1966: 'Moby lost'.

Yes, he had regained his freedom.

But he was alone.

## CHAPTER 7

### Utrecht-Arnhem

After his summer break with Beckers, Rebert's fourth year began with phantom exercises. The phantom, a wooden frame containing a pelvic skeleton and a leather sack, simulated the birth canal and uterus of a cow.

A dead calf was placed in the uterus to demonstrate various abnormal presentations and to practise repositioning. Rebert walked calmly into the phantom hall, surrounded by excited fellow students. The female genital organ presumably no longer held any secrets for them, whereas he had never seen one, yet he alone remained calm and did not laugh when the first student – with a snigger – stuck his hand into the simulated vagina. All thanks to his summer with Beckers.

Every morning at nine o'clock on the dot, he set off through the park and over the bridge to the clinic, where his black rubber sleeveless and collarless boiler suit now hung. The guys had only just managed to finish it before going off on holiday. When he had tried it on, they pointed out the advantage of not having to wear an apron, but after they'd left he began to have doubts. Despite the trouser legs having a heavy silver zip in the side seam, the overalls suddenly no longer seemed manly: there was no fly. But actually he was pleased, since it would almost certainly have been fitted out with the same exposed zip.

His new garment proved its usefulness shortly after the prolapse. A bunch of piglets were scheduled for an iron injection for anaemia, and since Rebert had already learned how to give an injection – as well as administer a drip and stitch a wound – Beckers took him along. 'I'm getting too old for the frisky rascals,' he said, putting the repeater syringe in his bag, 'but the rest is easy. I'll demonstrate the technique on a couple of them. Prepare yourself for an audience. This kind of spectacle usually attracts a crowd. And remember: a vet must never lose his dignity!'

It was just across the Rhine. They turned into the yard, the farmer came to meet them, and next minute they were in the kitchen. Beckers simply put on his apron, but Rebert, his upper torso bare, turned away and began wriggling into his rubber suit. The legs were so tight that he had to leave the zip open up to his thighs, and by the time he finally straightened up and turned to face the others, sweat was running down his face. Although Beckers had never seen him in his overalls, he did not comment, but simply nodded.

If the prolapse was the most unappetizing of all the procedures which were part and parcel of the outside practice, then injecting piglets was the most humbling. The stall was in semi-darkness, grunts sounded from every direction, and, as predicted, a whole group of spectators had already gathered around the pen by the time they walked in: the farmer and Beckers in the lead, Rebert following behind with the construction lamp. Still almost unnoticed, he began to unwind the spool. That changed instantly when he found a wall socket and returned holding the lamp above his head: his skin was pale and the rubber gleamed black in the lamplight pouring from above his head. No sooner had the spectators caught sight of him than the muffled grunting was drowned out by cries of dismay, brief volleys of laughter, and the wail of children. The only person who remained unruffled was Beckers: by the new light he filled the spray-gun with iron dextran, handed the lamp to a spectator, and entered the pen through a narrow opening, followed by Rebert, who anxiously closed the gate behind him.

There were at least fifteen piglets in the rectangular, chest-high enclosure, probably including a few from the neighbours. They were quick as lightning and slippery as eels, but with his experience Beckers quickly got hold of one. Calmly he demonstrated the procedure, injected the piglet behind the ear and then handed it to the farmer, who lifted it over the wall and deposited it in the empty pen on the other side. Transferring each pig immediately after it was injected ensured that none of them would be forgotten or injected twice. Theoretically.

After three piglets, Beckers decided that he had given enough demonstrations and he left Rebert behind, alone in the pen. Thanks to the dignity accruing from Beckers' age, character and profession, he had immediately silenced the initial outbreak of hilarity. But when they saw him leaving the pen, even following the farmer out of the shed, there was a new ripple of tension among the onlookers. Their elbows resting on the enclosure, grinning in anticipation, they looked down at Rebert, who now had to go after the piglets himself.

The stone floor was slippery with muck, to which some joker may even have squirted some oil. In any case, there was no straw on the floor. Thus the audience, which already had possession of the lamp, had itself determined the decor of the comedy.

It was not long before the second round of laughter began.

