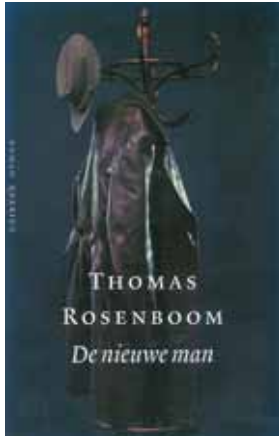


A shipbuilder's dazzling downfall

Thomas Rosenboom



The New Man

THOMAS ROSENBOOM is the master of downfall. In his work he steadily guides his characters to their inevitable destruction. In his previous novel *Public Works* (*Publieke werken*, 1999) the pharmacist Anijs and the violin maker Walter Vedder slowly but surely fall under the spell of their delusions. Likewise, in *De nieuwe man* the director of a shipyard and his foreman fix each other in a stranglehold.

Berend Bepol is the director of a small shipyard in the 1920s and 1930s. He has two burning wishes: he wants a husband for his daughter and a successor for his business, and he manages to combine these in one fell swoop by asking his foreman Niesten to marry his daughter and become a partner in the business. When Niesten agrees Bepol's problems seem to be over, but in fact they have just begun. Bepol doesn't understand what it is that he really wants; slowly it becomes obvious to the reader that he wants to get closer to his foreman.

This becomes slightly ridiculous. Bepol has a house built for his daughter and her new husband right across from his own house, in the grounds of the shipyard. Subsequently he haunts the house and peeks inside. Once Niesten finds him at the back door late at night, and his wife catches him climbing on the saddle of his son-in-law's motorbike. This intrusion on Bepol's part inevitably only serves in widening the gap between him and Niesten.

In addition, when difficult economic times hit, Bepol's attempts in making an impression on Niesten as a successful businessman are in vain. When Niesten on his own initiative brings in a large order for the shipyard, Bepol's pride is hurt and he refuses to clear the slipway. Niesten doesn't take that lying down and starts building an enormous tugboat next to the shipyard, in the middle of the meadow. When Niesten, at the advice of Bepol, also pulls in the order for the built-in motor, the ship turns out to be too heavy to be pulled into the water. It remains mired for eternity in the clay.

This tragic plot, which Rosenboom has clearly enjoyed preparing, adding a wealth of telling details and insightful scenes, drives the plot of *De nieuwe man*. The dazzling failure of the undertaking and the comical yet tragic development of the relationship between master and servant, between two men who are completely at each other's mercy and go down together, keep the reader glued to the pages of this novel to the very last line.



photo Jerry Bauer

Thomas Rosenboom (b. 1956) made his debut in 1983 with a collection of short stories called *Those at Home* (*De mensen thuis*), for which he received the Van der Hoogt Prize. The prodigious and brilliant historical novel *Gewassen vlees* (*Washed Flesh*, 1994), which won him the 1995 Libris Literature Prize for the best novel of the year. The historical novel *Publieke werken* was published in December 1999 to great acclaim and with over 100,000 copies sold, it has become his biggest selling book so far.

His narrative has great expressive power. When I finished the novel and wanted to review or go over it again in my mind, countless scenes jumped out. (...) No less than a masterpiece.

TROUW

Rosenboom is and remains a masterful stylist (...) De nieuwe man brims over with scenes and expressions to make his readers grin and chuckle.

DE VOLKSKRANT



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A conversation with Thomas Rosenboom

The Biography of The New Man

by Anthony Mertens

translated by Michiel Horn

To dispel the cobwebs of the night, Thomas Rosenboom takes a daily walk through Amsterdam. This morning I am walking along with him under a dark grey sky. We have agreed that on this overcast morning we will discuss the biography of his novel *De nieuwe man* (The New Man, 2003).

Because a book has a life, too: it is conceived at some point, goes through an embryonic phase and comes into the world in completed form. It is possible that the book will live for half a century before it's buried in the tomb of the library.

'What concerns me above all is that very first phase of life,' I said to Thomas.

'During the last few months of 2001 I was writer-in-residence in Groningen and gave some lectures at the university. It began there, in Groningen,' Thomas says. He was staying in the university guesthouse and spent his spare time in 'Het paard van Troje' (The Trojan Horse), a pub near the guesthouse.

On one of those occasions in The Trojan Horse I remembered an anecdote that used to be told in my family. When he was eighteen or so, my father worked for a trucking company in the eastern part of the country. The owner offered the business to my father, provided he would marry the owner's daughter. It must have been deeply humiliating for the girl that she was being offered for sale, as it were, but I can readily imagine the man's devotion, that he was acting out of love for his daughter, finding a husband for his daughter and giving her security for the remainder of her life. My father rejected the offer. But I became interested in the question: what if he hadn't done that? What sort of consequences would that have had? That was the opening question, the novel's point of departure.

How did you know it was a promising idea for a novel? Why not for a short story or just a passing thought?

'You sense it, it is as if the whole show gets under way, like an engine that starts and begins to run. It also has something to do with a feeling of power, the sense that you can make something happen that never actually took place.'

But in any case you changed the setting. Instead of a trucking firm you took a shipyard as your context.

'That anecdote about my father could have happened in any family business. I chose the shipyard because I've been interested in ships since my childhood,

made little boats myself when I was a kid, have owned a boat, and have read an unbelievable amount about ships.’

And instead of situating the story in the eastern part of the country you located the shipyard in Groningen, in the north?

‘At the time I was in Groningen, after all. I could get hold of the right documents. Besides, I remembered an old book that I once read feverishly. It was a book by Hylke Speerstra, *De voorbije vloot* (The Fleet of Bygone Times). In it he reproduced conversations with the skippers of the last cargo sailing ships, of tjalks, clippers, and schooners. I still owned the book and opened it again. It told of activities that took place at the beginning of the last century, all of them in places I had never heard of. Because I was in Groningen already as writer-in-residence, I had a splendid opportunity to wander around in the Northern Marine Museum. I absorbed the atmosphere of that glorious period of ship-building history, of all those scows and flatboats and the new motor vessels. I saw a model of a shipyard of that period there, and also saw a video of a ship launching. These were all elements that I could put to good use in my novel. Moreover, there was a large library in which I could potter about to my heart’s content.

On the Damsterdiep in Groningen there was also a branch of the second-hand bookseller Hollandia, which specializes in books about ships and shipbuilding and from which I took home a lot of books that I devoured eagerly, late into the night in my room or sitting in The Trojan Horse. Above all I learned a lot from an overview of shipbuilding in Groningen, *Nieuw van de bijl* (Hot Off the Yard). It pointed out that most of the shipyards were concentrated in the area around Hoogezand. A good connection to the sea had been established by way of the Winschoterdiep and the newly-dug Ems Canal. But the shipyard that I was thinking of had to be a bit off the beaten track, a yard that hadn’t adapted to the changing times. I situated it in Wirdum. I had got this idea from a commemorative volume that was dedicated to shipyards such as Sander, Nisten, and Apol. One chapter was devoted to Apol Shipyard, a small yard located along the Damsterdiep, which had become too narrow a passage for modern ships. The shipyard was in the wrong place and in time it went belly-up.’

And in your book Apol became Bepol?

‘Exactly.’

Funny that after your novel Publieke Werken (Public Works) you should again end up in the same region, in Hoogezand.

‘You can’t figure out something like that beforehand. But I soon realized that Hoogezand was not a suitable location, because the novel had to be about a remote shipyard. In Hoogezand all the shipyards were in a row. You had all kinds of colleagues left and right who also crossed your yard. I was looking for a more

closed-off yard. In the commemorative volume I had seen an aerial photo of Wirdum; Arent Apol's lonely shipyard could be seen on it. And there was the beginning of my tale.'

Your protagonist's name therefore came to you naturally, but why did you choose Niesten for the name of his antagonist?

'The name had to sound a bit exotic, a bit German. It would be nice if it could simultaneously serve as given and family name. When he enters the living room of his future in-laws for the first time, the name must at the same time sound familiar and distant. The father is incredibly fascinated by Niesten. So the name must have something to feed that fascination. And Germany, well, for Bepol that was the big world, Hamburg, Bremen, the Mecca of the shipping companies. For a while I played with the name Sieger, but then, at a certain moment, I don't know why, the name Niesten came into my head, a name you won't readily come across anywhere but that nevertheless sounds altogether plausible.'

So you had the basic element of the father who offers his daughter along with his shipyard, and you had the protagonist Bepol and his antagonist Niesten, but you still lacked the driving force for your tale.

'That's it. There is a wedding, a house is built on the shipyard property. But I pondered for quite some time how I could move the story along. Something had to happen. The books by the journalist Hylke Speerstra gave me the idea I was looking for. Wonderful books they were, which I devoured when I was a little boy. They dealt with the world of motorized sea-going tugboats. The technology, the speed, the telegraphy, the adventure, all the elements of that world spoke to me strongly. In one of his books that I read what an aged manager of Smit Salvage Company had to say about the way things were done at the beginning of the twentieth century. He had discovered a new market, as it were. The tugboats would wait at anchor until a storm began and SOS-messages arrived from ships out at sea that were in great peril or had run aground. Then the seagoing tugs could swing into action and bring these ships safely into harbour. And then a stiff invoice would be presented. Being saved could quite literally drive you into bankruptcy. Speerstra's books gave me the idea of having the young, mysterious Niesten build a sea-going tugboat against the inclination of Bepol, who didn't care much for modernity and was a bit scared of large undertakings. That way I could have Niesten make mysterious excursions to Germany, because over there the salvage companies had really taken off, just as Smit Tak had in Rotterdam. Around 1912, Bugsier in Hamburg was a large enterprise that appealed to the imagination. But closer to Wirdum was Bremerhaven. In that place there was a small shipping company, Schumann, with a small fleet, but in a very sneaky way it had been secretly buying the common shares of Bugsier. That seemed to me to be a fine element for the novel: Niesten was in tune with modern times, but of

course the launch had to be a disaster of major proportions. By having them build the ship on that piece of land at the edge of the canal the precondition for disaster had, of course, been created.'

So you had the scaffolding for your story. How long did the period last during which you were, in effect, designing your novel's framework?

'I don't know for sure any more, a couple of months, I believe, the length of time I stayed in Groningen. I made notes in two exercise books. In one exercise book I made notes about the personalities, their characteristics, external features, behaviour patterns, etcetera. And in it I also sketched out possible plot developments and turns. Take the sequence of the ship's construction, for example, I noted down that Niesten should receive a secret commission from Schumann to build a very large ship so that they could enter into competition with Bugsier. In that way Niesten and Bepol would, without fully realizing it, become part of a competitive struggle of which, were Bugsier to find out about it, they could become the victim. With that secret commission the people in Wirdum got a whiff of the big world, and that, of course, was something that excited them. In the other exercise book I noted down all the data about shipbuilding that I needed as background information or that I would probably have to use in the novel: technical terms, telling details.'

But then you still needed to construct the framework of the novel.

'You know that I work with long strips of paper, on which I outline the chapters in columns so that I can in one glance check out the construction of the novel. A constant in my case is that the first chapter must present a stable situation. That's a classical beginning. So I place Bepol at the window from which he can see the shipyard. He sees a ship under construction. He has his ducks in a row, he is the manager, a local dignitary. And a first chapter like that must have something of an exposition, you put the players on the stage, as subtly as possible you begin to weave together the elements that are necessary for the development of the story. So there has to be a look towards Germany at this early stage.'

