

Life in a rundown working-class area

Philip Snijder

Sunday Money



NOT FAR FROM Central Station in Amsterdam is Bickerseiland, a piece of reclaimed land, a lively harbour in the seventeenth century, but in the turbulent sixties a rundown working-class area, 'a forgotten, messy part of Amsterdam full of bad housing, rickety sheds and car wrecks.'

Every Sunday the eleven-year-old protagonist goes to collect his 'Sunday money' from an aunt and uncle who treat him as their favourite child. It's one of the deep rooted traditions of his large, typically Amsterdam working-

class family, with its countless uncles, aunts, cousins, grandfather and grandmother.

Snijder paints a beautiful, restrained picture of daily life on the island at the time through the eyes of an intelligent, sensitive boy who feels safe in the bosom of his family, while beginning to realise that he doesn't quite fit in.

Snijder vividly describes both everyday and special events, such as the parties brightened up by stubborn Uncle Freek, a musician and master of ceremonies. The boy wants to belong and plans to join in the dancing: 'It should have been a moment of penance, but at the same time a manifesto of great happiness, a joyful christening of my new self, an ecstatic immersion into my family.' There is only one person in his family who seems to really understand him - his father, who is from rural Groningen, 'the only wise man on the island.' He subtly resists his uneducated in-laws by 'defending everything which is jeered at on the island.'

Clearly and precisely, Snijder evokes a lost world with striking sights, sounds and smells. These slightly melancholy yet wholly unsentimental memories paint a touching picture of an Amsterdam family in the sixties, as well as an affectionate portrait of father and son.



photo Erik Pezarro

Philip Snijder (b. 1956) was born in Amsterdam, where he grew up in an old working-class area. He studied Italian and worked variously in a cleaning company, a bookshop, a youth hostel, a university, a café, and a cultural centre. He published a few partly fictionalised stories about his childhood in literary magazine *De Tweede Ronde*, which he has now turned into this debut novel, *Zondagsgeld* (Sunday Money).

A beautiful portrait of a poor working-class area.

NEDERLANDS DAGBLAD

Zondagsgeld contains many charming details about a sometimes wonderful yet always grubby working-class area in Amsterdam which has now, as such, ceased to exist.

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Sample Translation

Sunday Money

(Zondagsgeld)

by Philip Snijder

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Translated by Barbara Backer-Gray

We had to walk two by two along the narrow pavement of the Willemsstraat, so we were quite spread out. Some of the men were still on the drawbridge across the Brouwersgracht while the first women were already approaching the entrance of the community centre. I moved away from my father's side so that I could see the front rows of women. I was probably the only one to notice that at this point along the route every party showed the same phenomenon. A careful swaying would take hold of the people walking in front, as if a sudden strong wind began to move them like treetops. Sure enough, this time too, I saw heads at the front moving rhythmically from right to left, the shoulders rising in turns, index fingers pointing up and moving back and forth like cheerful metronomes. The first women were now within range of the sounds of Uncle Fred's accordion coming from the open doors of the room. Uncle Fred was hired as the musician and master of ceremonies for all our family parties. I tried to guess from my aunts' pantomime which Jordaan sing-along was being played, but I couldn't.

Uncle Fred was a toothless old man with a lengthy archipelago of warts in his neck, which attracted the younger children more than his actual performance did. I can't remember a single party without his completely routine leadership which tolerated no interruption. With his pained expression and his shuffling movements, Uncle Fred wasn't exactly the epitome of gaiety. But he was always there early so that he could greet the guests with festive sounds. Whether people liked it or not, he always worked through his entire, neverchanging repertoire of music, games, and congas, and he stopped exactly when the hire of the room ended, at one in the morning. You knew exactly what to expect, and my father said that he didn't cost much. Now, coming into range of his pumping instrument ourselves, I heard that he was playing 'There's Always Room for a Dram'.

Inside the large room we occupied the tables and chairs along the left wall; Aunt Gerda's relatives sat on the opposite side. However well in-laws got along, this party arrangement was so ingrained that deviating from it would have been out of the question. Nuclear families came together again during seating, so I was

obliged to sit with my father and mother. I made myself as invisible as possible on my chair and looked around. Uncle Fred was reduced to four short, fat limbs and the top of his bald head, seemingly engaged in an intense wrestling match with a broad-shouldered black-and-white attacker. He sat on a chair at the head of the long empty space between the families: the dance floor. Between our tables and those across the room, greetings and jokes were exchanged loudly, in order to be heard above the sounds of Uncle Fred's accordion. Serving aunts dashed toward each table with coffee for the grown-ups and cake and Coke or Sprite for the kids. Along with a beer glass full of Sprite, my beaming Aunt Sienie served me a big piece of mushy cream cake from the supermarket. 'They love that, those boys...' she assured my parents.

