

THE ARCHIVE by Thomas Heerma van Voss

Translated by Michele Hutchison

Das Mag, 2004, paperback, 274 pages

Pages 11-21

PART ONE

My father trusted possessions more than people. For my mother, the towers of paper around his desk, the journals, periodicals and meeting minutes, the dolls' houses, bags, pens and paperclips, DVDs and video tapes were just mess. He saw objects that he knew through and through and which might come in handy someday. 'Always be prepared,' he told me when I was about six or seven. The window of his Opel Vectra had been smashed in and it turned out he'd hidden my cassette tapes at home, preventatively. Crime was all around us, no one could be trusted. Change in the supermarket had to be counted. Every cheery door-to-door collector could be a crook.

He'd kept all of his diaries since he was twelve. His days were carefully recorded; unexpected encounters and football scores were noted, too. On the last pages he wrote down important things, invariably in code. He labelled his email password 'Safe Security, Gerard Oegel Ltd.' When I opened my first bank account, he wrote a note in his diary about Pierre Bankopini, Italian restaurant, located on the Via something or other at number 1098.

After one of my very first biology lessons, I asked over dinner when exactly I had been conceived. When had my parents procreated?

'Ugh gross,' said my brother.

My mother launched into an enthusiastic story about a sultry evening in a small hotel in Saint-Valery-sur-Somme, a coastal village with more boats than people, later our standard stop-over place halfway to our summer holidays in Brittany.

‘Impossible,’ my father said immediately. ‘Pierre wasn’t in your womb for thirteen months.’

He shook his head, hurried away from the table, opened the stained glass sliding doors to his study – I can still see him. He effortlessly reached into the mess of books and papers pulled out the notebook he was looking for: his well-thumbed 1990 Parker diary. He leafed through it, pointed happily to a December day filled with his neat handwriting. Appointments with people I didn’t know, a series of times and locations. At the bottom there was something about a *birthday dinner at Centra*. ‘That’s when it happened,’ he told my mother with theatrical emphasis, like a lawyer who had worked a suspect into a corner. ‘Such a shame that restaurant shut down.’

On holiday he’d drag me and my brother around the same toy shops each year where we were allowed to pick out an action figure. He was never impatient or rushed – time was boundless on summer days like those. It wasn’t until years later that I realised my father hadn’t stood there as a parent but as an equal. Although friends occasionally thought he was my granddad – he was fourteen years older than my mother, and when I was born he was fifty-one – he was capable of losing himself in the wide array of plastic superheroes and rockets. Wouldn’t this Luke Skywalker be a nice addition to our collection? he’d ask with childish enthusiasm. That Robocop keyring looked good too, and what did we think of the little metal Opels that looked just like our own car?

My mother would have liked to take us on interesting walks and to historical buildings, as she was accustomed with her older primary school pupils. But her efforts never got off the

ground because my dad never wanted to go. ‘They’ve opened a wonderful new art gallery here, boys,’ she’d say, ‘they have some beautiful paintings on display.’

‘They can display away,’ he’d say.

He used a lot of set phrases, which he’d mainly inherited from his own father.

Whenever I’m walking around the city and I see someone stepping into the road without looking, I’ll hear him say, ‘*They’re* tired of life.’ An embracing couple: ‘*He’s* trying to stop her running off.’

Almost everything was a ritual. Every Saturday, my father would devotedly watch my plodding attempts as a defender on the football pitch even when I had long reached adulthood and my first teammates had children of their own. For as long as I can remember, we’d been going to the hairdresser’s together, an outing replete with traditions. At Concerto, we’d inspect the second-hand records and DVDs, after that we’d evaluate our purchases at Van Dobben as we shared our bread rolls with steak tartare and salted meat.

On Sundays he’d settle in front of the TV in his dressing gown with a pile of newspapers – he was always months behind, copies of the *NRC* and *de Volkskrant* gradually took over our entire sitting room – and then he’d leaf through them, shaking his head.

Every few minutes he’d say, ‘Well, nothing in the papers again.’