When you read the novel you get the impression that the chapters that follow describe the same sort of situation, but each time in a different light.

'That's right: you could say that I constructed the novel out of similar modules. So after the description of a stable situation there is a disturbance in the equilibrium. We make a leap in time: it's eight years later. Bepol stands in exactly the same spot and looks out over the shipyard. But here the problem presents itself: his daughter is unmarried and whether she will find a husband seems dubious. And Bepol realizes that he has no successor. These problems must be solved and that is the first story line: proposing, becoming acquainted, building a house, getting married. At that point the second story line can begin:

the sequence in which they bite off more than they can chew with the construction of the large ship.’

Even more than in your two previous novels you have tried to keep it as simple as possible, you actually wanted to work with minimal means.

‘Sure, but within that simplicity I wanted to write an opaque book. Bepol doesn’t fathom his own motives. He is someone who gropes around in his surroundings like a blind man. He lives in the conviction that he has brought Niesten into the firm, that he has rendered him a service, but he does not understand the commission that Niesten secures. He wants that special commission to be carried out not in the shipyard but in the field next to it. A new shipyard takes shape there, as it were. And gradually Bepol doesn’t know any more whether it is his shipyard or not. He loses track of it.’

When did you actually begin to write?

‘That must have been in January, at the outset of 2002. All that time you’ve been pregnant with ideas, they have developed themselves, but something dark remains which you know you can only discover while writing. Then you decide to start writing. There are writers who claim that they don’t figure things out beforehand and that they have to discover everything in writing. I don’t get that at all. For me the framework has to be there, and the filling-in of the framework as well. I don’t get need to get nervous about that while writing, I can direct my attention to something else, the choice of words, the tone, the style. I know that the protagonist doesn’t understand himself, that he is a kind of sleepwalker, he doesn’t understand what is happening around him. The style adapts itself to that: I’ve drawn the story in a dream-like, eerie atmosphere. The style that I maintain in my writing has to make the story mysterious. That style, tone or whatever you want to call it, that’s part of you. When I walk along the street, I hear within me the rhythm of the sentences, the turns of phrase, the timing, where I’ve got to keep going, where I’ve got to stop, in an abstract way I almost hear the intonation in the dialogues, in this case in Bepol’s monologues especially. I hear the whole book, I see the whole book before me. It’s a happy time.’

In your choice of words, it seems to me, you allow yourself to be influenced by a mixture of different vocabularies.

‘You got it. In *The New Man* I often drew on the vocabulary of financial affairs. It strikes me as amusing to give those terms a philosophical or psychological content. So when I write the sentence “he knew whether he was solvent or already bankrupt,” this also depicts his psychological or existential state of affairs. What matters to me is to turn the language of business into something lyrical, to give poetic power to financial and technical terms.’

You use the most anti-literary prose to extract a literary effect, as it were.

‘As far as I’m concerned, in that respect a trustee in bankruptcy is the ideal figure. I like descriptions of contents. And the style in which they are couched: “I hereby declare to have found on the premises etcetera.” Administrative prose to be used in a novel. It makes the presentation of very different matters possible. This kind of summary is, after all, the basic pattern of description. By using that dry-as-dust style you can create a beautiful counterpoint.’

That corresponds nicely to the modular construction of your book.

‘Yes, indeed, in those modules I allow situations to return repeatedly, as a result of which the scenes begin to resemble each other at least visually. I aimed for that effect in those meetings between Bepol and his wife on one side and Niesten with his young wife on the other. Each and every time they are in the same room, sit in the same chairs, they follow the same rituals, they drink the same thing they drank before, and so on and so forth. In this way a pictorial rhyme develops. Bepol at his window, contemplating his shipyard, gazing towards the east from which the future presents itself. Niesten on his motorcycle, disappearing in an easterly direction. It happens a few times, but on each occasion a scene like that carries a different load of meaning. So I’m aiming for a minimalist art of the novel, looking to accomplish the maximum effect with as few elements as possible. It’s about small patterns, in which little shifts take place that have big consequences. I hope that this way of working will have a sort of intoxicating effect, that the story moves inexorably toward the end: there is no escaping the catastrophe.’

Because of that modular construction, realism becomes problematical.

‘Even more because of the style. I’m fond of an astonishingly matter-of-fact style. It’s got to be simple, so simple, in fact, that you can hardly believe it. There’s a sentence in the novel: “So as not to talk too much, Bepol stopped talking” which I consider to be a successful example of that. By means of the style, I try to throw a surrealistic light on a realistic presentation of matters. A normal scene must gradually become puzzling. So by means of the style I try to remove myself from realism as far as possible. That’s why writing is by far and away the most important thing, much more important than constructing the plot, thinking up story lines. It is in writing that you can win everything or lose it. You decide to write if there is something obscure in what you’ve thought up that you want to clarify by means of writing.’

Sample translation from

***The New Man* by Thomas Rosenboom (Amsterdam: Querido, 2003)**

Translated by Nancy Forest-Flier

CHAPTER V

Courting

By half past six Bepol was sitting in the living room, ready to receive his visitor. Refreshments were on the table, a pan lid was rattling in nearby kitchen. The women were still upstairs.

Twilight was setting in; darkness descended. Bepol turned on the lights and gave the fire in the stove a good poke. His nervousness was making him cold. He jumped when the clock struck six. After the last stroke there was a moment's silence, interrupted by the swelling throb of a motorbike in the distance. He leaped to his feet and left the room for the front hall, perfectly composed.

"He's coming!" he shouted up the stairs. He opened the front door, and the approaching sound grew louder still, and louder – yet even when the beam from the headlight finally swung into the yard he was still disconcerted.

Niستن came riding out of the darkness, in a slow roll, his cap pulled low over his eyes. Usually he would turn immediately and round the corner of the forge; now he drove straight on until his jacket gleamed in the glow of the outside light. Just one more sweep of the headlight over the ground, one last roar, and he came to a stop, still swaying but with his eyes straight ahead, apparently deep in thought – until he swung his leg over the seat, lowered the stand, and turned towards the door.

“Welcome!” cried Bepol. He shook Niesten’s hand, calmly stepped aside to let him go in first, but then suddenly shot in front himself; he had to be there to take the jacket and hang it on the coat rack!

The black leather jacket lingered in the hall like a bodyguard while Bepol once again led the way to the living room, advancing towards the stove at the back, past the big bookcase, which he touched lightly in passing.

“Any time you’d like to borrow a book –” he joked; after all, he had to put the young man behind him at ease!

Reaching the refreshments he saw that Niesten still had his cap in his hands. He showed him a chair by the window and remained standing to pour drinks.

“What’s your pleasure, Niesten – genever? The ladies are still upstairs, so it looks like we have the first round all to ourselves! Ha, ha!” He set busily to work, arranging two small glasses side by side and he picked up the bottle, but before he could begin pouring there was movement at the door.

The first to enter was Agatha, with Ilse right behind her; they walked past Bepol and up to Niesten, now on his feet again. They greeted him with a nod, he nodded back, holding the cap to his chest, then they sat down together on the couch, Ilse bowing as if she were reading a book.

“Well, isn’t this nice! Now we can get acquainted; but first something to wet your whistle! Niesten wanted genever – here you are! A blackcurrant for Aggie, and another for Ilse. There you go!”

Finally Bepol served himself and dropped into the chair opposite Niesten. Glass raised, still making cheery talk, he looked from one to the other as they sat round the table, glasses in hand. It was time for a toast. The words were welling up in him, but Ilse happened to raise her face for a moment and they stuck in his throat. It was the first time this evening that he had looked at her directly, and for a moment he thought this was not his daughter he was seeing but an offshoot, a duplicate of his daughter. Ilse had painted her lips red and full. Her mouth stood out from her pale face like a poppy.

“Well, then, to the future!” was all he could manage, the sense of duplication still whirling through his head, and then when he looked over at Niesten the duplication seemed to have duplicated itself once more: Niesten had placed his cap on the windowsill behind him, and it lay next to his head. It was as if he, too, had split himself in half so that now two of them were sitting opposite Bepol, two heads looking at him at once, one with piercing eyes, the other with the iron insignia above the visor.

He had soon recovered his composure. The conversation proceeded smoothly. The more he talked, the more he regained his customary aplomb. Exhaling after yet another sip he repeated his words: “No, we’re not going to rush into anything, let’s take it one step at a time. First get the house built and the marriage will take care of itself!”

To clear space for a suitable dwelling, part of the willow copse next to the kitchen garden would have to be cut down, and with a bit of the bleaching ground added there should be plenty of room.

“Just make a sketch, Niesten,” he invited. “There’s no reason to delay construction any longer. You’ll be back on the job starting Monday, like before, but with a ten percent cut in wage, because of the slump. Oh, there’s no need to look so out of sorts, that was a joke to relieve the tension. By the time the house is built and the wedding’s over, the shipyard will be flourishing again. You may not know just now how to make a shipyard flourish, but don’t worry, that’ll take care of itself – once the freight prices pick up! So long as those rates are low, things can’t help going badly, there’s nothing to be done about that. The shipyards at ’t Hoogezand are at a standstill, too, it’s no different there than here, but as soon as the coastal trade starts turning a profit again the shipyards will be better off. Like I always say, if shipbuilding has a pulse, it comes from the heartbeat of the coastal trade! You’ll learn to think the same way later on, never fear.”

Aggie had left for the kitchen. Soon soup was served up and they sat down to dinner at the table in the back room. To celebrate their acquaintance, Bepol

opened a bottle of wine and proposed a new toast, looking from Ilse to Niesten and back again: “Now let’s drink to your friendship, to the friendship from which love slowly grows. Love is something that happens very gradually. You might decide to go on the motorbike to the movies, or to go to Groningen to listen to jazz – but don’t force it, Niesten; a marriage is not made of iron, it’s not a set of gears. Your health!”

As they ate, spoons scraping the china louder and louder as the plates emptied – Bepol felt the closeness of Niesten as a kind of radiation. How alien he was here, even more than in the office when he demanded a pay rise or later with that business about the contract. He seemed more alien now than he had been when he was still a stranger, even although he had worked at the shipyard for so long that Bepol suddenly realized he no longer knew whether Niesten was his first name or his last. He continued furtively to study him, his excellent table manners, his freshly ironed shirt; the only thing he could not work out even when he was so close was his age.

If age was like layers of varnish, then Niesten’s age was clear lacquer, thought Bepol. The man must be about thirty – no longer young, not yet old. Perhaps age was simply less of a factor with him than it was with other people.

The soup bowls were cleared away, Bepol sliced the meat, Aggie served the vegetables, and out in the shipyard the Festina creaked.

