

Joost Oomen

The Paradise of Sleep

or

Someone Cycling with Flowers

Translated by David Colmer

Thanks to the glass extension behind the coffin in the funeral parlour auditorium, we spend the entire service looking out at a ride-on mower grazing down strip after strip of lawn. The gardener sitting on it is wearing fluorescent overalls. He's probably listening to the radio, most likely a station with lots of music from the nineties and early noughties, not too much blather, the occasional commercial for new windows, e-bikes, the toothpaste that's currently on sale at Kruidvat. But we can't hear any of that because we're inside and listening to 'Everywhere' by Fleetwood Mac. A young woman two seats away sobs through the music, but everyone else is sitting in silence, arms crossed over their chests, heads at a slight angle. Frisian men and women who are thinking, or pretending to think, about death. As the song dies out a few of them sniff, one coughs loudly.

After parking my bike against the fence, I'd crossed the square in front of the funeral parlour behind a man in clogs. Not wooden ones, but leather Gevavis, with veins in the toes because the work in the fields and sheds has completely dried them out. Crusted shit and mud on the heels, click-clack. The man – the farmhand, I think, at the third farm outside the village – was about to take the clogs off at the entrance to the funeral parlour and leave them next to the door when he caught an elbow and a whispered warning from his wife, who sniggered silently for a moment at her husband's naivety before spotting me behind them in the condolence queue and mumbling 'Dr Engel' in a serious voice. She's an assistant at the practice in Dronrijp, that's why she recognised me. Her husband kept silent, shot an angry glance in my direction and turned his broad back on me.

I never actually go to patient's funerals. If I did, I'd spend more time in places like this than I do at home and be a nervous wreck from having to shake hands with the whole family every time. I know it's not really the case, but in moments like this it feels like it's my fault they're here. No matter how glad the patient was to die or how much of a relief the death has been for the family too, it wouldn't have happened if I hadn't come by with my needles. But because the man in the coffin in front of the window ended up dying of natural causes – lung cancer – and didn't live long enough to go through the whole process with

me, I'm here today, in the sun, having ridden my bike to this village from Leeuwarden. His daughter is a nurse who sometimes accompanies me on my visits and I consider it a good custom to attend the funerals of friends' parents. Strictly speaking, the nurse isn't a friend but a colleague, but I still wanted to come, given that I'd also met her father, without his dying through my intercession.

That man in his hospital bed, scarcely able to string a sentence together, with me on a stool next to him. A large, silver-coloured watch was lying on the yellowish-white bedside cabinet next to a hard plastic cup with a straw. There was a black hair caught between two of the links in the metal watch strap.

The last speaker is his wife. Her cropped curls have been dyed an unnatural black.

'Pete had cancer,' she says. 'There was nothing left of him.'

As it is now completely silent in the auditorium, we hear the mower turn off. The gardener climbs down and bends over to clean the blades. When the woman turns to nod at her husband one last time, the sun catches her watch, casting a white, quivering dot of light on the ceiling.

I cycle back through the fields. After the service I was in such a hurry to leave I forgot to drink something, so now I'm parched. When I get home I find a thick envelope in my letterbox. I study it in the lift: the back only gives a street and house number – *Doarpstrjitte 19* – and a postcode. I tear the envelope open and shake it out over the kitchen table: a folder with a thick wad of paper in it and a smaller envelope fall out. This envelope, which also has my name on it, contains a letter.

Dear Dr Engel,

You don't know me but I found your name on the Euthanasia Centre website and got your address through friends. My name is Gerrit Blauw. I'm seventy-one and I want to die. I know this is not the standard way of approaching a euthanasia doctor, but as I don't meet the criteria for a standard euthanasia, I am writing to you like this anyway.

I don't meet the criteria for a standard euthanasia because I am not sick. Physically and psychologically, I am healthy. Up till now I have

experienced life as pleasant. The only reason I want to die is that I see my life as rounded off, complete, and that's why I don't want to live on, as living on would mean running the risk of reaching a stage when I begin to find life unpleasant. I have built my whole life around beauty. I have enjoyed beautiful things my whole life and, if possible, I would like my death to be beautiful as well.

It would be wonderful if you could consider helping me. Of course, first you will need to know who I am and why I consider my life complete as it is. That is why I have written my life story – I hope you will read it. I've done my best to make it as comprehensive as possible. Although I won't have succeeded with everything, I believe I have covered the most important of my life's crossroads.

If you, after reading my story, would like to discuss it and my request with me, my contact details are enclosed.

Yours faithfully,

Gerrit Blauw

I put the letter and folder on the corner of the kitchen table and sigh. Then I stand up, walk out of my flat and take the lift back down to do some shopping. By the time I re-emerge from the supermarket, it's evening and the sky over the city has turned a deep orange. At home I cook a meal and eat it in front of the telly, watching YouTube repeats of famous football goals.

Later that night I'm smoking a cigarette in the dark on my balcony. When it's finished I squat down next to the drain in the corner and drop the butt, still burning, into it. A short hiss. Then I slide the silver-coloured watch with the hair between the links in after it.