He slipped, found himself stretched out in the muck, crawled further, and could no longer distinguish between the sound of piglets screeching in terror and children shrieking with pleasure. He finally succeeded in cornering one animal. He grabbed it, clutched it to his chest, and after the injection handed it over to someone who was helpfully stretching out his hands. But, as if by accident, the man dropped the piglet back into the full pen. This marked a turning point: Rebert was no longer in charge, and the comedy had become a farce. For an instant he thought he recognized the animal among its fellows. Quick as a flash he reached for it, but once again went sprawling. When, after a brief dizzy spell, he looked around him again, he couldn't tell which piglet he had already injected. But to avoid a double injection, he would somehow have to remove the animal from the pen.

The spectators appeared to know which it was, but he had to be quick about it before they too lost track. By then there was no shortage of advice.

'There!'

'That one!'

'Behind you!'

Sprawled in the pig droppings, he responded to each shout with a swerve to the left or the right. There was no use trying to stand up – the piglets slipped straight through his legs – and his only chance was to grasp the animal in question with outstretched arms, as the directions became more and more daft:

‘That little one!’

‘The pink one over there!’

But as these were the only directions which were forthcoming, he continued to follow them, twisting and crawling his way through the muck. His bespattered arms, shoulders and cheeks were as black as his rubber suit, and from above he must have looked like a frogman, giddily propelling himself forward on elbows and stomach, in search of the spray gun, while the blinding construction lamp was passed from one to the other and enthusiastically handed down to him, as if it was a camera and everyone wanted to take an even larger close-up of him: never before had they witnessed such an entertaining inoculation. Looking up, he saw nothing but glowing faces peering over the wall of the enclosure. What did it matter anyway? Why should he consider himself above all this? As an assistant, hadn’t he himself taken the mickey out of the vet? Blissfully he glided off on the trail of yet another piglet. Even though no one had an inkling as to whether it was the right one, he would go on until Beckers came back to release him.

Two days later, Beckers again asked him to accompany him. This time the patient was a crippled horse. The animal was in such pain that it couldn’t move. For a week it had been standing on the very same spot out in the pasture. Beckers had been back several times, most recently the day before, but even soaking the leg in ice water hadn’t helped. The farmer had just telephoned.

‘Lameness is always difficult to diagnose,’ said Beckers, hastily packing his bag, adding a length of rope, ‘but I’m totally baffled. I’ve tried every remedy except one, which makes this the last resort. I’m taking along plenty of hypnine, so if this doesn’t help, it’ll have to be euthanasia. As a vet, you have to know your limitations. Never allow an animal to suffer unnecessarily. What I’m talking about? Well, my young friend, the ancient art of bleeding! I don’t imagine they

still teach that technique at Utrecht, but I remember a case years ago where it worked. Why? I haven't a clue. But once in a while something helps when even the vet doesn't understand why!'

Visibly agitated, Beckers showed him his lancet, before adding it to the instruments in his bag. He had taken the fate of the horse to heart, explaining that it was the special favourite of the farmer's youngest daughter. Every day for a week, the child had taken a wheelbarrow full of hay out to the horse: he'd seen that with his own eyes the day before, when he's driven up the road unannounced,. And damn it, it was as if everything suddenly went misty. No, the rubber suit wouldn't be necessary, only boots.

On the way, he drove faster than usual. 'Got to make time. There's an animal out there in pain. Sometimes you have to be fast so that the patient can be slaughtered before it dies on you. Why that's important? A farm is a business, and a farmer only calls us when we can make more money for him than we charge him. And at least you can salvage the meat for him – provided it gets through the inspection – whereas a cadaver is no good to him, not even the skin. Mind, the destructor can turn it into all sorts of things: industrial grease, glue – whatever. So remember: a vet is always in a hurry!'

The bloodletting proceeded as calmly as the inoculation of the piglets had gone crazily. They headed straight for the pasture, without first going up to the farmhouse. The horse stood motionless in the middle of the field: a spotted mare, not too tall. She didn't look round until they were quite close. The area around her had been grazed bare as far as she could reach. Beyond lay a wisp of hay, which had no doubt blown away or dropped to the ground while she was chewing. Although Becker always began by stroking and talking to the patient, this time he was unpacking his bag in silence. Rebert took his place, stroking the mare's nose. Then he shaved and disinfected the spot on her neck. Beckers put the rope round her neck. All was ready.

Rebert pulled the rope tight around the neck.

Beckers positioned the knife. After one quick blow to the blade, the skin tore open and the blood gushed out onto the ground in a broad stream. Later, as the rope was loosened, the bleeding stopped. It was over.