“It’s very pleasant to make your acquaintance under such peaceful circumstances, Niesten,” Bepol continued, securing his napkin once more. “I think we shall get along very well, even though there was that matter of the certificate of equality, I don’t want to brush that under the carpet. But Niesten, what would that have come to with no diploma and no wife? And look at you now, sitting here at the table as a future son-in-law and successor in the business – there’s equality for you! Ha! Wouldn’t your father have been proud of you, though! A very fine workman he was. A hard worker and a good worker, just like you, and it was such a pleasure when he smoked that little pipe of his during breaks. Oh, yes, and then there was that fuss about the hammering and the pay

increase – but that’s normal between workers and owners, the same thing will happen to you in time! To avoid discord I’ve always been obliging with the men, if their demands were justified. That’s why socialism never took root here: the working conditions are too good! Like I always say, if socialism is a plant, then it’s a desert plant that flourishes when it’s deprived but withers as soon as its needs are met. Apart from that, there’s absolutely no reason for an owner to reject socialism out of hand, because when it comes to exploitation every form of protest is reasonable. At least, that’s how I see it! No, there’s no need to respond, Niesten, we’re sure to talk about politics later on.”

Aggie put her hand on his forearm as she usually did whenever she thought he was talking too much, and asked Niesten to tell them about his lodgings in Appingedam, what he most liked to eat there.

Bepol was happy with Aggie’s manoeuvre to ease the pressure on Niesten; after all he, too, had earned a moment’s peace. He followed the conversation that now developed among the others with great attention, ready to step in if it should flag.

Niesten mentioned a few dishes; his voice grated and went up and down in volume, sometimes loud, then soft again, like the first voices on the radio. Bepol suspected this was because Niesten was hard of hearing, and that he spoke too loudly as a matter of course but often consciously toned his voice down for others through sheer will power.

Then Niesten asked Aggie what she liked most. Aggie’s choice was Ilse’s savoury tart – as only Ilse could season it! – and she praised it to the skies.

“That tart is health food of the highest order, Niesten!” Bepol agreed enthusiastically. “You know why? All the herbs are fresh from the vegetable garden! Caraway, basil – quite delicious, though personally I prefer wild herbs, the ones that don’t grow to serve us, the ones that grow freely along the side of the road. And why is that? It’s the socialist in me!”

The plates were empty. Bepol praised the quality of the food, and laying his hand on Aggie’s, said to the other two, “There’s nothing finer than a good, meal

taken together, even if we shan't always eat together in the future. You'll have to start your own household; after all, you'll have a family of your own some day!"

They stood up. The women disappeared to make coffee, which would be served at the stove in the living room, Bepol strolled aimlessly around the room. He remembered suddenly that he had put the shipyard revolver in the sideboard with the intention of cleaning it. Aggie and Ilse were still in the kitchen. He opened the drawer, he took the revolver and hurried over to Niesten, who was sitting on the same chair as before by the window.

"Take a look at this," he said, beaming boyishly, and holding the revolver with its fine barrel under Niesten's nose. "One day this revolver will be in your hands, and you'll make a speech. You'll figure it out. One word of advice though: don't make it too long! Ha, ha!"

Laughing good-humouredly, he went walked back to the sideboard and returned the revolver to the drawer just as Aggie and Ilse came in with the coffee and drinks.

Bepol, pouring cognac, was the last to sit down. He noticed that everything was as it had been before dinner except that Ilse's lips were not nearly as red.

"Well, that was a pleasant evening," he said in recapitulation, wellfed and content, satisfied with how things had gone so far. "Very nice to exchange views on so many different topics. We don't have to limit our conversation to shipbuilding, Niesten! We can also talk about your motorbike, or about automobiles, whatever you like! Cigar?"

Niesten waved the cigar aside and started rolling a cigarette; Bepol took back the proffered box of Havanas and lit one himself.

"It's certainly a fine piece of machinery, that motorbike of yours.... An Adler, isn't it? Yes, I've admired it on many occasions. You take it to Germany every now and then, don't you? To visit friends, I imagine. Yes, Niesten, I was young myself once!"

Niesten gathered his mouth into a thin smile, but it wasn't the beginning of an answer. It was the tacit answer itself.

“But don’t forget that your motorbike could never have existed without the internal combustion engine,” he went on. “And the same goes for the automobile, of course. The men of ’t Hoogezand are already driving around in automobiles. You will, too, later on; I’m too old for such things. Bodewes has a Spyker C-3, Pattje a Pathfinder 40 HP, and Van Diepen an Oryx Torpedo. At meetings of the Shipbuilders’ Association all three of them are parked side by side in front of the Martenshoek Hotel, and it’s a mighty beautiful sight. I’ll take you along with me one of these days, and I can introduce you to the men at the same time. Some day you’ll be going to meetings there yourself!”

Niesten pressed back in his chair. Was he shying away from the new responsibilities that awaited him; was he afraid he might fail to measure up to his new position? For the first time Bepol sensed something resembling doubt in the young man, and it was as if the confidence deserting Niesten was flowing over to him and nestling itself twofold in his dancing heart.

“The diesel engine is going to bring drastic change to road transport, just as we’ve already seen in coastal navigation. It’s a development that can’t be stopped; what we’re seeing now is just the tip of the iceberg. Some day the sail will be completely supplanted by the engine, Niesten. If the transition from wood to iron was a revolution, the transition from sail to engine will be war! And once again there’ll be conservative forces to fight. Back then some of the old shipmasters used to say, ‘If you don’t have to pump it out, it’s not a ship.’ Now they say, ‘If God provides the wind, I’ll provide the sail.’ But if you bow to that kind of pressure, Niesten, then... then. You’ve got to think ahead, set your sights on the future, look for new possibilities, reach out to new customers, advertise, acquire. You may be the first in Groningen to build an ocean-going vessel that runs entirely without sails, not even an auxiliary sail. Do you see what I’m trying to tell you? The Groningen shipbuilding industry always uses German steel, but what’s keeping us from changing? There’s a blast furnace right here in the Netherlands now; they may do laminating at better terms. Invite tenders, Niesten, change old habits, make decisions. You may have wondered, what does Bepol do

in that office anyway? Well, I do business! Shipbuilding isn't just building; shipbuilding is business, too, and you don't do business in the shipyard alone, you do it in the community too – at least that's the way I see it! That's why I've always included poor Wirdum within my range of concerns. The cooperative cold store is finally a fact, I'm working on a laundry centre now, and it wouldn't surprise me at all if Ilse were to turn the book-lending service into a real public library. A cultivated woman, Niesten, nose always in the books. Then there's education. These are some of the other torches you'll be taking over from me, at least if you're socially minded. And there, too, you'll have to put your own stamp on the work, be able to take your own initiatives. You have to do it your own way – the modern way!”

Niesten was still sitting back in his chair, motionless. Yes, indeed, the man who was known for striking iron was now apparently struck dumb by all the benefits, duties and expectations that were descending on him. Bepol watched with growing pleasure, and to show Niesten his strength he kept on pounding, now fully at ease.

“And then there's still the financial side of business to discuss,” he said. “One of these days I'll go through the contracts with you, I'll teach you how to call for tenders.”

“And then you'll have to become acquainted with the notary, nothing happens these days without the notary,” he said.

“And you should come with me to the bank sometime. That's something else again. The notary is for consultation, the bank is for business!” He said.

That's when it happened: Niesten looked away from him to the door, as if he were giving in. Bepol beheld the sight with satisfaction, the warmth of a smile spreading across his face. He had never been able to break Niesten's pride, not by refusing him a ship of his own nor by denying him work. But now that everything had been bestowed on him, that is exactly what seemed to be happening.

He poked the fire coals once again, noisily. He winked at Aggie, who sat motionless on the couch, hand clutched over her mouth. He tried to exchange

glances with Ilse, but her head was bent too far over. So he sank back in his chair with a sigh, overcome once more by Niesten's impenetrability. The man was so strange, so different, so utterly different to Bepol himself. If he was a cigar, then Niesten was a cigarette. If he was the tuba, then Niesten was the trumpet. If he was lukewarm, then Niesten was hot or cold. If he was wood, Niesten was iron. If he painted with a fan brush, Niesten etched with a needle. And whereas he had always exercised leadership from the rear like a general, Niesten would be the general who led his troops into battle to break oncoming resistance. Niesten would become a businessman, but he would always be a workman.

“What would you like to be, Niesten? Associate? Partner? Just say the word.”

The smoke hovered over the table. In complete silence Bepol suddenly raised an attentive finger.

“Wait! No, perhaps not: I thought I heard the telephone in the office. Ha! But enough talk about work. First get that house built, because you know something, Niesten? You're not just a hair's breadth from marriage, but a house breadth. Ha! Ha! Ha! Yes, Niesten, another one of those jokes... that sense of humour. You really need it sometimes in the shipyard when the men start complaining. You'll certainly need it in your marriage!”

He turned to Niesten and laughed; he looked laughingly at Aggie and then at Ilse. Aggie's eyes flashed above the hand over her mouth; Ilse could not look back – her head was still bent over too far. When he turned his gaze back to Niesten he noticed something had changed; Niesten had taken his cap from the windowsill and, leaning forward, was spinning it on his knee. Then he stood up.

Struck by a wild urgency, Bepol stood up, too. “You're leaving? But not so fast. Aren't we forgetting something?”

From far away he heard Aggie's voice, but it hardly registered with him now. The only thing he knew was that his sense of urgency was beginning to shift; he was going to give everything to Niesten, and by giving him all his possessions he was giving himself as well. Driven by a power he did not yet

recognize, he stepped right in front of the young man, who had barely a background, a name or even an age to call his own, but who nevertheless would possess Ilse, the shipyard and his position. And then Niesten, without one word of thanks or expression of satisfaction, without one tangible sign that he was willing to accept it all, was wanting to leave the house?

Bepol had already reached sideways and taken Niesten's hand. At the same time he drew Ilse up from the couch to stand on his other side. He kept pressing both their hands firmly together as if they were clay and in this way he could somehow blend them. Then he stepped back like an artist from his canvas, to take a better look.

"You may kiss each other," he said, laying his hand on Aggie's shoulder without taking his beaming gaze from the couple.

"Go on, it's all right, it's a sign."

The two young people did not move. Caught in a motionless dance, they stared at a point between their feet.

"Go ahead, Niesten, the man goes first, don't be bashful on my account. I was young once myself! Go on!"

Just as he was about to step forward to set the motionless in motion, something moved. Pressing his cap to his breast, Niesten nodded slightly to Ilse, and turned on his heel. Bepol watched him in bewilderment as he walked out of the room, shoulders erect as always. The front door slammed shut and Ilse, too, ran from the room. For a moment Bepol thought she was following Niesten, then he heard her footsteps drumming on the stairs.

"What? Why?" he said, looking first at the empty doorway and then at Aggie who, without so much as returning his glance, straightened and left the room, arms outstretched.

Finally Bepol walked out of the room. He stood in the hallway as the first gasping sob sounded from upstairs and the motorbike was kick-started out in the yard. Opening the front door he caught one last glimpse of the little red light before it disappeared round the corner of the forge.

Sample translation from

***The New Man* by Thomas Rosenboom (Amsterdam: Querido, 2003)**

Translated by Michiel Horn

CHAPTER VII

After the wedding

The wedding took place at Appingedam town hall, the reception at the hotel next door. The shipyard workers presented a clock to the couple and returned home; dinner began with a speech by Bepol. He had wanted to invite several gentlemen from 't Hoogezand, Bodewes, Pattje, and Van Diepen, but the bride and groom had vetoed this. They gave as their reason that they didn't know these people.