I am a Frisian man who was born in Sneek a number of years after the war and if you asked me now what the first most beautiful thing I saw in my life was, it would be the team of white horses that drew the funeral coach on the day Queen Wilhelmina was buried. It was 1962 and my parents only had a radio. I couldn't see the horses.

But I *could* see them, twelve horses in two rows, stepping through the rain with sopping horsecloths over their sweating backs. They were the only white that day, besides the princesses, who were dressed in white as well, but the rest of the world was sad and black and grey; the horses moving through it were nothing less than six suns and six moons riding the radio waves towards me. I could almost stroke their warm noses.

The second most beautiful thing was a string of bicycle lights in Friesland in the night.

It was summer and those lights, with me among them, were on their way to a party. We were riding along the paths between the fields in long lines. It was a warm starry night and because those paths are laid out with lots of corners (land consolidation has turned Friesland into a strange patchwork quilt) I could see all the cyclists from behind so the lights were all red, never white. The voices that belonged to the lights drifted back to me over a sea of dark grass and every now and then a shudder passed through the night when somebody rode over a cattle grid between two fields.

Rrrrrringgggg, it went.

Those voices were all drunk or at least tipsy, because along that string of lights, bottles of booze were moving up and down. Glass Coca-Cola bottles that had been secretly topped up with Stroh rum without our parents noticing. Or old, rinsed chocolate-milk bottles hastily filled with genever from the pantry. The art was to open the bottle while riding, raise it to your lips and drink without stopping your bike. Sometimes somebody fell over, didn't matter, grass is soft. You'd lie there laughing while the others cycled on. Once everyone had passed, you'd scramble back up and suddenly be standing all alone in the dark.

Surrounded by the gleaming, gimlet eyes of sheep staring at you mistrustfully in the light of the moon.

I was eighteen, almost nineteen, and it was the endless summer between passing my school exams and the moment I would start university in Groningen. Like me, a lot of the procession's back lights had rounded off secondary school this June, but just as many others were going into their final year and some were a year lower than that. There were friends of mine in that group too. In Friesland you had to – and have to – scrape your people together. There were – and are – never quite enough to form a fully-fledged group: not enough fashionistas, not enough farm boys, not enough hippies. But in the year below mine, the year that had to spend another year at school, there were enough people who, like me, were already starting to cautiously occupy themselves with beautiful things.

The guy with enormous hands who wanted to be a sculptor. During a long bike ride in the pouring rain he explained the difference between the two kinds of breasts to me: 'Boobs that are filled with water and boobs that are filled with wheat.'

The guy who spent every break practising his trombone with his back to the lockers, without blowing, and therefore silently. Moving the slide back and forth at top speed, but under perfect control, the mouthpiece loose against his lips, eyes glued to the sheet music next to him on the lino of the school floor.

The set designer with the big grin and sawdust in her hair.

And the guy who came closest to no longer being a student and was already dedicated almost entirely to jazz drumming. He spent the whole day tapping out rhythms on his thighs with his drumsticks and reeled off the names of American musicians as if, like theirs, his could already be found in the New York phone book. He had long blond hair and was a fantastic whistler. A face that was sharp but not unfriendly, sometimes with a nonchalant cigarette dangling from his lips.

But he also smelt of soap flakes and shag tobacco and I knew they were the smells of the strict parents he never told anyone about except me.

He was called Douwe. In the long line of back lights I was riding next to him.

By myself I didn't amount to anything yet. Unless maybe for some of the others. I wrote a bit of poetry and during a discussion in class I'd once said something about contemporary theatre, but I didn't feel like that was enough to

grant me a role. I had bad skin. I read novels before going to sleep and never mentioned them at school.

And I wasn't going to an art academy or a school for the dramatic arts. I wasn't even going to study art history or Dutch; to please my parents I'd enrolled in law at the University of Groningen. I was starting in September. It was my last summer here.

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‘One, two, three, four...’

The string of bikes arrived in tufts and were dropped willy-nilly on the shoulder of the road. The party was at a farm and being thrown by a girl I didn't know and wouldn't meet that night either. That wasn't a problem because everyone was always welcome at these summer parties as long as you brought your own booze. A drive of concrete slabs, the silhouette of a shed with shuffling, snorting cows in it, a wood fire and about sixty young people who can't think of anything to do except stand around with a bottle of beer in one hand, stare at the fire and smoke.

At these parties a moment invariably arrives when someone gets restless, like a green cricket in a yellow field that suddenly can't stand being quiet anymore and starts chirping, after which they all join in.

‘Let's play hide and seek,’ a guy with a spotty face said. ‘And once you've found somewhere to hide, you have to make up something beautiful. And when I find you, you have to tell me that beautiful thing, and it's only after I've repeated it back to you that I'm allowed to continue looking for the others. In the end I'll have a long string of beautiful things and if it works out I'll be able list them all afterwards. Then we choose the most beautiful and it wins a prize.’