Rebert stitched up the wound, disinfected it again, inserted the needle in the same artery he had used for the drip, and lifted the funnel containing Suisan above his head. Beckers still hadn't said a word, but watched the proceedings intently. There was nothing left of the bravura he'd displayed before and during the trip.

And then the horse took a step. Rebert saw it in the brightening of Beckers' face, which at the horse's second step broke into a radiant smile. Then, without uttering a word, he strode off in the direction of the farmhouse.

As the horse began grazing and the Suisan slowly dripped through the rubber tube, Rebert saw a small girl rush out of the house. She ran straight to Beckers and listened to what the man was saying as he squatted beside her. Then, following his arm, which swung backwards in the direction from which he had come, she started to run again. Holding the funnel above his head like a torch, Rebert saw how her pigtails danced as she ran towards him, and he felt his eyes burn.

If the prolapse was the most unappetizing procedure and the vaccination of piglets the most mortifying, then the embryotomy was the most grim. This was necessary when the calf was wedged in the wrong position within the uterus and could not be delivered alive. To save the mother's life, the various parts of the calf's body had to be dismembered inside the uterus, using a wire saw, without the benefit of sight. The sections then had to be brought out: first the head, then the right foreleg and chest bone, followed by a handful of abdominal organs and finally the pelvis. This could easily take an hour and a half, and it was a job that every veterinarian hated.

But there were also cases where the foetus could not be reached manually due to insufficient dilation, and then the solution was a caesarean. In Beckers' view,

this was the most beautiful procedure a vet could ever hope to carry out. In the past, the danger of infection had made it prohibitive, but since the War, when antibiotics became available, more and more such operations had been carried out. Beckers led the way in this procedure and, thanks to the high price of veal, the farmers generally opted for a caesarean rather than an embryotomy. The added value of a live calf instead of a dead one outweighed the difference between the lower bill for sawing up the embryo and the higher cost of a caesarean. The latter operation was expensive because Beckers could not carry it out on his own and had to call in Heiman, which meant a bill from two vets. A farm was run as a business, and the same was true of the clinic. But if Rebert was game, he could learn to assist during the procedure.

There was nothing that Rebert would like better. With the aid of the special box containing all the necessities, he was instructed in the theory and the instruments, and from then on, Beckers took him with him whenever a calf was stuck inside the uterus. As a rule, it was possible to reposition the calf, and there was little for him to do. Why Rebert always went along with Beckers? He had no choice: if it turned out to be a caesarean and Beckers had to call for assistance, he wouldn't be able to get to the farm because he couldn't drive.

By now, he was accompanying Beckers on his rounds virtually every day. He developed the same fondness for deliveries, and learned to wash his hands and arms as briskly as his mentor, so that with all the other things he absorbed and soaked up along the way, he became more and more like him.

'Always be kind to the mother of a calf that refuses to come out... By the time they call us, they've spent hours pulling on the animal, to avoid having to pay our bill. It was probably the same story with that prolapse – there could have been three of them at the end of the rope. Small wonder the whole uterus came out as well. One time the farmer was just hitching up the horse as I walked into the cowshed, hoping that that might work... The cow was in calf for the first time, and wasn't much more than a heifer herself. "Don't pull!" is the first thing you tell them when you get called in for a calf that's stuck. Or better yet, "Stop

pulling!". And then, once you're inside: "Been pulling for a while, have you?" But they'll never admit to it. The fact that the bloodletting worked may well have been due to the drop in pressure... but that just means that ice water would have helped too!'

It wasn't until their fifth year at university that students were allowed to perform procedures involving live animals, and until that summer he had still been operating on stinking animal parts preserved in formalin. By contrast, when Beckers let him, he didn't hesitate to put his arm into a cow's vagina, and a month before the phantom exercises were due to start, he managed to reposition a calf and deliver it on his own. The forelegs were extended, the head bowed devoutly, and in the posture of prayer – perhaps even in prayer – the gleaming calf glided into his arms. He rubbed it with straw and kissed it, and could no longer remember any previous kiss.

After an operation the farmer always brought out a bottle, and if there were children, Rebert invariably went with them to look at the rabbits. The farming folk got to know him better and ultimately to like him: he said very little, he could take a joke, he was good with animals, in fact, he was just plain good. Not only that, but he felt good about himself: how buoyantly and purposively he strode across the bridge, where in the past he had so often paused!