That was how three coaches came to be swaying back to Wirdum through the darkness: first the one with the aunt from Groningen and her unmarried female companion, then Bepol's carriage, the roof rack loaded with gifts and the clock in the trunk, then finally the barber and his family, bringing up the rear. Although everyone had said goodbye to each other in Appingedam, when they reached the shipyard their carriages came to a halt and they exchanged renewed farewells. The entire village was already asleep, not a single light burned anywhere, only the outside light of the new house sent splintered rays through the bare branches of the willows – because of the festive homecoming Bepol had turned it on just before they left. Ilse and the young unmarried woman embraced, sobbing with emotion; a final farewell, best wishes, then the barber's coach disappeared among the market gardens, the aunt's coach rode on to Groningen, and the four people who were left behind followed their own coach on to the

grounds, Ilse with her bridal bouquet pressed to her bosom. It had been a windless, grey day; the shipyard flag Bepol had run up drooped limp and black from the flagpole.

Past the corner of the smithy, the outside light of the new house came into view again, more brightly this time – yet Bepol headed straight for the old house: that light did not beckon but actually warned him off, it was too early, it would be too abrupt, besides, he still had a surprise left. He opened his front door and switched on the outside light there as well, the second light in all of Wirdum, two eyes that looked at each other, and in that new light their wedding clothes suddenly looked strange to him, now that none of the other guests were left: the lace veil that hung over Ilse's face down to her shoulders looked like snow on her white wedding gown; he could hardly see Gathie's face because of the enormous hat she was wearing; like Niesten, he himself was wearing a tailcoat.

“Well, now, shall we have a nightcap, or do you two want to go...?”

Just in time, Bepol halted before the abyss that his question opened up; to close it, he broke into jovial laughter, while Niesten leaned over towards Ilse and she nodded under her veil in agreement.

“Splendid,” he shouted. “A last glass to allow us to have a chat about what happened, we've got all the time in the world!” He gave the driver the key to the new house with instructions to take all the presents inside, walked through to the living room and switched on the lamps, the one by the book case, the chandelier, and all the others he saw there. When he heard Niesten's footsteps behind him he began to stir up the fire noisily, pretending to feel more cold than he actually did, although he did feel a shiver run down his spine.

Moments later high heels sounded on the floor, muffled by rustling silk; it was as if an oriental princess was entering, accompanied by a lady-in-waiting or a duenna, even though this one no longer wore a hat but just her usual hairdo. Leaving the poker in the stove door, Bepol went to the sideboard where he poured the wine. After this they sat around the coffee table just as they had that first time, Ilse and Gathie sitting beside each other on the sofa and Niesten

opposite them on the chair by the window, his hat resting on the windowsill – the tailcoat looked good on him, and Ilse looked uncommonly pretty, with her veil still down. The way she held her bridal bouquet it looked as though it was growing from her lap.

“Well then, now, let’s just be happy with each other – there’s nothing else to be done,” said Bepol, but as soon as he looked around the circle, his glass raised, he felt he had to say more, to propose a toast in any case, and quickly, because the silence had at once filled up with embarrassment: it was the last hour before the wedding night...

“Two voices, one song!”

The others drank without knowing what they were drinking to; Bepol went on to explain the toast.

“Yes, that is the harmony of marriage, how should I say it, perhaps using yet another metaphor, a metaphor especially for you, Niesten, a metaphor that fits you the way a regional dish fits a region! Think for a moment...”

At the same time as Niesten, but much more emphatically, he put his glass back on the table; then, in one continuous motion, he leaned back heavily in his chair – he folded the fingertips of both hands together, looked up obliquely and tasted the wine on his lips, seeking to find a word in it, a sentence with which he could begin; then he inhaled heavily, tested the air in his expanding chest, filled himself full of speech.

Then he said: “Rivet holes.”

The words fell like bird droppings from a clear sky. Niesten, still leaning forward over his glass, immediately raised his head to look Bepol straight in the face; even Ilse and Agatha, who so far hadn’t moved at all, abruptly turned their heads to him with an air of surprise mixed with reticence.

“Rivet holes,” Bepol repeated, unperturbed, nodding to himself now, as though the metaphor were still taking shape in his mind, “every rivet hole is preordained to correspond to another hole; if both holes line up perfectly, the way two souls sometimes do, then together they make up just one opening; when the

holes merely overlap, the opening is off-centre, and in the worst case it is a blind opening. But wait, even if the two holes line up perfectly to make one new round hole, then one crucial element needed to make the desired connection is still lacking: compatibility is not enough, in riveting the rivet is also essential, just as in marriage the two souls, however much in harmony, are actually connected only by that other, spiritual rivet that is called love, or affection... Cheers!"

Beaming, his glass raised high once more, Bepol gazed around the circle. The women were looking straight ahead again, Ilse hidden under her veil, Gathie expressionless beside her, but a subtle smile had appeared around Niesten's mouth, the smile of the person who had been addressed, a knowing smile; he, too, lifted his glass from the table again, by the stem, very delicately, as if he were picking a flower – but would he be able, later, in the dark, to soften the familiar up and down of his hammer strokes into the back and forth of a caress?

Instantly the silence was once more filled with awareness of the forthcoming sexual intercourse, and the almost tangible awkwardness of the moment was nothing but a translucent curtain behind which it would soon take place. Turning away, Bepol rattled the poker back and forth, then broke into coughing; although he usually coughed to relieve a tickle in his throat, this time he coughed to rid himself of something intangible, a discomfort of the spirit.

"But enough of philosophy," he said, emptied his glass, and resumed, "We're sitting here, just making polite conversation, and tomorrow life goes on, right? Yes, Niesten, we're going to be doing great things."

Barely had he touched on this new topic than, talking without a pause, he latched onto it as if it were a pole he could climb, lifting himself away from the swampy, sucking ground under his feet; he spoke of invoices and balances, of tenders and contracts, and the higher he got, the smaller Niesten became, helpless without hammer or steel, the successor who so far didn't know what his new position entailed.

"I'll show you everything later in the office, yours or mine," he concluded reassuringly, "we'll spend a lot of hours together there, it'll be a complete course

of study, but don't let me get too far ahead of myself – that would be quite something, I could end up chasing my own tail! Ha, ha, ha.”

Bepol let his laugh bounce away, like a ball on the floor; he laughed like someone who wanted to show how it was done, but Niesten kept a straight face throughout; perhaps he couldn't hear him properly, had become hard of hearing because of all that hammering and for that reason sat there so impassively, as if everything that had come his way that day was only his due – or had he, Bepol, used that line before?

“Gathie, a man who gets so far ahead of himself that he ends up chasing his own tail!” he turned to her, still chuckling. “Just imagine that – or had you heard that line already? This memory of mine...”

But Gathie didn't seem to hear him either, nor even to see him; she just shrugged her shoulders, whereupon Bepol turned back to Niesten and, again in a comic manner, raised his hands helplessly: he was at a loss.

Everything stopped moving again; inside the house it was as motionless as the water in the canal outside – but that was mere appearance, below the surface the evening rushed ever more rapidly and inexorably towards the seething waterfall of passions that were waiting at the end, perhaps no more than an hour from now, less than that if no one spoke.

“And then there's advertising and attracting business,” he continued, “ – very important, that; Van Diepen has done pioneering work in this area, the orders he has managed to pull in by means of model contracts and letters of recommendation, even from Germany, along the Elbe and the Ems – simply marvellous! We have to do that too, even at this time, in spite of the slump, but hold on, I want to go one step farther: why should it always be freighters, why should we cling to that Groningen tradition and not be allowed to consider patrol ships or pilot boats? Just imagine, an order from the Ministry of Waterways, the Customs Department, or the police... Yes, Niesten, the modern entrepreneur is someone who seeks new roads to travel, who does the unexpected, who has complete hulls on hand, for example, especially during periods of weak demand

like the present, so as to be able to supply in double-quick time as soon as the tide turns, who perhaps even orders them somewhere else, from other shipyards with which he first cooperates, then forms a community of interests, and finally merges, because that's the way things are headed, it has already happened at Bugsier Hamburg, Smit and Internationale in Rotterdam are bound to follow suit, the salvage industry is way ahead in this, there the future reveals itself most clearly, that's a whole new way of doing business: tugs that don't just tow but lie at anchor in predetermined locations, around the ocean, just lie there waiting, listening for the SOS – then the signal: Mayday... The engines roar; cast off and head out to sea, at the most ungodly hours, a race against the clock and against the competition – that is bound to attract young people, that's something completely different from harbour work, piloting some boring freighter in and out, *that* is adventure, it's speed and technology: Marconi's telegraph key, the direction finder, and of course these new internal combustion engines, so compact and so powerful... I predict that it's also going to bring major changes in road traffic!"

Nielsen said nothing, but an answer came all the same, from the side, from Gathie: "And I tell you it's already happening! Come on, Berend, don't... these young people have just been married!"

Very slowly Berend turned her way; she granted him only a brief exchange of glances, then at once she returned her sparkling eyes to the middle distance before her; smiling, Berend turned back to Nielsen, now in full accord – by touching on the subject about which Bepol had heard him speak in the smithy it was as though he had touched him, perhaps even held his interest during the length of the explanation – but Nielsen remained impassive, seemed abstracted even, trapped perhaps between his new role, which he was not yet able to play, and his old, which because of the continuing inactivity in the shipyard he couldn't play; he was also unwilling to drink more, so that Bepol, hunched over, topped up only his own glass.

“Of course, of course,” he said when Gathie’s words finally penetrated to him; they had come from so far away, they had been underway so long in the hesitant silence in which he asked himself how he could put Niesten at his ease, could reassure him that the prospects were no worse here than anywhere else, “of course what I’d love to do more than anything else is to start on a new ship tomorrow, just like that, without an order, for my own account, on speculation, but what that leads to is demonstrated by Pattje’s three-masted schooner, which still lies unsold at the quay – no, don’t think that the situation in ’t Hoogezand is better than here, because of the low freight rates they’re not doing any work at all over there – but when they go up again, and the traffic on the Rhine increases, then we’ll be the first to profit from it.... Why? Because of our location, Niesten, that’s why... thanks to the Ems Canal!”

He snorted, laughed briefly, and explained: the new canal had been intended to revive the city of Groningen as a seaport, but the real growth had actually taken place at the other end, closest to the sea, because shipowners and freight handlers preferred to transfer their goods there and transport them inland on barges; to the extent that Delfzijl, with its trans-shipment of Russian cereals, Scandinavian timber, and English coal, was developing into the seaport Groningen had wanted to become, the city was declining ever more to the status of inland port.

“Look at it this way, Niesten,” he concluded, “Delfzijl stopped working for Groningen years ago; in its role of hinterland Groningen is working for Delfzijl now, that’s why I thank my lucky stars that we’re so close to Delfzijl here, a lot closer than the shipyards at ’t Hoogezand. These are factors from which in time you’ll be able to extract entirely new possibilities – but now we’re no longer talking about enterprise, this is pure economics.”

The clock ticked, the lights burned, there was a small explosion in the stove, moments later a clinker fell from the ashpan. The poker, still in the stove, spread the smell of hot iron in the fire, the smell of riveting.