‘What kind of beautiful things?’ someone asked.

‘Just normal, a beautiful situation or something, or a story. Something you can picture.’

‘Does it have to be true?’

‘No. Anything goes.’

‘What's the prize?’

‘It's a surprise.’ He turned his back to the fire and started counting and the twelve people who wanted to play shot off (the others kept standing silently around the fire hoping that somebody might spontaneously kiss them).

‘Six, seven, eight, nine...’

‘Thirty-six!’

‘Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen...’

‘Twelve!’

Three voices faded behind me: the counter and two guys who were trying to confuse him. Taking quick shallow breaths and with my heart pounding, I ran into the farm’s back yard, passed a bed of strawberry plants that had turned grey in the moonlight and jumped over a dry ditch that separated the yard from the fields. On the other side I flopped down stomach first in the grass. They hadn’t made hay all summer.

‘Ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred. Coming ready or not!’

On my knees I looked at the party, my head scarcely visible above the grass. It was strangely quiet in this grass hut, with just a mosquito trying to bite me on the ear. The silhouette of the searcher was moving in the opposite direction so I didn’t need to worry about that. A group of six guys clinked their beer bottles in an exaggerated toast and shouted something, but so boisterously I couldn’t make out what. Two of them had been in my class this last year. One had failed.

‘Cheers, lads,’ I whispered in the dark and raised a non-existent beer to join them. But before I could complete the gesture, I pulled my arm down quickly because in the corner of my eye I’d seen somebody else wandering past the grey strawberry plants towards the field.

A slow subaquatic lamb in the dark – that was what she was. She wasn’t even running. She stepped carefully over each plant and leapt over the dry ditch as gracefully as a giraffe made of cling film.

A giraffe made of cling film. If you asked me now, that would be the most beautiful thing I’ve seen in my whole life.

‘Pst... here!’ I was about to say, but she was already lying stretched out next to me in the grass.

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Although I’d never spoken to her, I knew exactly who she was. I knew she came from the islands, from Terschelling. I knew she was two years below me, but also that we were more or less the same age, probably because she’d

repeated a couple of years. She smelt incredibly strongly of wood fire, the grass hut was immediately ablaze.

I knew she was called Saartje Schaap.

At first we stayed quiet because if you've had any kind of upbringing at all, you know that's what you do when you're playing hide-and-seek. Two pounding hearts in the grass, like a lapwing nest with two throbbing eggs in the dark.

'If you ask me he's gone looking along the road,' she said after a while. 'Hello, by the way. You're Gerrit, right? Would you like a beer?'

She'd brought two bottles with her, which we opened with the key to my bike lock. First we whispered, then we spoke in our normal voices. We heard the party in the background, someone screamed, people laughed, people cheered when something big went on the fire. Saartje lay down on her back, and a little later I was lying shyly on my side next to her.

We talked about the things young people talk about in the night (the stars, school, other young people) and also subjects young people never actually have anything to say about at all, but that night Saartje and I suddenly did (the echolocation of the bats flying overhead, the possibility of Martians shaped like bathtubs, whether sailors on submarines had the option of deep frying their potatoes if they felt like chips).

'Do you think it's possible that it's not Paris that's the real city of love but Reykjavik?' she asked. 'They've been keeping it secret all this time, but there's a society that's known about it for centuries.'

'Because the true city of love has to be on an island, of course,' I said, immediately enthused. 'Otherwise it doesn't count.'

'Isn't Reykjavik too cold?'

'That's an advantage,' I said. 'It has to be a bit difficult to survive there. Once you've started thinking of yourself as a kind of Robinson Crusoe, the sudden confrontation with the city of love hits even harder.'

Her laughter mixed with the smell of grass and cow shit that always hangs over Friesland in the night, and had already blended with the wood-fire smell from her clothes. There was a gigantic moon and I pointed out the spot where the first moon landing took place.

'I once saw a giraffe on Terschelling,' she said. 'At night on the North Sea beach. I'd gone there with my father. I was five or maybe six and we'd gone there to see the sea sparkle and all of a sudden a giraffe came down out of

the dunes towards the surf. It almost stumbled over its own legs on the slope but once it made it onto the beach it calmed down and after standing by the water for a while it just went back again.'

I could have said there were no giraffes on Terschelling, but I didn't. No idea why I would have wanted to.

'Gerrit! Saartje!!' somebody shouted in the distance. 'You can stop hiding. We're not playing anymore!'

She stood up faster than I did, for a moment her silhouette towered over me, sharply outlined against the starry sky. Together we jumped over the dry ditch and walked through the dark yard back to the circle of light around the fire.

'Where's the guy who's supposed to be looking for us?' she asked. 'I still have to tell him what I made up.'

'You don't have to worry about that. He went off to do something else ages ago.'

'No, I want to find out what the prize is. See you!'

Somebody threw a log on the fire, sending a shower of sparks up in the air. Somebody else was playing a Byrds song on an untuned guitar. In the dark shed a cow mooed. She should have gone to sleep ages ago.