Meanwhile Rebert required less and less in the way of instruction, and the caesarean procedure went faster and faster, until it was down to an hour and a quarter. While Beckers chatted with the farmer, he administered the anaesthetic, guided the helpers in placing the cow on her left side and tying her down, shaved the operation area with the clippers as far as the groin area, washed it with soap, applied the iodine, and laid out the operation sheet. Then Beckers made the incision: first through the skin, then the tendon plate and the peritoneum, before he opened the uterus and the calf was born on a wave of amniotic fluid, accompanied by a sigh of relief from the circle of onlookers. From the first cut, the procedure lasted only six minutes. The rest of the time was spent making the cow whole again, whereby knives and scissors were replaced by needle and

catgut. In silence Beckers stitched up the uterus, and without a word, Rebert slid a white antibiotic tablet into the opening just before the final stitches, brushed the organ clean and dusted it with penicillin powder. After that, the peritoneum was stretched taut over it, like a tight waistcoat and then stitched closed, as they worked their way back to the outside in silent harmony. After a few times, Rebert was allowed to do the stitching on his own. Alone in the shed, after Beckers had retired to the kitchen for a drink with the farmer, he pulled the curved needle through the living leather with strong, regular movements. The cow occasionally glancing at him over her shoulder. Rather than feeling cut off from Beckers, he felt even more closely united with him, because he was truly standing in for him, saving him costly time by doing what he would otherwise have had to do, so that briefly he was already what he would become.

And so the summer slipped by, as he criss-crossed the Over-Betuwe area with the caesarean box, from stall to stall, from grass staggers to milk fever. By the beginning of the new academic year he was so used to inserting his arm into an orifice of cow or horse – whether rectal or uteral – that he didn't join in the giggling and sniggering among the students waiting their turn behind the phantom.

When he returned to his studies, life settled back into the old routine: the train trip to Utrecht every day, three times a week the evening shift at Haarhuis and, when he came home, the coming and going of Marc's friends upstairs in the hallway, and the regular ringing of the telephone, always for Marc, who had been back for some time. Marc always picked up the phone quickly so as not to inconvenience him, and then for several minutes his melodious voice could be heard in the front room – until one evening, when only a few words were spoken.

Rebert noticed this over the sound of the radio, followed by approaching footsteps and – when he was already half out of his chair – the knock at the door.

'Telephone for you. I didn't catch the name.'

He walked past Marc to the telephone, stiffly and formally, as if still in his porter's uniform. It was Becker asking if he could come right away: a calf in Valburg was stuck halfway.

At first he could only nod, then he said that he was on his way. After that, he turned around in a kind of frozen haste. Marc was still standing there.

'Nothing serious?' he asked. His face betrayed concern, solicitude even.

'There's a calf in Valburg stuck halfway,' Rebert explained simply. He grabbed his coat and, without another word, raced downstairs. From then on Marc was not the only one to receive calls so late at night and leave the house, though not to Meijers. It was usually close to midnight when Beckers got the call. By that time the farmers had spent hours pulling at the calf, before deciding it would be risky to wait until morning. 'They drag the poor vet out of bed, so that they can sleep themselves!'

Next time Marc knocked, it was to ask if he could borrow the rubber suit: there was a special party, a kind of masked ball. Rebert was flattered that he wanted to go as a vet and readily agreed. Next day he picked up the suit at the clinic. Marc tried it on: the legs were on the short side, but that didn't matter. He'd be wearing socks with horizontal stripes.

A month later, Marc moved out – he had found a room in a student flat.

It didn't bother Rebert that much. He took down the 'Ring once - ring twice' sign and focused on his studies the same way a flower focuses on the sun. He completed the other subjects in the curriculum as easily as he had mastered the phantom exercises, one by one and at a good pace. Lectures whizzed by like the trees along the road when he sat next to Becker in the car: the entire fourth year passed, like the undulating landscape seen from the train in the morning mist, half familiar and half foreign, and until deep in the night he pored over *Doctor Vlimmen*, the three-volume memoir of a vet in the province of Brabant. The books were a thoughtful farewell gift from Marc, which he had left in front of Rebert's door. Beckers was familiar with Vlimmen: so he must have read it the same way he was reading it now.

He worked in the clinic again that summer. Beckers advised him to take driving lessons, and he got his licence just before the start of the new academic year. It came in handy after the very next nocturnal delivery. The customary glass had apparently turned into four or five, and when Rebert walked into the kitchen after sewing up, Beckers handed him the car keys. He laid his tired old body to rest on the back seat, next to the caesarean box, and Rebert drove homewards through the darkness, gravely and cautiously. When he saw in the rear view mirror that Beckers was asleep and his presence had faded, his own surrogate attendance seemed to increase with each breath.