So as not to talk too much, Bepol stopped talking. To persist in his abstinence, he went over the pattern of the day's thoughts in his mind: the house had been built, the wedding had taken place, there was a successor in place. Ponderous and pleased with himself, the way a respected figure of authority might feel, he reconsidered what he had set into motion, and involuntarily his gaze drifted sideways to Ilse on the couch. She appeared in the corner of his eye like a distant mountain top covered in snow, then it seemed as if she were trying, with might and main, to transform her flesh into foam under the gauze of her veil – but then she coughed and her body resolidified.

“Two partners, one partnership!” Bepol dashed off a variation on his first toast, now raising his glass to Niesten only. “We'll have to pay a visit to the notary one of these days for the formalities; then I'll put the ownership of the shipyard in the form of a limited company and you'll get to own half the shares as a gift, provided a benefit like that doesn't trouble you too much, otherwise I'll lend you the money you need to buy in... though that solution carries with it the danger that you'll think of yourself as working only for me, instead of for yourself – I already warned you about that at the time of the Festina affair, that you would start hating me over it. I'm just trying to be mindful of your feelings... that's essential in a marriage, too! But whatever way it's done, once you are are legally a partner, and later my successor, then you'll go and make yourself known, and drum up business, and in the end you'll enter mergers as well...”

Niesten said nothing, did nothing, except that he put a cigarette between his lips; Bepol did the same with a cigar. When he didn't see a match he pulled the poker from the stove and lit his cigar from it; after that he held the red hot end of the poker across the table to Niesten, to offer him a light too – but the flame of a lighter already flickered.

“Yes, Niesten, mergers, that's the future... marriage is a merger too!” he began again, while he put the poker back into the stove and noisily pushed it back and forth several times. “The bonds of cooperation will grow ever stronger, the shipyards will join up with their suppliers, they in turn with their suppliers, and

so on, ad infinitum, that is the socialistic ideal that I, as entrepreneur, see before me: no struggle, no more competition among the businesses, they're all connected with each other by an invisible web of strings, feeding and fertilizing each other, just as the mycelium and the mushrooms do! All of Groningen has become one industry, the whole country, finally the whole world – but that isn't economics any more, that's politics..."

He drew on his cigar, blew the smoke into the air, and looked up pensively. The small cloud of smoke curled its way along the light of the chandelier like a ball of glass.

"Lord, lord," he sighed, "I'm already so contented with the here and now, and then the future is still to come... When does it begin? Now... and now... and now... always now, I don't know why... it's philosophy!"

Counting the beat of the ticking clock he spread his fingers, after he had spread them all the clock kept on ticking, counting, counting down – the end of the evening drew closer with ever-increasing force, in order not to be dragged along he had to talk more rapidly, against the undertow in the wild water of the canal...

"A moment ago it began again, the future, now already in the past – your future as partner too, Niesten, yes, and that is why I say: to our cooperation!"

Just as a moment ago he had offered the poker to Niesten, Bepol now extended his glass to him for a new toast; but Niesten was not a drinker, did not even raise his empty glass.

"But that is bound to go well," he continued, while bending over to put down his glass – he could no more sit still than remain silent. "Of course we confronted each other once, over that hammering incident back then, but that was not a personal confrontation, that was a class confrontation... But look at yourself now, Niesten, pocket handkerchief, tailcoat, a glass of wine on the table and a shipyard nearby, just married and a house of your own at the other side of the yard; no, you lack nothing, I can see that, a whole lot has happened to you since

the stone-breaking shed last year. Now you even belong to the property-owning class!”

Niستن pulled up a trouser leg, crossed his legs, and looked intently at his gleaming shoes, just as if he consisted only of his festive clothes and in a little while would have to do no more than hang himself over the bedside chair.

“Incidentally, that position does carry quite a lot of responsibility,” Bepol hurried on, “I already felt that where your father was concerned... A great pity that he didn’t live to see this day, I already mentioned that in my speech at the dinner, how proud he would have been... A very fine worker he was, and it was so enjoyable when he smoked his pipe during the break, nice and warm in the smithy... an employer sees that with pleasure, Niستن, you’ll find that yourself!”

Although he was the only one who was still drinking, the bottle gradually emptied; gracefully, from an ever greater height, Bepol poured the tail end of the bottle into his glass – there was more in the sideboard where it came from.

“But that responsibility doesn’t just involve the workforce, it extends across the community!” he continued, now simultaneously waving cigar and glass about. “Because of that social feeling I battled the Appingedam politicians a while ago to get the cold storage facility, and these days I’m concerned about a central laundry – in that regard, too, you’ll be my successor, Niستن, at least if you share my concern... Give some thought to what you may want, at city hall this afternoon I gave the matter of the central laundry a rest, but I’ll bring that one to completion yet – so that you’ll be able to get going on something completely new, you’ll have to do it your own way, in a modern fashion, talk about it with your wife – it wouldn’t surprise me at all, for example, if the lending library here expanded into a proper reading room some day... But then there will have to be more construction! That will mean putting pressure on the politicians... that means getting involved in politics yourself!”

By talking just as fast as the passage of time, he talked the clock to a draw, but then when he fell silent the clock kept on ticking, as impatient as a human being, as imperative as the tapping of a fingernail on a table top; his conversation

resembled walking on thin ice: as soon as he halted, it began to crack unbearably and he had to keep on going, but he didn't know what else to say, oh yes, two more things.

He said: "But we haven't spoken at all about the guests and the gifts; all of the employees were there – that magnificent clock – you two are bound to find an inscription on it somewhere!"

And he said: "Also, Niesten, as partner you can have the barber shave you every day, just like me... yes, when he's through with me tomorrow morning, shall I send him over to you right after? Or is that too early, perhaps you two want..."

Too late he realized he was veering off the road; still moving at full speed he slammed against the manure tank he had studiously tiptoed around all evening long; scraping his shoulder against the rough masonry, he came to a halt – a short dizzy spell, then just like that he began to laugh, very quietly, just as he had at the beginning of the evening; his laughter was soothing, like being dabbed gently with a compress; he kept on laughing until his embarrassment had subsided, then he saw Niesten extinguish his cigarette and look at the clock, to note the time, the never-failing accomplice of the unavoidable – and only at that moment did he suddenly remember that he had a surprise in store.

"Wait!" he cried, leaping up from his chair, "I almost forgot!"

He bustled away, past the bookcase, and returned contentedly with a large box wrapped in checked paper, which he put down squarely on the table.

"Unwrap it, please!"

Niesten tore off the paper, opened the lid, and took out a heavy object that he cautiously put back in the box a moment later: it was a telephone, a bakelite table model with a copper receiver.

"For your office!" Bepol explained – because he was standing up and Niesten was still seated he could look down on his head, and for the first time that evening he thought: son-in-law. "You see how important it is to me that you should have a fully-equipped office of your own? In order not to give the secret

away, I haven't had it connected yet, but that will happen soon... Then we'll be able to phone each other... imagine that, while we can see each other from our offices... Ha, ha!"

Overcome by the intoxication of giving, he suddenly thought of something else, and while he stumbled over to the sideboard he chuckled to himself about something else again: just before the departure for Appingedam that afternoon – Ilse and Gathie were occupied in Ilse's old room, Niesten was helping to harness the horse – in that feverish hustle and bustle just before the departure he had sneaked unseen into the new house with a basket of freshly-picked crocuses, up the stairs to the bedroom; when he emerged moments later the lilac-coloured petals lay hidden under the blanket of the bridal bed as a fragrant surprise, in the form of a large, graceful B, his signature, which in a little while would become his greeting.

Since Niesten's first visit no ship had been launched, and so the shipyard revolver had not been used since then either. Bepol found it in the drawer where he had put it away and brought it back to the table, to Niesten, who was looking at him.

"For you," he said gravely, while thrusting the weapon at Niesten. "At the next launch you will be the one to fire the shot; we're going to work in a new way, but we'll honour the old traditions!"

Niesten nodded; from above Bepol couldn't see whether he felt happy or was otherwise moved.

"Always shoot up on the diagonal," he said briskly, while demonstrating with an outstretched arm. "A falling bullet is dangerous too, so you always shoot up on the diagonal, over the heads of the line of young people already waiting on the other side to jump over the wave – oh, yes, indeed, those days will return! Here it is... it isn't loaded right now, I'll teach you how to handle it... please take it..."

Niesten now got up to accept the gift; he weighed the weapon in his hand, drew himself up even taller as though he were going to put it in his trouser

pocket, but then put it back on the table. After that he shook Bepol's hand and took his hat off the windowsill, putting it on at once.

It was finished, it was going to start now.

“And you two also get a bottle of wine to take with you!”

Bepol feverishly searched the sideboard; when he found the best bottle and turned around, Niesten had picked up the heavy box, and Gathie and Ilse had got up, too. His wife approached him, and the bride joined the groom. Feeling a lump in his throat, Bepol swallowed: in no way did Niesten's tailcoat suit him now, after all, he was wearing it only because he was flesh. Ilse's veil, too, seemed to have changed: all evening long it had atomized her into foam and shadow, now it actually gave her an edible touch, sweet, made of spun sugar.

Imperceptibly they began to move, the bridal couple taking the lead, Niesten with the telephone under one arm and Ilse on his other; behind them the parents of the bride, separated, because Bepol had his hands full with the revolver and the bottle. Just as he had done at the beginning, when they had entered, he made all sorts of reassuring noises: he recalled the aubade played by the band, praised the dignified light lunch afterwards, with eggs and cold cuts, and this way finally got to the after-dinner chat that had been the objective at the outset – until they reached the front door.

The embarrassment that had been banished from the living room seemed to have collected here and hovered in the sudden silence like a miasma; in order not to have to smell it, Ilse hid her face in the bridal bouquet, while Niesten took his leave from Gathie with a bow and then extended his free arm to Bepol, not to shake his hand but inquiringly, offering to take the bottle and revolver from him.

“No, no,” he immediately fended off the gesture. “I'll accompany you to your door...”

At the same moment that he opened the door with his elbow he saw a fast, white flash of movement from the corner of his eye, and at the same time he heard a sob; it was Ilse, who had thrown herself into Gathie's arms, but only very briefly; she disengaged herself at once, she put her hand back on Niesten's elbow

and so, once more fully in control of herself, she walked outside with him, right past Bepol, whom she seemed not to see at all, blinded as she perhaps already was by the dazzling brightness of the outside lamp on the other side. Gathie, who seemed to have been turned to stone, stared at her daughter's receding back.

"I'll be back in a moment!" Bepol said. "I'll just help carry this." He stepped outside, and just before the door closed behind him he heard Gathie burst out sobbing too.

The heavens had cleared, there was wind now; stars twinkled everywhere in the inky sky, the shipyard flag flapped languidly from the flagpole. The door of the new house was bathed in light; above it the bedroom dormer window, designed by Ilse, was dark. To the left of the door Niesten's motorcycle stood gleaming, as if waiting for him to ride off – but he walked straight on, still with the telephone under one arm and Ilse on the other.