I saw how my father was sloshing the remains of his coffee around in his cup without letting any of it spill over the rim, his eyebrows in a frown. This way he didn't have to look around. These were the most difficult moments for him. Later, emboldened by a few Heinekens, he could give himself over to what he felt was vulgar buffoonery. But at the moment he had to fight his stone sober, screaming aversion and brace himself for the first part of Uncle Fred's repertoire, which even the most seasoned partygoer in the family dreaded.

There it came. Uncle Fred got up, blew for silence on his referee's whistle and asked those present to leave their coffee and cake for a moment to join in a 'cheerful welcome conga'.

In order to overcome the awkwardness, everybody tried to bump up their forced cheerfulness even more. Now that the music had stopped, the room was filled with loud, collective attempts at chasing away embarrassment. Nobody wanted to parade through the room like an idiot before having had even one drop of liberating alcohol, and everybody knew that Uncle Fred wouldn't stop at one conga, but there was no choice. Everywhere loud, emphatic voices could be heard from women trying to boost their own courage by ordering others to obey.

'No, come on now, everybody join in...! You too, Uncle Janus... Make sure you drag him with you, Aunt Sjaan!'

The fat aunts and uncles tore themselves slowly away from their chairs, rigid grins fixed on red faces, and began to form a snake behind Uncle Fred. Although they were as yet standing still, they were already placing one hand on a shoulder in front of them, an obligatory intimacy that made everybody uncomfortable so early in the evening. Wisecracks could be heard from many of those uneasy links, followed by loud, affected laughter.

‘I’ll take hold of you, Aunt Neel – that’ll give me a good grip...!’

Some women picked a child off the floor and held it on their arm, so that they weren’t forced to hook on. My father tried to conceal his embarrassment by putting his hand in my neck, pretending he had to take care of me – as if not he but I needed support during the coming ordeal. Uncle Fred, at the head of the conga as usual, pressed a cheerful intro from his keys, and we were off.

Dutifully swinging hips and timidly singing along, we formed a winding trail across the dance floor. With his nervously pinching hand, my father communicated his resistance to the muscles in my neck. Each time Uncle Fred reached the end of one of the familiar Jordaan songs, everybody hoped that we would be allowed to sit down again. But each time he segued smoothly from the last notes to the start of a new song, and we were pushed along again. ‘Who put them soap suds in the ce-re-al...’ I saw that only my disabled gran was still seated. With hands lifted, the flesh on her arms swinging along, she waved back and forth to the beat. Thus she pretended to follow our stiff conga with cheerful attention, though I knew that she could hardly see a thing through her frosty glasses.

Now Uncle Fred was busy getting us in a certain formation, while still playing and singing. He formed two long rows facing each other – the lane of honour. After some shuffling and shoving he was satisfied; he sounded a forceful final chord and took his fingers off the keys.

Everyone began to laugh and chat, relieved and embarrassed at once. Uncle Fred took a stack of rumpled copies from his large accordion case and started to hand them out. I immediately recognized the text on the paper, grimy from the

sweaty fingers of many generations of partygoers. It was the standard welcome song that we had been singing for years for every bridal couple, regardless of whether they were just married, or celebrating copper or silver. I read: ‘To the tune of: Among the Bronze-Green Oak Trees’.

Welcome bride and bridegroom
United with us here
Where a treasured friendship’s
forged stronger year by year

I decided to listen closely for any uncles daring to use the famous family trick. The stately text of the welcome song was completely alien to the island language, and so many of my aunts and uncles stumbled over certain words every time, or they ran wild in the metre. But years ago my Uncle Bertie had discovered that if you just looked like you were concentrating and kept repeating ‘Welcome bride and bridegroom, welcome bride and bridegroom...’ nobody noticed and the result was just as unintelligible as the joint struggle to say those difficult words. At every party I managed to catch a few uncles taking their refuge in this ruse.