Although it was never openly stated, my father’s study was obviously a no-go zone. As a child I fantasised about exploring that space, that world. It was by far the most packed room in a packed house. When my brother and I still played hide-and-seek, I’d sometimes silently open the sliding doors and hide among the pieces of furniture around to my father’s desk. Chair legs with spiders’ webs; rows of tin soldiers; boxes of Dunhill cigarettes my father had once got cheap; countless photo albums, the years they covered marked on sticky labels (he’d taken almost all of them so was rarely in the pictures himself); hundreds of novels and reference

books, neatly ordered; ring binders filled with notes and correspondences that spanned decades. All that stuff, a whole life, kept together by a system I didn't yet comprehend. But once my father retired, I had no more access to the room. He sat in there the whole time himself, smoking at his desk behind his paperwork and his laptop.

What was he doing? Sending emails, following the news, leafing through old notebooks, more than that I didn't know. The same way I never knew what kind of work he'd done. Something in the media, that was how I explained it to classmates for the longest time. First at a news magazine, later as a freelance journalist for the radio station, he was on committees, went to launches and drinks parties, did all sorts of stuff at the same time.

When I started reading books, around the time I started secondary school, when many of the names that had issued from my father's lips turned out to be responsible for wondrous stories, he'd sometimes emerge from his private storehouse with a nicotine-yellow novel which he'd hand to me proudly. Or he'd pass me an article which he'd carted with him for at least three house moves. 'Here, this is about that poet you asked about. Forty years ago it was wonderful piece and it still is. Which person can you say that about?'

More than anything else, my father taught me this: objects stuck around. Events could be looked up, they could be carefully reconstructed down to the hour. But people, yes, they could just vanish, unpredictably and without anyone being able to explain it, but things and words, they lived on.

Not long after my twenty-eighth birthday, a man with a crew cut and round glasses told me that everything in life is repetition. Things seem new but are imitation or reproduction or a semi-conscious reference.

‘Everything that seems like innovation in our world actually happened years ago in Silicon Valley,’ he said. ‘You and me? We just imitate what we see around us. You discover a new writer, actor, footballer? They began by copying others and were slogging away in the shadows for a long time beforehand. And that’s how you should consider the literary magazine, not as the source of major innovation but as a sheltered place where a person can make their first attempts, imitating, developing their own style.’ His voice grew louder. ‘The literary magazine is the breeding ground for stories that will later fill the bookshops, win prizes and engage a great many of us.’

The man asked me not to use his name. He asked in the same tone he used to order coffee and write emails, the latter mainly in the early morning before his wife and daughter had woken up in their terraced house in Tilburg. (I’ve never been there but I looked it up online. Looked like a quiet street. Wide pavement, enough parking spaces, solar panels on the roofs.) His emails were cheerful and every message, however short, ended with ‘all the best!’. The man worked at Athenaeum bookshop on the Spui in Amsterdam three days a week, though I never saw him there when I bought a book. He did something above the shop, in the area closed off to customers; practical matters, a lot of technical stuff. His name is Koen Koole by the way – I’m not going to conceal the truth. On second thoughts, it would be a pity not to make the most of such classic Dutch alliteration.

The morning Koen mentioned Silicon Valley, which is six years ago now, was also the first time we met. A week earlier, on a Tuesday morning, at 6.14am to be precise, he’d emailed to ask whether we could have coffee together. *To talk about Arabesk! You know I’m on the editorial board, right?*

We'd arranged to meet at Café De Zwart, in his break from the bookshop. He was already sitting there when I entered, a slender figure in a dark-blue polo shirt and jeans at a round table next to the window. I recognized him from his Twitter account where he shared daily book tips and sometimes complained about disruptions to the rail service.

During those forty-five minutes in Café De Zwart, Koen dominated the conversation. Although he is nine years my senior, he seemed slightly nervous. I didn't yet know that this harried way of talking was just part of him. In between sentences, he took sips of his cappuccino. He didn't touch the biscuit that came with it.