After a few rapid steps Bepol had come so close to catching up with them that for an instant the outside light was obscured by their two bodies just ahead of him, nothing but penumbras around their contours but still two bodies, which shortly they would offer to each other, exchange, and join together – the light returned through a widening crack; once again Bepol could see everything, the brand-new door swinging open, the heaped-up presents in the hall, the key that Niesten slid back into his pocket and after that how he stepped aside, for Ilse, who stepped across the threshold by herself and went into the living room without a backward glance. Niesten entered too, he put the box down inside the door and seemed surprised that there was someone still outside the door when he turned to close it.

"Here you are," said Bepol, handing him the revolver and the bottle of wine. The smell of fresh stucco drifted out of the hall, and suddenly, disconcertingly loud in the silence, a clock began to strike, the clock from the shipyard workers that must have been set down somewhere nearby: twelve times, midnight. Compelled by the force of the sound Bepol stood and listened until the

last stroke, only then could he take his leave. Niesten rose high above him, still wearing his hat which cast a black shadow over his eyes.

The door closed.

Even then Bepol kept on standing there.

The feeling of strangeness within must have been enormous; the outside light was turned off, came on again and went out once more – Niesten wasn't sure, because he opened the door to have a look.

“Yes, it's off,” Bepol said from the darkness.

He walked back pensively; the light was on in the master bedroom; Gathie had already gone upstairs. He entered the house, turned off his own outside light, all the other downstairs lights as well, and went upstairs.

Gathie sat hunched up on the left side of the bed, on the other side hung the mirror. It was his habit always to greet his image in a friendly gesture, but this time he walked straight over to the window.

“I've put flower petals in the bridal bed,” he confessed, his voice quavering with anticipation.

In the house opposite, at first there was light only in the living room, then a light went on upstairs as well, somewhat later the downstairs light went out – while in this way the new house was winking to the old one, Bepol held on to the windowsill: now someone was going upstairs over there; would they laugh as they turned back the covers and understand that he was responsible?

Only the dormer light was still on, an empty square glowing yellow in the roof, until Niesten's dark silhouette came to the window.

Bepol waved.

Niesten pulled the curtain shut.

“That boy is nervous!” Bepol exclaimed without looking back. “We were too, do you remember?”

Later, when a measureless void had come into his heart, he stared over the roof of the house into the dark distance. The lighthouse beam restlessly circled the sky above Delfzijl. When Gathie's first sob penetrated his awareness he went

and sat down next to her and pulled her down slowly to lie down beside him. They were both still fully dressed, it had been a long time since they had lain down on the bed that way.

“Yes, that’s the way it is,” he said, while Gathie wept in his arms like a girl, “those youngsters have their own life... and we have each other... dear, sweet little Gathie!”

Sample translation from

***The New Man* by Thomas Rosenboom (Amsterdam: Querido, 2003)**

Translated by Nancy Forest-Flier

CHAPTER XV

The decisive round

The lamp was still on in the living room. He hung his hat over the coal scuttle and, yawning from the cold, sat down beside the stove. He opened the slide, poked the fire and lost himself in the warmth. Then seized by a violent shudder, he walked out of the room, his coat still on, through the kitchen and into his office.

There was no more movement under the stern. Niesten had already stopped digging. The nearby house, dark and shut, was shrouded in apparent abandonment; a moonbeam flickered on the motorbike still leaning carelessly against it.

Bepol lowered himself behind his desk, without turning on his own light. He lit a cigar, not knowing whether he was solvent or bankrupt, and stared up at the darkness at the day's remaining flashes: the tensing and releasing of the moorings that had marked its passing; the greedy, smirking men; glances exchanged among his own people, a hand coming and going over the rail.

The telephone gleamed; all else dissolved into the surrounding blackness while he sat motionless in the dark, thoughts racing. Niesten doing the same in the house across the way. But why were no lights lit there? Was Niesten in the

house at all? Perhaps he had climbed on board and was standing on the bridge turning the wheel, like the boy he still really was, no more than a nail boy.

Bepol smiled paternally, then started up and stared once again at the still darkened house. It was dark on the Seawolf as well. Where was Niesten? How were his spirits? Was he too ashamed now to bear the light? Perhaps he was also ashamed, over the recent episode of foolish digging, the fit of rage. But why should he be? After all, no one had seen that, only Bepol. Niesten really ought to be less preoccupied with himself, always that kerchief, and that cap.

Once again Bepol attempted a fatherly smile, at the same time peering round the yard. His glance swept back to the house like a searchlight. Suddenly light had flashed on behind the parlour curtains. Deeply startled, he began laughing good-naturedly with relief: Niesten was simply at home! In response to the signal he switched on his light at once so that if Niesten peered through the opening in the curtains he in turn would know where Bepol was and not think he had forgotten him. At the same time he realized how visible he now was and decided that he ought to strike a pose. He removed his coat, took the Merchant Shipping Act from one of the drawers and walked over to the desk with it, as if he had just entered his office to do some work.

He sat for a short time, bent forward, sniffing his fingers, but soon stood up once again and looked outside. Just then the upstairs light went on in the other house, behind the curtains of the dormer window.

Before he could move a shudder ran through him, just as the Seawolf had shuddered that time the engine was being started. He broke free from his paralysis, the power released driving him from his office, and stumbled through the kitchen and continued on into the hallway and upstairs. He turned on the light in the bedroom, made an appearance between the opened curtains at the window and, gasping and beaming at the same time, grabbed the windowsill. Here was another sign from Niesten that he had responded to, promptly and in kind!

The moon shone through the clouds. Here and there a star twinkled. The flag was fluttering – the wind had got up, the sky stretched open, and far in the

distance the faint glow of Delfzijl was visible through the immense, pitch-black canopy.

When the curtains remained closed in the other house and nothing else happened there, the ship rose more emphatically above it, fixed in varnish, much steadier stationed here than it could ever be in Cuxhaven. It was built like a gigantic cap, the rotating beam of the lighthouse shining all around like a corona. After Bepol had stared long enough, he forced his gaze higher and looked out at all there was to see in the night sky over Germany – the morning came from there.

As he left, he paused at the threshold and winked the light, switching it off and on again, and then went laughing down the stairs. They had to have a little fun with each other, what choice was left, everyone else was gone!

The living room began to warm up. The poker was still in the stove, and he rattled it back a few times, then went straight through to the kitchen and turned on the light there as well. It was quite late now and he had to cook – for two, since cooking was obviously not something Niesten could do. He never had. And if he were suddenly to appear at the door he would bound to be famished – from the fiasco!

Like a real manservant he put on Aggie's white pinafore, showing that as far as he was concerned the age of domesticity had come. The pans on the cooker still held food from the previous day, when the guests had left prematurely. Instead of warming it up he threw it away, along with his cigar, and started preparing an entirely new meal. Bubbling with hospitality, he peeled the potatoes, washed the chicory, and crossed in front of the window – if Niesten were to see him thus occupied, that alone would make him hungry. If it weren't for his pride and shame he would have tapped at the window long ago.

Although his kitchen skills were not highly developed, his gestures were grand and he kept making lighthearted, or at least reassuring, sounds with his voice with everything he did and touched.

“There.” He put the potatoes in a full pan of water and set the pan on the cooker, shook in salt from the shaker held high above his head, and did the same with the vegetable.

“Now the meat.” He took two seared ribs from the fat and placed them on a plate ready to fry later on. That was all he could do at this stage.

“Done. Now a little rest!” He turned to the door, wiping his hands. After two steps he halted, finger held aloft. “Dessert!”

He had forgotten dessert. There was one dessert he was good at making, and he had almost forgotten it! After he had gone upstairs for a clean tea towel, he returned to the kitchen humming. He tied the four corners of the towel together to form a pouch, hung the pouch from the tap and poured in a whole bottle of buttermilk, which had only to drain and thicken for his speciality to be complete: *hangop*, real East Indian *hangop*. As a finishing touch he placed a jar of stewed prunes on the counter. Then he returned to the parlour with a light step.

A tablecloth flapped through the air, dishes and cutlery clattered out of the cupboard, a cork sprang from the bottle, a candle was lit: all was ready.

Holding a glass of cognac under his nose, Bepol sat beside the stove. His eyes roved over the champagne bottle, the ship’s canister, the stack of flags and the barometer on the sideboard, absent-mindedly poking the fire every now and then, basking in the warmth of togetherness. For they were together now, for the first time – each in his own house, true enough, but in the same grounds, with no one else around, and all the more together since they had achieved their togetherness by driving everyone away – he the men, with words, Niesten the rest with the shot, followed by exactly the same thing, his words. Yes, his successor had really succeeded him this evening. Where on earth was he?

The clock ticked. In the kitchen a lid began rattling, then another. Bepol could no sit still, and he went to stand before the window, black yet as reflective as a mirror. The pinafore looked good on him, he thought. He untied it, and turned sideways, leaning back a bit and looking over his shoulder at the gracefully hanging pleats on his back – first with his hands in the pockets, then on

his hips, then with the index finger along his cheek and the thumb under the chin. A moment later he combed his sideburns with a fork from the table, using it to clean his nails as well, and then put the fork back beside the plate.

Bepol polished the glasses.

Bepol folded the napkins.

Back in the kitchen when the food had finished cooking, he saw that nothing seemed to have changed in the other house – except that he no longer knew where Niesten was. Upstairs still? Back downstairs in the parlour? Perhaps he, too, was standing this very moment at one of the unlit windows.

With the same graceful movements as when he started the meal, he took the potatoes from the cooker, drained them, shook them as if shaking a rug, and did the same with the chicory. As long as he kept moving through the steam, he released his good mood as a flower releases its fragrance, a bird its song. He wiped the steamed window with his arm, emptied the pans into serving dishes, took down the salt and nutmeg cellars and shook them, one in each hand in alternating strokes – from the outside he must have looked like a drummer, or a farmer at his milking – until suddenly he stopped, and, very calmly, bent attentively over the pouch with the buttermilk. He dipped his finger in, stuck it in his mouth, and nodded approvingly – but could do no more just yet than pick up the dishes and leave the kitchen.

It was very warm now in the living room. The food sat steaming on the table. Sitting beside the stove, Bepol lit a fresh cigar and leaned forward with exhaustion, his elbows on his knees. The tobacco smouldered, the smoke curled up, pots continued to drain in the kitchen – so much was happening that he no longer had anything to do. All the peace that this would otherwise have given him was replaced by a nagging disquiet that stole up on him and penetrated his weariness with increasing urgency. When he looked round he saw that the food was no longer steaming, but the glasses were still sparkling and the candle was still alight, like a single beacon of benevolence, even now, now more than ever. If Niesten was in doubt, he need only look inside. But how could he possibly doubt,

after the house and the marriage? Was it never enough? What did Niesten blame him for that kept him from coming? What was holding him back? It couldn't be his pride, not now!

He laughed briefly, fiercely poking the fire back and forth through the grate, lost himself in wordless musing, and returned to the kitchen to take a quick look outside.

Thus the minutes strung themselves together, and accumulated into hours of sitting, walking and waiting, while the candle on the table grew shorter, the buttermilk in the towel thicker, the blackness behind the window deeper.