The next time he was in the driver's seat, Beckers wasn't even there – why should he go along when it was only a question of removing the cast from a calf's foot? After a final glance at the map and a series of admonitions – 'Don't get lost!', 'Be polite and accept a cup of coffee!', 'Don't leave anything behind!', and 'Be careful with the car!' – Rebert got into the car and drove off. At the highest point of the Rhine Bridge, he smiled in the direction of the Over-Betuwe. He had never driven on his own, and had never felt so feather-light. What's more, he had totally taken over Beckers' place

Back in Utrecht, he had no difficulty with the internships which began in his fifth year and continued until the end of his sixth and final year, thanks to all the experience he'd gained at the clinic and in outside practice. He passed parts I and II of his Master's. And thanks to the countless trips to the local farms, he also passed the Veterinary Surgeon exam. He had truly become what Beckers was: a vet.

For the last time he sat on the train from Utrecht to Arnhem, with his microscope beside him and his degree on his lap. It was June 1960.

Beckers had spoken to Heiman: they gave him a permanent appointment. He was now a full assistant. He gave up his job at Haarhuis and bought himself a small car, an old Morris.

The summer never really came to an end, for that winter his life was just like all those past summers, the only difference being that now he was both fully

qualified and fully responsible for his actions. Like Beckers, he loved the outside practice, but like Heiman, he also enjoyed the clinic. In actual fact, what he liked best was commuting between the two: coming home after a job in stable or cowshed, then answering an emergency call or starting on his round of visits. How contentedly he sat at the wheel of the Morris: when it rained, he was safely ensconced behind the wipers, as they swished back and forth, and when the weather was good, his right hand was on the steering wheel and his left elbow on the open window.

‘Never before’ and ‘for the first time’ – these recurring expressions sketched most graphically his growing experience. And yet one experience was still lacking, an important one. But what could be more intimate than a meeting between a man and a woman when the man fights for the life of her beloved pet?

She was around his age, dark-haired and slender, and in the appointment book she appeared as Miss T. Spaans. Her cat’s name was Lou. She had been to the clinic before: for the last time the previous day. Lou had a huge belly but a scrawny chest, threw up constantly, and because he ate almost nothing, was moribund, just like Kloris years ago. Beckers had been unable to establish the cause of the vomiting, let alone remedy it, and after unsuccessful attempts at medication he agreed to, even recommended euthanasia. But Rebert had a suspicion, and since the day before he knew for certain. He had asked Miss Spaans to bring along a small amount of the vomit, which he had smelled and examined. He determined that it was not vomit, but faeces: the tomcat with the enormous belly was suffering from constipation. His body was full of faeces which could not exit from the anus and were being vomited up. He found nothing about this condition in the books, and didn’t want to raise the question with Beckers, but he did discuss with Miss Spaans what he saw as the only solution: he wanted to simply remove the large intestine, so that it could no longer extract moisture from the faeces. The constipation should then disappear, but in all probability Lou would suffer from permanent diarrhoea – would that be a problem?

Not in the least! And of course she could come the very next day.

There was no need for an assistant, but Miss Spaans insisted on being present during the operation. There was no surgery that day and Beckers and Heiman were both out. It was deathly still and he was conscious of the anxious look in her dark eyes as he injected the hypnine, spread out the green sheet, opened the belly and removed the large intestine. He had never performed the operation before, nor did he know of anyone who had, but what did such innovations matter in comparison with what happened after that?

Perspiring from tension and concentration, he sewed up the wound, and sprinkled penicillin on the seam. Only then did he dare to glance sideways, straight into the dark, anxious eyes of Miss Spaans.

He smiled, and nodded reassuringly.

She began to smile, too, and looked deeper into his eyes.

As everything began to blur, he could just see how she leaned slowly in his direction, averted her head slightly, and opened her mouth; in a kind of rarefied stupefaction, he did the same, so that finally, alongside all the other things he had never done before, came the greatest of all: their lips touched, their mouths fused, and whereas others, first massaged by the music, only dared to cross that border between decorum and corporality under cover of din, drink and darkness, he kissed T. Spaans under the operation lamp, in clinical silence, while on the steel table between them Lou had yet to come round, and he still didn't know her first name.

That Saturday they went to see a film.

He had a girlfriend.