With his accordion at the ready, Uncle Fred now left to get the bridal couple. Following tradition prescribed for honouring newly-weds, Aunt Gerda and Uncle Rikus had arrived after the others and were waiting among the coat racks in the narrow hallway. With the handouts in front of us, we were ready to sing to them. Uncle Fred appeared in the doorway again, nodded emphatically three times and gave us a long-held opening chord to give us the chance to begin singing: ‘We-el-come bride and ...’ Then in he walked, squeezing even more volume out of his accordion than before. I thought I noticed Aunt Gerda and Uncle Rikus – although both pretty substantial – trying to hide behind Uncle Fred and his accordion in order to get through the painful parade of honour invisibly. But Uncle Fred stepped aside and drove them through our narrow little street, where they were supposed to shuffle back and forth for three full minutes, arm in arm

and grinning rigidly. Their bright party clothes were so new that I caught myself scanning them for forgotten price tags. As uncomfortable and stiff as the bridal pair, we tried to sing our way to the end of the song as quickly as possible.

‘Welcome bride and bridegroom, welcome bride and gróóóóm...’



An hour later I was sitting at the aunts’ table, trying to predict with every whistle, followed by the cry ‘CHANGE!’ who would end up on the dance floor.

After the real beginning of the party – marked by popping open the first beers and pouring the first shots – I had hung around my father and Uncle Ben for a while. As if on cue, as soon as they got their first beer uncles around me loosened their ties and collars. Aunts with eyes already shining slumped back, crossed their legs, and pulled at their Caballero cigarettes as if they were asthma inhalers. The tables quickly became strewn with bottles, full and empty glasses, coffee saucers with cubes of cheese next to a blob of mustard, small bowls of salted peanuts and large bowls of crisps that were emptied almost immediately by grabbing hands. The separation between the in-laws had disappeared; traffic was continuous between the tables on both sides of the room. The initial arrangement of each nuclear family at their own table had also been abandoned. The men and women moved together in clusters that had the same make-up at every party; the younger children ran across the dance floor and dared each other to get as close as possible to Uncle Fred’s warts while he, as imperturbable as a jukebox, poured out one classic Amsterdam song after another. Here and there people sang along, with heartfelt, nasally sustained notes, in the style of the famous Jordaan singers. ‘Oh Johnnie boy, sing a song just for me...’ The bridal couple seemed to have told the serving aunts to make sure there was plenty of everything. Next to each half-empty beer bottle a new one was placed; they topped off barely touched liqueur glasses of gin and lemon brandy without being asked. When the noise

became so loud that I could no longer hear anything my father and uncle were saying to each other, I slipped off my chair and started my rounds of the room.

Because everybody was busy drinking, smoking, talking, singing, or dancing, I could wander among the tables inconspicuously. I didn't see any group where I could casually join. Each table seemed to have experienced an unobserved, natural arrangement of well-matched company, and I had missed it. Now that everybody was distributed, the entrance to the tables was closed. Older cousins drinking beer and uncles telling dirty jokes had put their wagging heads together. There were tables with elderly people swaying to the music, tables with smoking and drinking women, and tables with children chewing furiously. Whenever anyone seemed to notice my aimless wandering, I quickly pretended to be on my way to a table further on.

Halfway through the foxtrot part I had to sit down in order not to be in the way of the growing number of dancing couples, and I found myself at a table deserted by a group of aunts who were all on the dance floor.

As at every wedding anniversary party, the foxtrotting was opened by the honoured couple, on an otherwise empty dance floor. After Uncle Rikus and Aunt Gerda had gone through their steps for about a minute, Uncle Fred blew loudly on his whistle and shouted 'CHANGE!' What followed was also a standard part of our party etiquette: Uncle Rikus had to ask his mother-in-law to dance, and Aunt Gerda her father-in-law. For the next minute the two newly formed pairs were little fox-trotting icons that overcame the boundaries between generations and groups of relatives, at least for the duration of the party. For the following 'changes' the choice of partners was free and the dancers could have spontaneously kept on dividing, although with my own relatives I knew how the following rounds would usually go. From the back of the aunts' table I saw that many daughters had asked their fathers and that several pairs consisted of two women. Aunts who were dancing together unconsciously put on a forcedly neutral face, to demonstrate how completely normal they felt it was.

The aunts had left their drinks behind on the formica table in front of me: about fifteen glasses of lemon brandy, some half empty, other still almost full. Little yellow tulip heads, standing in sticky puddles that had formed during pouring and sipping. All the adult women in our family drank the same thing at parties, probably more for fear of standing out than because of the irresistibility of the sweet, bilious yellow liqueur itself. ‘Oh, just give me a little ell-bee...’ Through the cigarette smoke I sniffed up the aroma coming from the collection of glasses: more the smell of sickly sweet Bazooka bubblegum than a crate of lemons at our grocer Chris’s. I rocked back and forth on the back legs of my chair. The dance floor was now so full that most couples hardly left their place. They moved on the spot to the forceful sounds of Uncle Fred, who was sitting and playing somewhere, invisible in the crowd.