It was the clock striking eleven that made him sit bolt upright in his chair, momentarily surprised by the apron he was wearing. The cognac glass still hung from his fingers, but his cigar had gone out – he must have fallen asleep. As the last chime sounded he stood up, fingered the flaps a bit, sat again, stood up once more and walked to the kitchen, suddenly in a hurry – but too late. It had already happened. No sooner did he see it than the weight drained out of him. To get a closer look, he slid farther into his office, pressed his face to the window and found he was as light as electricity.

No light was burning in the other house. It was completely dark now – but the motorbike was still leaning against it.

The final stroke of darkness, from maybe ten minutes before, had quietly been waiting for Bepol and it came upon him now, unexpectedly and out of nowhere, on his temples. He shook his head, sank dizzily behind his desk, and stared hard at the other house through the window in the door. The lights must have been just recently extinguished. If only he had seen which went out first. If it had been the downstairs light, he would know that Niesten was now upstairs; if the upstairs light, then – his line of reasoning flared up for a moment and unfurled like an article of clothing falling to the floor. Niesten could be anywhere now: in bed, downstairs in the kitchen, on board the ship, somewhere outside in the yard or the path at the back – it was no longer possible to determine his whereabouts. Or was there still a way to drive him from cover? His hand hovered over the

telephone. He dialled the number, crouched down, and stared back at the sightless house.

The ringing must have been ear-splitting there in the darkness; even he himself could barely stand to hear it. He held the receiver to his head with two hands as if to absorb the recoil from each shot that he fired into the other house. His eyes glittered, his lips drew across his face as he recalled the first time he had dialled the telephone that way, and as the volley continued his smile expanded, until he saw that the corner room remained dark and his call was not being answered. If Niesten thought it was Ilse, calling from the home of the young lady in Groningen to tell him she had arrived safely and to wish him good-night, he would have picked up long before this. But no, he knew all too well that it must be *him*, that was why he didn't answer! Yes, indeed, they were starting to understand each other.

Flushed with understanding he hung up. In the ensuing silence he stiffened. Perhaps Niesten hadn't answered simply because he was no longer indoors. The fact was that he could be anywhere.

The total change in the house across the way finally overcame Bepol as well. A shadow was cast over his heart, a new disquiet rose within him. Seeking refuge in immobility, he moved nothing but his eyes, peering self-consciously into the outer darkness, searching the impenetrable surrounding motionlessness that gradually took on a life of its own. Afraid of betraying himself with the smallest gesture and becoming visible once more, he dared not even turn out the light beside him. Now and then a kitchen tap dripped but nothing else could be heard, until out of the silence his watch suddenly began to sound ticking in his waistcoat pocket.

Meanwhile the darkened house stood impassively in the grounds like a stranger, a mail-clad trespasser, a suit of armour with its visor closed. Was Niesten still there, or had he crept outside and was he now roaming about, free and noiseless? His presence gathered like a wind, and a draught passed through the office, getting stronger as if he were coming closer...

Bepol could contain himself no longer. Not taking his eyes off the house he groped round sideways and turned off the light. Still groggy, slowly he pulled himself up, and it was only when he locked the outside door that he was finally able to shake off his paralysis. Roused by his action, he stumbled into the kitchen to do the same there, then was propelled into the hallway, where he bolted the front door, the last point of access. Now no one could get in. Sweating heavily, he exhaled with a gasp, breathing again as if there was not a moment to spare. His gaze moved instinctively upstairs – to Ilse’s room, the window that was always open a crack, the flat kitchen roof right under it, the drainpipe...

He went upstairs two steps at a time, then more cautiously, until he was creeping up. He moved stealthily across the dark landing and very slowly pushed down the handle. The door swung open. He stayed in the doorway.

“Niesten?”

In the far distance a water tumbler glittered; the dull lustre of the linen cupboard slid into view, the window became visible – it was still open a crack. There was no answer.

He turned on the light, closed the window, and glanced over the empty kitchen roof. When he then turned off the light again and quietly shut the door, it was as if he had put Ilse to bed. A moment later he turned off the light in his own bedroom that he had left on after his wink-signal. Arms outstretched, he walked to the window.

All was dark now, here and for miles around. Wirdum slept. The house across the way stood out like a barely visible façade, submerged in an inertness that was no longer a quality of lifeless material but an attitude, an act even: the house was *keeping* silence, like a predatory animal about to spring, while inside a heart pumped, breath was drawn, and the motorbike glistened at the corner. In the distance the lighthouse swept its beams across the sky, unendurably monotonous, as thoughtless as a fool unable to stop – if the night were a negro, he would have been tickled to death by feathers of light, almost imperceptibly, stroke after stroke, interminably...

Head spinning with imagery, drawn towards the view, lost in it, Bepol grabbed the windowsill. For more support, and in an attempt to recover his composure, he turned to the mirror above the washbasin – but even his reflection had abandoned him, refusing to appear in the darkness. When he looked out again the house had come one step closer. He fled downstairs, toward the light.

The curtains were pulled closed. All the doors in the living room were locked. Standing at the table, Bepol poured himself a glass of wine and then filled Niesten's glass. It was the time Niesten had first come courting. Aggie and Ilse were there, too, sitting on the sofa.

“Your health!” he pronounced, sweeping round with upraised glass. Then, turning back to the glass on the table, “To our further acquaintance – cigar? Come now, you only live once, at least, we hope so! Ha, ha!”

From the corner of his eye he saw Aggie's expression darken, which did not bother him in the least. It only egged him on.

“There's Aggie, looking disapproving,” he said, turning back to Niesten's glass with a smile and a nod over his shoulder. “She finds remarks like that totally inappropriate, and quite beneath me. She thinks everything about me is soft – his body, his features, his character – it's as if there's nothing but warm milk flowing through his veins. It fills every inch of him: his cheeks, his belly, everything – and then he comes out with something like that? But this kind of thinking is based solely on appearance and prejudice, Niesten. It creates a gulf. Even in my younger years I couldn't overcome that. When someone looks at you like that they rob you of everything: your soul, your freedom. Every glance cast in your direction falls over you like a net. But we shan't make that mistake, shall we? All right, I may look like a cow's udder (ha, ha: there's another bit of good-natured self-deprecation for you), but as we get to know each other better, you'll discover that I, too, have blood boiling within me – I, too, have a sharp side, another side, just like the next man, who often doesn't know he has it and isn't allowed to see it in anyone else. Have I gone too far? All the better. We'll have

no formalities here! And as for that comment I just made, well – let’s call it philosophy! Know thyself. Cheers!”

He raised his glass, emptied it in one gulp, filled it again, and went on talking.

“A little more for you?”

He filled Niesten’s glass, right to the brim this time, and looked down at him, his smile recovered.

“Makes you look like a real gentleman, you know, there with your wine, – a fully paid-up member of the propertied class. You’ve never shown very much in the way of socialism, but the last shreds you had now seem to have vanished. Mind you, I wouldn’t be surprised if your future partner were to choose this very moment to start believing in socialism. Why? Because there’s no other doctrine that so strongly emphasises the difference between workers and gentlemen! Ha, ha! Yes, that’s a side of socialism, too, another side. Personally, I believe more in human equality. If you’d like me to tell you more we can talk about it some time, some other time. Now there are ladies present...”

It was the clock that brought him back. Loud and urgent, the sound of the clock striking half past eleven rang through the living room. It was a magical stroke that stripped everything of its magic. Suddenly everyone was gone. Bepol’s monologue slid from his shoulders like a cloak, leaving him naked in the chill of his desolation.

The poker had remained in the stove so long that the heat had reached the handle, but the living room still wasn’t warm enough for Bepol. Bending forward, he raked up the blazing coals even further with ill-tempered, scraping strokes, afraid of the silence that would ensue if he stopped, then suddenly even more afraid that the noise he was making might drown out another noise that he wouldn’t be able to hear, the noise of breaking glass, a door handle being turned. Which window would Niesten choose to smash? Through which door would he enter the room to wipe off his shame and even the score? What state would he be in? Enraged, because of the locked outside doors? Would he stand there chewing,

as so often? What state was he in now? Was he lying in bed, fully dressed? Was he throwing his legs zombie-like over the edge of the bed? Was he already outside, unstoppable, single-minded, dissolved into the darkness?

Scared rigid in that instant, Bepol listened to the sighing in the air. He gazed around in panic, cowering in his chair as if the entire past year was pressing down on his shoulders. No door handle moved, not a single sound could be heard, the candle flame stood still – yet he immediately felt that pull again. It was the only sensation he could still feel, and it blew at him from every side, and electrified him, and so stultified him that his face lost all expression and form. As his eyes jumped wildly from door handle to door handle, his face looked more and more like a wad of paper, completely empty now that he could no longer think, except for the crooked lines on it – until his lips stretched once again, and his gaze finally found a fixed point, the point that, with all the strength he could muster, he placed at the end of all this empty, unbearable waiting. Good, he would rise and go. If that was what Niesten was challenging him to do, then he would gladly summon the courage to meet him, even in this hour of his deepest despondency. Yes, he would rise and go, but not unarmed. Niesten had the revolver, with three more cartridges.

The breeze had become a blaze, a hot, sweltering invitation to see to the final business, the decisive round, man to man. To prepare himself for the reconciliation he remained seated for a moment. Then he pulled the poker from the stove and stood up.

The night's mad laughter hung noiselessly in the upper air, and beneath it Bepol crossed over to the other house, bare-headed, timid as a bride. A man who had never been bashful, who had yet to know what shyness was – shyness was what he felt now. All his weight gone, he glided forth on a sigh, the sigh of surrender, another man, a new man, whose only desire, now that he could hide himself no longer, was to emerge – a night voyager, floating away from all that lay behind him, unattainable. He had left the door open as if he never intended to return – he had left his house as a bird leaves the egg.

Not until he got outside in the darkness did the poker lighten up, orange, like rust in the sun. It was all anyone would be able to see, looking out from one of the dark windows. To show that he had only come to demonstrate his friendship, Bepol slowly waved the glowing rod back and forth. In a few moments he was halfway. A moonbeam swept over his apron, which from the house must have seemed like the approach of a white flag.

The motorbike was leaning against the corner on the right like someone on the lookout, an ally of the man indoors. He turned instinctively in a slight curve to the left; this was not a visit to be made through the front door. Legs wide apart and squatting low he continued on, not making a sound. He did not walk of his own accord; he drifted through the darkness, as a sailing ship drifts to another ship during a calm, not by its own power but drawn and inevitably by the mass further on.

Yet he reached the window of the office quite suddenly. He placed his free hand above his eyes and bent over towards the glass. He could see nothing, not even if the curtain was open or closed. He tipped his head back a moment, because Niesten was taller than he was, then went on, round the corner of the house.

The Seawolf lay like a gigantic whale unfathomably far away in the meadow, her upper surface gleaming brightly as if wet. Bepol, by now facing the door to the scullery, turned again towards the ship but wavered. If he were seen entering the house now from there he would undoubtedly be followed; then the man he had come to see would actually be at his back. Rooted to the spot, he kept on looking – at the curve of the bow, the ladder that always stuck up above the rail, the tall wheelhouse with the bridge – until the ship faded before him and he knew for certain that no one was on board. At the same time, the house behind him began to exude a warmth that penetrated his skin.