His expression suddenly became concerned. He fiddled with his glasses and said that a large part of the editorial board had recently departed. 'Bert van Nieuwbeek and I are the only ones left. But we must go on, *Arabesk* is still the best literary magazine in the Netherlands. We've just managed to a nice wodge of funding from the literary foundation, so we're safe for at least a year. And this we do know: an injection of youth is good for a magazine.' Had I ever thought of becoming an editor?

I hadn't but it happened there and then.

The idea alone was an ego boost. *Arabesk*! Ten years ago, right before I left home, my father had shown me some old issues of the magazine. A spontaneous yet ceremonious moment. Like every evening I was lying on the red sofa in the living room when suddenly he was standing there with a stack of paperwork under his arm: seven or eight different magazines. 'Of course you're already familiar with *The New Times* but you might enjoy these issues from when I was in charge. Quite a lot of influential material and journalism at the highest level, even if I say so myself. And this well-known journal is also good. I never wrote for it but I did read it with great admiration. You'll be careful, won't you? No greasy fingers.'

I carefully leafed through a few copies of *Arabesk*. Brittle yellowing pages, around seventy in total – filled with keen-witted stories, poems, observations. I saw a lot of dense,

tightly-packed text, title pages upon which the date and place of purchase were dutifully noted.

9th September 1977, Scheltema. 21st February 1983, a biting cold Monday in H. de Vries.

Perhaps this was my father's way of cordoning off the magazines from my mother: *these ones are mine*. (He'd already been divorced once and still deeply regretted getting married that time without a prenup.) But I mainly read into this how important these copies of *Arabesk* were to him. Once I'd finished reading them, he placed the copies back in the cupboard next to his desk, like museum pieces that had been on loan. There they sat old road maps, cuttings files and cashbooks to the second row.

Would I really be allowed to be a part of this magazine?

The pay was minimal, it was true. Koen made it clear immediately that this was a side job, only modestly remunerated, but still it sounded attractive. Since finishing my degree, I'd been working for an online company that sent me academic theses to correct. It was lucrative, not prestigious but entertaining enough – and now I could edit the magazine on the side.

How had they come by me? I didn't have any experience of being a literary editor. I read the theses the way a plumber set about repairing broken pipes. I replaced wonky sentences, corrected typos, took out repetitions and cut lengthy asides in two. But I didn't get involved with the construction or the style. And I'd temporarily set aside my own literary ambitions after a few poetic utterances written at uni. Perhaps I could do some writing again as the editor of a magazine. Years before this coffee date, a friendly shabby publishing house had published a collection of my poetry, *Red Meat*, but despite good reviews, it was never reprinted. It seemed unlikely to me that Koen had approached me because of the three times I'd submitted poems to the magazine for publication in my early twenties.

The first time my poems, which were about someone who didn't dare leave their bedroom, were shot down, after several months of waiting, with a line I'd later use myself for rejections: 'Sadly we weren't convinced.'

The second time – a poem about a bickering married couple, loosely based on my parents, though I'd never shown it to them – an editorial process began in which I emailed back and forth with both Koen and Bert. I rewrote and rewrote and was amazed by their attention to detail. *Could you specify what kind of café they're in because this will reflect their milieu?* I had no experience of this kind of guidance. Finally Koen emailed me, 'Your poem has improved, but not in its entirety.'

After my third submission, certainly not worth summarizing, he wrote: 'Feel free to email us, but from now on your poetry will go onto the main submissions pile. Corresponding hasn't been sufficiently productive.'

To avoid spoiling the mood, I decided not to rake up these episodes now I sat facing Koen, blowing on my mug of ginger tea. Instead I just kept nodding, over and over, I could hardly keep my head still.

'What would I have to do exactly as an editor?' I asked finally.

'A lot of reading, that's the essence. Improving stories and poetry. Approaching writers, talent-spotting. Dutch literature is still our mainstay but we also publish translations. You can manage your time any way you want, and yes, this is just a side job, not something one does forever, and I realize I don't have much to offer. Many people have already written off literary magazines and we're battling against the tide with fewer and fewer people reading.' He paused. 'Books have been struggling for years and it's even worse for magazines.' He actually rested his slender fingers on his chest then, 'this is going to be unlike anything you have ever known.'