Whatever it was that made me do what I did at that moment, sitting at that table with the disorganized army of little yellow glasses, wasn’t an idea or a plan; it wasn’t even curiosity. My head was empty; I was staring indifferently at the crowding dancers and listening to the continuous accordion music. I was driven by nothing more than a slight restlessness, a vague urge in my right arm and hand. A small, aimless stream of energy was flickering there, the desire to fidget, to lift something, to open and close a lid, to tap an ashtray with a teaspoon. My arm could just as well have relieved itself by taking one finger and running a set of slaloms among the glasses, or by briefly ruffling my hair, but the itch in my muscles started a different mechanism, totally beyond my control. It turned into a casual movement that was so common in the room that the motions of my arm and hand went unnoticed. Synchronically with other arms around me, mine moved forward like a machine, grabbed, lifted, a nod of the wrist backward, another nod forwards, the lever lowered, set down. And before my mouth and throat had been able to send any signal to me, my robot arm had already followed the same route a second time.

By the time I heard Uncle Fred announce that ‘a few members of the family would like to sing something for us’, I felt that I was beginning to get the burning sensation in my chest and stomach under control.

After the explosion in my chest I had remained motionless and bolt upright on my chair until the end of the foxtrotting, staring at the two small, empty glasses in front of me. I felt as if I had a gaping wound under my clothes, as if I had been split open from the inside out, from my throat to my belly. And yet I had managed to get up and leave when I saw the still slightly swinging aunts heading back to the table. I started walking randomly around the room, but I noticed that walking was tricky because the distance between my body and its surroundings seemed to have become variable. The floor flinched away from my foot when it wanted to land after a step; chair backs which I sought for support bent away from my hand. I realized that I had to make sure not to be noticed, so I dropped onto the first empty chair I came across. As I closed my eyes I felt quite a turbulence in my head, but a decrease in the pain in my chest at the same time. When I opened my eyes again, I found myself next to my half-blind gran. Although she had no company at her table, a generous assortment of more or less full glasses of lemon brandy had collected here, too. Because of her weak eyes she had not seen me; because of the music and the singing she had not heard me. Unaware of my presence beside her, she sat smiling blissfully, waiting for the first performance that Uncle Fred had just announced: her daughter Trudie with ‘The Fishing Fleet’. My chest was glowing comfortably. And now that I had been sitting for a while, it seemed that the rest of my body was obeying me again, that it was even beginning to reload with energy. I was vaguely surprised to notice that the emotion and admiration that dominated the room now that my Aunt Trudie was about to sing her song was making itself known to me, and even began to affect me.

At each party, from time immemorial, Aunt Trudie’s was the first in a series of performances that followed the foxtrots in Uncle Fred’s programme. There was a ritual at this point that had always seemed fake to me, and that I therefore, in

stubborn protest, had consistently backed out of. Sure enough, Uncle Fred turned as usual toward her table and called: ‘Trudie, we would all love to hear you sing about the fishing fleet, wouldn’t we, folks?’ Never before had I joined in the encouraging applause and the chanting of her name that now began around the room in order to bring the dutifully refusing Aunt Trudie to the front (‘Oh no, guys, I can’t, really...’). But now, sitting next to my passionately clapping gran, I was suddenly overcome with a conviction that seemed to want to fill my whole being: nothing was more sacred than achieving as much festivity as possible in this room full of relatives, and tonight I had to devote myself entirely to its realization. My chest was still glowing, but the sensation no longer had anything to do with the biting lemon brandy. What I felt there now was a flaming happiness, the warmth of suddenly realizing what a privilege it was to be born into such unconditional love and protection. With a lump in my throat I clapped and stomped louder than anybody else, and cheered at the top of my lungs when Aunt Trudie finally gave in, accepted Uncle Rikus’s hand, and let herself be led to Uncle Fred’s chair. The accordion gave the opening chords and Aunt Trudie began.

‘The Fishing Fleet’ was a sad ballad about some calamity that prevented the fishers from doing their work. Each time the whole room roared along with the refrain. I made sure that my lungs were full of air at the end of each verse, so that I could use my voice to the fullest. At each refrain my gran and a few aunts had to dab their eyes, and I understood completely.