He groped for the door handle and found it, turned it, pushed – the blackness faded before his eyes. He crossed the threshold, bolted the door behind him straightaway for protection – and he was in. They had been together at the

shipyard, each in his own house. They were together at night, while Wirdum slept. Now they were together *inside*, in the house that enveloped Niesten like a body envelops a heart. It was as if he had entered his body.

The darkness in the scullery was thick as blood. He felt pressure on his ears, too, as if he was underwater. When it was clear that he could still breathe he went on.

His sword of light was the only thing he could see. He held it down rigidly while stretching out his other arm – sometimes straight in front to avoid bumping into things, sometimes to the side when he lost his balance. Because he could not see, his balance was minimal, but he kept on moving.

So long as he could feel the rough, uneven bricks under his soles he knew he was in the scullery. Past the doorway the bricks changed to the floor tiles of the kitchen, where here and there he saw something glimmer – the communicating door was standing open; after the digging Niesten has stopped closing it. Then, his free hand guiding him along the kitchen counter, he reached the door to the hallway. This door was closed. Very quietly he pushed it open.

“Niesten?”

He called out into the depths, whispering. He had to make himself known yet dared not reveal himself – but if Niesten had seen him approach, he would be standing directly in front of him right now.

He stood still.

He stepped into the hallway.

Here, too, it was not entirely dark. On the coat rack beside the front door hung the leather motorbike jacket and above it, the cap with the gleaming visor and metal insignia; the banister, shining faintly as well, curved upward. The door to the living room stood open but revealed nothing whatsoever, no matter how long Bepol’s gaze bore down on the space within. He bent forward as if to take a first step, but turned suddenly and walked to the stairs. He grabbed hold of the banister, climbed a few stairs, but paused once more at the turn.

“Niesten?”

Breathless he listened in the silence, gazing up the staircase, until the feeling again came over him that his back was unguarded and he was being approached from behind. He had to retreat, but could not turn around and did not dare let go of the banister. Breaking into a sweat, he looked down over his shoulder; the bottomless blackness beneath him made him reel with vertigo. Retreating, as if descending a ship's stairway, he began working his way down, step by step, until his foot knocked the floor and he could finally turn towards the inexorable blackness of the parlour's doorway.

“Niessen?”

All in a muddle, he panted his way into the darkness. Looking was pointless; it no longer made any difference whether his eyes were open or shut. Nevertheless, he could see that there was no red glow from a cigarette tip. Maybe at the back of the office. Not until he had probed that part of the room and, naturally, the impenetrable space in front of him, would he be able to climb the stairs without fear of being followed – up to where Niessen was probably lurking. Breathing deeply, he drew himself up to his full height, lowered the poker and stretched his free arm out in front of him, and as the passage began to list he stepped over the railing of the threshold, abandoned the wreckage of light and gave himself over with the acquiescent stupidity of a castaway to the swirling possibility that Niessen was somewhere in the room.

The darkness inside was total. After a few steps he could no longer tell if he was still walking straight ahead. He turned round to face the deadening rectangle of the doorway, positioned himself properly with his back to it, set himself in motion once again – and bumped right into the table.

At first he thought it was Niessen.

After a brief bout of dizziness a wild bubble of air arose within him, but his throat was too constricted to release it even as a squeak. In his feverish listening his ears seemed to have been stopped by the dense darkness, but finally he was able to breathe again and swallow the pressure: nothing, not a single sound could be heard, not from upstairs either.

Steadying himself on the edge of the table he regained his composure and continued on in a crooked line, shuffling, weaving, swimming, winding his way through the dark like a fish through an inkpot, a flounder through the estuary, yet drawn to the office with a certain inevitability: now feeling a brush of curtain on one side, then a dining room chair on the other, then nothing but that radiation on his back. Stiffening slowly, he saw something in front of him that he was convinced was behind him: Niesten in the doorway, the glowing end of a cigarette and two fiery eyes above.

Unable to change position, he began to turn like an automaton, wobbling from one heel to the other, his head rigidly unmoving, while his free arm, stretched out in front, was first bent slightly by the back of a dining room chair and in taking another swing touched something else, something that seemed to give way at first but then fell like a solid object, rolled over the tabletop and then, after a moment of giddy silence, crashed in pieces to the floor.

The shock was that of a surge of current against the temples, leaving Bepol with no other thought but that he had to clean up. Mechanically he crouched down where he was standing and began to search for the vase that could have fallen on any side of the table, rummaging from leg to leg, until his hand found the first fragment and the dried teasel descended upon him like a fine powder. As soon as he had straightened again the darkness flew at him from every side, now even from below. Without daring to look at the void beneath him he raised the poker like a torch; the bright red light with which it continued to glow with such fiery intensity did not radiate, however, but remained in the iron, dazzling him all the more. The light from the doorway was now gone as well, the escape hatch was nowhere to be seen – or was he mistaken, was he looking in the same direction each time, in that sea of solitary blackness that suddenly began to oppress him as if he had already drowned in its depths?

He swallowed, set off in a new direction, when suddenly his raised arm was clamped in a grip that closed just above the elbow. The strength of the grip was

enormous, yet the only sound was the crash of the poker falling on the wooden floor. Bepol could no longer hear it; he was numbed.

Without light or inhabiting spirit the house could no longer close itself off from the surrounding night. The greater darkness crept closer and closer, encountered no one, let itself in and seeped into the lesser darkness between the walls. There was no longer any difference between inside and out, between here and there, and with the passing of the hunting hour he also gradually began to lose all sense of distinction between the fox and the mouse in his stomach.

Bepol hung slackly from the unrelentingly clenched fish like a coat from a hook, but eventually a sufficient amount of tension returned and he was able to move again. His head was the first to straighten. Then he raised his whole body up on his toes and began, painfully but joyfully, to rotate on the pivot of his rigidly fixed elbow, further and further, until they would be standing chest to chest.

He saw still nothing.

Then something in him began to scream. Almost weeping, he pressed the last bit of light from his eyes with every ounce of strength he could muster, and yet he saw him: a friendly face, with a dreamy, blissful glance, the full cheeks with the sideburns like sides of bacon hanging from his plate – it was Bepol himself.

He pressed himself against the darkness, felt an arm around his shoulders, was embraced, held tightly and shoved back – but the grip on his arm had been so powerful, and continued to tingle so much, that it was not until the flash had completely died that he realized he had been released. He extended his arms forward, felt nothing, and found himself alone in the all-consuming darkness that had now begun to work on him, too. As the screaming began to swell uncontrollably he became lighter and lighter, he disintegrated with incredible speed, nothing of him remained: his bones turned to powder, his flesh turned to foam, and when all the strength had poured out of him he sank to the floor, noiselessly weeping.

An immense moment later came the sound of calm, determined footsteps descending the stairs. The footsteps continued with the same gait through the hallway, and then, after a brief silence, the front door clicked shut.

Bepol came to his senses with a jolt. Outside the motorbike was being kick-started. He sat up, saw again the patch of light in the open doorway and, mechanically grabbing the poker and stumbled into the hallway. The jacket and cap were gone, and the throbbing of the engine swallowed up the acceleration, rising in pitch and volume before slightly subsiding. Niesten had driven off, he was riding away, he would make a wide arc and drive off the grounds. It was senseless to run after him. Bepol would have to head him off. Only by going through the scullery and then hurrying to the road would he be able to apprehend Niesten at the bank, throw his leg over and ride pillion.

This fuller understanding burst upon Bepol with a chaos of new passion. He stood at the front door, turned on his heel without a moment's thought, stormed through the moonlit kitchen and came to a stop at the outer door of the unchanged, pitch-dark scullery. Groping with his free hand, he found what he was looking for: he turned the door handle, tugged and pushed, while the time passed and the tugging and pushing melted into a single powerless wrench – he could not get the door open, gave out a screaming gasp and started crying once more, then suddenly realized that he had bolted it himself. First groping, then shoving, and then with a single kick he staggered outside, going straight ahead until, breathing in deeply, he managed to slow down and finally turn round with a deep breath. At that very moment, the rear light of the motorbike darted out from behind the shed, and Niesten rode past him and down the road, heading for Germany.

The flickering rear light danced away between the trees and buildings like a flame. Paralysed, Bepol watched it go, the arm with the poker stretched out toward the motorbike, the other instinctively toward the Seawolf, the only other motorised rig for miles around. The roar was a strip of noise that already stretched further to the east, thinning all the time, and finally fading like the smoke fading from an exhaust pipe. In the silence that followed the clock in the

house behind suddenly began to chime endlessly, loudly through the open scullery door. Twelve times, midnight. The day was over, everything was past, yet Bepol kept on going. He glanced quickly back and forth at the directions his two arms were pointing in, then shook off his paralysis and started out in the direction of the ship – first sideways, then straight ahead with increasing acceleration.

Finally, when he reached the bottom of the ladder, he allowed himself to throw away the poker in order to free both his hands. The glowing rod, now dark red, lay hissing in the mud behind him. He felt the rough wood and the smooth iron, and once aboard walked straight through towards the bow, up the stairs and into the wheelhouse.

Everything inside gleamed: the recently varnished panels, the glass and the steel. The pale light on the bridge was the concentrated reflection of the heavens. With one purpose in mind, Bepol strode up to the great wheel. He bent over towards the window and was at such a height, with such an unrestricted view of everything around him, that he immediately saw the beams of the lighthouse turning like silver spokes along the canopy overhead. On the ground everything was dark and dead, until he saw, far in the distance, the tiny red light flash suddenly and go out. Visualised as a painting, the view was nothing but a black square, meaningless, flat and abstract, but for Bepol it now had a vanishing point. And as he anxiously directed his gaze, it seemed as if it was his own heart that had disappeared there and was divorcing itself from him even further on the swift wheels of the motorbike. The thought was so painful that tears came to his eyes, and his face twisted into a grimace that he could no longer feel.

He dared not allow his gaze to wander from the vanishing point lest he lose it, and his eyes remained fixed on it as he set off in pursuit. Blindly his hand brushed over the dials, and the first switch he came to and pulled was the right one: it had to be the ignition. From the depths of the engine room came a sigh; apparently, after the trial run, the pistons and regulator had been tuned to the correct and highest position, ready for the next start, because as soon as the

concentrated air escaped, the engine below fired up, first stuttering, then fully engaged, increasing to the unleashed gallop of a stampeding horse.

The noise was deafening. The entire ship trembled on the ramp. Without any resistance, the machinery was racing in neutral at full throttle. He had to reduce the number of revolutions and the flow of petrol, but he didn't know where the regulator was. When he felt another switch a few minutes later and turned it, the beam of the floodlight suddenly bored into the darkness, a bundle of light that thrust itself forward from the roof like a sword but without in the least diminishing the mad frenzy of sixteen hundred horsepower.

Later still it hardly registered with Bepol, anymore than the smell of singed rubber canvas and smouldering leather rising from the engine room. He held on to the shuddering wheel with both hands, water running from his nose, and, steering clear of something every now and then, his gaze followed the line of the floodlight with great attention. But because the floodlight passed over everything without touching it, just as his own gaze had done earlier on, all remained black for him, until finally he saw nothing but the turning wheel of light over Germany, then that, too, faded and was blotted out by the tears in his eyes.