Fortunately he didn't ask whether I was a fervent *Arabesk* reader so I didn't have to admit to only following the mag from the sidelines. Why in fact? Not because of a lack of interest, it was just that my days filled up, and I never came across copies of it in bookshops or at friends' houses.

‘There’s a lot of experimentation in our magazine,’ Koen continued, ‘writers dare do things with us, they wouldn’t try elsewhere. Believe me, the literary magazine is a wonderful playground. An editorship like that is the perfect fit for people who want to immerse themselves in literature and maybe work more seriously on developing their own writing. *Arabesk* is still very well read by people in publishing. You might be surprised that we’ve approached you but we aimed at relatively unknown newcomers.’ I tried to ignore those last two words. ‘Young blood, setting our sights on the future,’ Koen said. ‘Out with the old dogs. Of course your family name has long been familiar to me, and our earlier correspondence about poetry was very substantive... I get the sense you’d be good at this.’

He wasn’t asking me because of my father, was he? No, no, no, I quickly reassured myself, that’s not how it works, there weren’t any other children of former editors working for the magazine. And the longer Koen talked, the more my suspicions faded to the background – one day people would probably, hopefully, know my name because of me. Let’s not beat about the bush, I felt special. This wasn’t something Koen would ask any random person to do, he’d chosen me.

Pages 214-216

Not long after that he had an appointment to see a specialist at VU hospital. My mother, my brother and I went with him. Up to this point, my father had gone to all his doctors’ appointments on his own. Weeks earlier, he reluctantly admitted to me, the GP had put his symptoms down to neglected eczema and exhaustion, after that: possible scarring or a fatty liver, and later still: possible cirrhosis and a treatable carcinoma. All of them terms that by now sounded

ridiculously innocuous. What came next: referrals, follow-up appointments, urgent consultations, which finally led to this brightly-lit floor at the top of the hospital building.

The specialist gave my father a long look. Then he used the words ‘unfortunately’ and ‘worst case scenario’, ‘stage five’, ‘I’m afraid that after the most recent tests, I have some bad news for you.’ The tumour had been mapped and it wasn’t a compact little ball that could be cut out. Like an octopus, the illness had irrevocably spread her tentacles to other parts of the body.

My mother got out a list of questions she’d written at home, *how long has it been there, how long does he have left and what now?* My father remained silent. Finally – dressed in his best jumper which he’d had trouble putting on just before he left – he asked just a single question, after a long pause.

‘Could I have prevented this?’

‘Hmm, well that’s a moral question,’ said the specialist. ‘You said you liked a drink, certainly when you were younger, of course that’s connected to liver function. I could admonish you about that, and I can imagine that this news has given you a rather unreal, nasty little sensation. But I’d like to ask you this: have you had a good life?’

My father’s hands landed on the arms of his chair, then slid off, he blinked repeatedly.

The question made my head spin too. I looked away from my father, at a rack of leaflets for patients, at a photo of the specialist with his family in the Grand Canyon, at an anatomical skeleton in the corner of the room.

‘Yes, I did,’ said my father. ‘Only I wasn’t done yet. And... it’s not in my nature to be that satisfied.’

‘The grass is greener on the other side?’ the specialist suggested.

‘The grass just isn’t that green.’

My father wanted to recuperate in the hospital café. I think he knew it would be his last day outside. This was the last day he'd wear his smart sweater and his long beige coat, the last shard of the world that was separate from his house. He shivered as he brought his cup of tea to his lips.

My mother stroked his cheek and began to cry breathlessly. My brother paced up and down the café. I sat quietly, my jaw clenched, my knees shaking against the tabletop, and I couldn't take my eyes off my father. He just stared into space, not combative but meek. Then he picked up a copy of the *Telegraaf* that was lying about, glanced at the headlines and closed the paper again after a couple of pages. 'Well, nothing in the paper again today.'

He didn't start swearing until we were in the taxi on our way home. 'Jesus Fucking Christ,' he said, breaking his long silence. 'Did the doctor really call it *a nasty little sensation?*'

Translated by hand without the use of generative AI.