The fishing fleet lies still
 And does not leave the harbour
 It is quiet in the village by the sea

It shamed me to think that never before at a family party had I been able to show enough interest to understand exactly what Aunt Trudie was singing. Now that I did try, in my new state of enlightenment and involvement with my surroundings,

it turned out not to be that easy. In contrast to our own Amsterdam songs, this ballad was written in a difficult, ponderous idiom. In addition, Aunt Trudie's interpretation was glowing and compelling, but not articulated too clearly. I would understand a few short words, but then a longer word would be lost in a sob or a snuffle. During the fourth verse I suddenly saw her strategem and tenderness welled up inside me. My aunt used the same system that my cousins and I did when we tried to sing along with an English song: distorting not-understood words into a meaningless series of sounds that would still resemble real language when half mumbled. During the refrain that followed my discovery, I felt tears sting the corners of my eyes. '...lies still, and does not leave the harbour...'

Next to me, my gran's hand lay in the sticky moisture on her table like a beached jellyfish, her thick thumb and index finger around one of the many ell-bees. I became conscious again of the sweet smell emitted by the glasses, a smell that lingered still at the back of my tongue.

Now that she was approaching the end of her song, Aunt Trudie became increasingly self-assured. In order to underline an especially forceful flourish, she even dared to spread her arms wide and throw her head back like she had seen professional singers do on TV. And as the last refrain came up, she shouted enthusiastically: 'All together now!' I contributed with all my heart to the thunderous applause that followed our collective final chord. And without further deliberation I joined the other members of the choir in doing what almost everybody did directly after those minutes of beauty and emotion that had touched us so. I, too, grabbed a glass – half full – and threw the contents to the far back of my throat, like medicine.



Other performances had followed. I had honoured every one of them with my full attention, singing along loudly where I could. As usual, Uncle Rikus scored

tremendous success as the last performer with the song 'Italia', about a group of artists far from their beloved fatherland (that naturally none of us knew or had ever visited) who had to eke out a living as street singers, and who were consumed with homesickness. During the performance I watched his pose with respect. It showed how sure he was of his power over the audience. Placing his right leg on the seat of a chair, he leaned his right elbow on that leg, while his left arm and loose wrist stood against the cushion of fat on his hip. He was completely at ease, leaning forward, enjoying his own voice and the admiration coming from the room.

It is the land of grapes and wine
It is the land of sun and sea
Italia, I will never forget you
There I want my grave to be!

I was enjoying my position at the back of my gran's table more and more. From a distance it looked like I was fondly keeping her company, which earned me warm looks from aunts. And my voice, when singing along, was apparently so completely engulfed by the surrounding volume that my gran still hadn't noticed me as her tablemate. From this spot I could experience to the fullest and without interruption this new phenomenon, this being a part of the community of kindred spirits at a family party. I didn't need to chat with anybody in order to enjoy what had been revealed to me this evening. The little half glass of ell-bee had not given me any problems, apart from a warm feeling in my chest and stomach. My face seemed cemented in a broad, all-embracing smile.

In the meantime the free-dancing part of the programme was underway. In order to please as many dancers as possible, Uncle Fred played songs with varying tempos. He began with slow Jordaan waltzes, to which mainly older couples turned their stiff circles. I saw that most of the men had both hands turned with the palms facing upward on their partner's back while dancing. At

previous parties my cousin Robbie and I had often parodied this dancing tradition. We would grimace and turn our hands as if we were spastic. But tonight I only had eyes for what seemed to me the touching elegance of the elderly couples and I pictured what my father had once told me about the origins of their dance position. When the street organ used to play in the evening and the men came home from work with dirty hands, this was how they could dance without soiling their wives' dresses. Whenever I remembered the words, I sang along at the top of my lungs. 'Such a good old waltz, such fine baize skirts...'

The waltzes were followed by faster dances, the foxtrot and the quickstep, which filled the floor at once. At this point of the evening cousins Hein and Hans, who took dance lessons together with their girlfriends, always did their thing. Hans took off his jacket and pulled his shirt over his trousers like a dress. Effeminately throwing back his head, he let Hein lead him stylishly among the other couples, who shrieked with laughter. 'He's touching my be-hind!' he shouted with a high flourish. Shaking with pleasure, I sought eye contact with uncles and older cousins so that I could share with them my appreciation for this intermezzo, which seemed to me even more successful because of its predictability.

When Uncle Fred reached the middle of his programme – rushed tangos and rumbas – I suddenly remembered how he always ended this part. A wild joy rushed over me at the realization that my moment had come. Trembling impatiently on the edge of my chair, I waited for the first recognizable rhythms. What filled me now was not just a resolve but a sacred duty. The next couple of minutes would become my personal offering to the festivities. I had to show my relatives that the days of my uneasy, withdrawn behaviour were over. They deserved to share in the spiritual growth, the irreversible consciousness that I had experienced this evening. How could I ever have thought that I was different from them, that I didn't belong? How could I ever have been ashamed of them? I was poised to jump up right after the last South-American note and give myself over to five minutes of unbridled physical expression. It was to be a moment of

atonement, but at the same time a manifestation of intense happiness, a joyful baptism of my new self, an ecstatic immersion in my family. Following my groggily smiling gran's example, I reached for a glass and emptied it. Here came the twist!



In the middle of the dance floor, my hips loosely swivelling, with long movements of my lower arms, leaning back more and more until the back of my head almost touches the floor and the twisting becomes truly acrobatic. Slowly bending my knees and continuing to twist, tightly balanced, on my haunches. Cranking myself up again, slowly and triumphantly, at the right musical passage. My relatives in a circle around me, pleasantly surprised at my unexpected conversion, making sure that I have enough room for my solo, which they accompany with rhythmic clapping.

That is how I had pictured it. But when Uncle Fred played the first measures of Chubby Checker, the floor was still filled with couples who had been dancing the samba and the rumba, and now they all enthusiastically joined in the twist. And, encouraged by the rapid accordion sounds, many other dance enthusiasts – adults and children – jumped up from their chairs and joined as well. Everyone sang along: '*Komaan, wie twiste ken...*'

Because I had briefly lost my balance when I got up, and had to swallow down a ripple of stomach acid, I was one of the last to arrive at the dance floor. My attempts to get to the middle of the floor left me stranded in a tight little spot between the closed outer ring of twisters and the front of the tables. I was stuck between a pair of protruding, swinging buttocks and the edge of a table, from where a small stream of spilled beer reached my trousers and shoes. Forced by this lack of space to limit myself to minimal movements of my arms and lower body, I began invisibly twisting.

Through a small opening in the rhythmically moving wall of backs in front of me, I could see that even during the twisting part of the party the dance floor was arranged according to the usual pattern. There were four cores, formed by fat middle-aged uncles who had been dragged along by their daughters. Such a fifty-something man in inebriated state was traditionally a popular attraction at our parties, especially with the children. A little group of twisting onlookers would form around each uncle, laughing themselves silly at the never-changing twisting moves of the rigidly grinning men. At first the uncles would move their lower arms and feet back and forth like wound-up toy clowns, not moving an inch from their spot. Then the moment arrived when they slowly bent their knees under loud encouragement, often falling over halfway through. Surrounding the four uncles and their audiences was a circle of serious, devotedly twisting couples facing each other, one with the back to the dance floor, the other with the back to the tables.

It was behind these last backs that I stood shuffling on my three square feet of space. My movements were now more a continuous evading of backward-jabbing elbows and feet than a recognizable twist. I tried to muster power and conviction by singing along loudly, but the increasing waves of stomach acid rising in my throat made this impossible. *‘Komáán, wie twiste ken...’*



My nausea didn't seem to lessen in the air outside, and my head started spinning even faster than it had inside. During the last hour of the party I had sat quietly next to my gran. Joining in the final conga – as exuberant and chaotic as the first one had been reserved and stiff – was out of the question. It had become increasingly difficult to hide my deteriorating state, but I had managed, more or less. Only my Aunt Sienie, who was collecting glasses, had remarked: ‘You look pale, kiddo. You must be tired, huh?’

Outside on the Willemstraat we fell in formation for the way back. Uncles and aunts had their arms around each other's shoulders and were yelling the songs that had been performed at the party, their drunken interpretation rising up against the fronts of houses, voices echoing in the dark street. 'There I want my grave to be...' Some fathers, however wobbly, had sleeping children on their backs. My gran hung between her sons again, who tried to move forward like a badly led team of horses, lurching in spurts from side to side.

On the bridge across the Brouwersgracht I burped up lemon brandy. Some sticky squirts escaped from the corners of my mouth, taking with them the last remains of control I still had over what was happening inside me. In my whirling head I saw the route before us: Binnen Oranjestraat, Haarlemmerdijk, Buiten Oranjestraat, Haarlemmer Houttuinen... At the rate we were going it would take forever. I leaned back against the rail and closed my eyes. When I opened them again, my father's head was floating right in front of mine. I soon had to give up any attempts to interpret his facial expression.