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His name was

This introduction will be brief. Brief yet essential, as is the way with warnings. In this chapter, someone will die. And that final descent into stillness will quicken the course of several lives. The man in question will make his entrance after the next blank line. Thank you for your patience.

Before we move on, let me assure you that I have no plans to steal the show. I will surface occasionally. Which is not to say that I have no personal involvement in this story. I do, and it has never been greater than here and now, in this – my role as narrator. Fortunately for both of us, good taste and an aversion to sentimentality will keep me from specifying or amplifying my part in all of this. But you can take my word for it: this story matters.

Here he is now. There, I should say, in the labyrinth we know as Schiphol Airport. Having checked in his suitcase, he trudges from terminal to terminal, from hall to hall. It's been years since he last set foot in this place and he had forgotten how it sets him on edge. What he does recall is the strain this puts on his heart. He takes pills for this condition. Pills he will soon no longer need.

It is Sunday, six in the evening, and all day things have been moving too fast for his liking. The screens are too yellow, too bright, the voices too loud; no one is looking where they are going. He orders a coffee – 'just an ordinary black coffee, normal size' – and plants himself on a bucket seat that does his back no favours. He lands with such aplomb that the people either side budge up instinctively, as if they don't quite trust this apparition, a species from another world.

But what do they know? They never saw him as a kid, roaming around a gloomy Brabant village, his itchy woollen socks pulled up to the knee, playing hopscotch or kicking pebbles down streets where cars were still a novelty, out the other side of St. Albert's parish and up to the mill. They don't know the schoolboy who dreamed of boarding a train and travelling far from that place. To a world beyond, the vast world beyond, captured in the three-line entries he read daily in *Everyman's Encyclopaedia*, sitting quietly in his unheated bedroom, blanket over his shoulders and the smell of Ma's boiled spuds rising through the floorboards. They never caught the tang of his sweat when he first fell in love in the big city or felt his joy when the nurse said, 'You're a father now'.

Before he has taken his third sip of coffee, his flight is announced, in a prim, tinny voice that seems to come from every corner of every hall, alcove and toilet. Then he hears his name, an entreaty to proceed to the gate. Did he lose track of time? Make some kind of error? He has no idea. He abandons his coffee and starts to walk, thinking of his seat, 58F, of the KLM in-flight meal waiting for him, and of the extra mini-pretzels that should be his by right given his family history. But his pace slows, his feet drag, he appears to be getting nowhere. On the other side of the glass, aircraft take off, a thundering growl muted by cheery piano muzak, the footsteps around him, the light background hum. Somewhere in the recesses of Schiphol, a Cif-scented stretch of no-man's land between gates D12 and D14, he falls to his knees, a marionette whose strings are being snipped one by one. He tries to get up, only half succeeds, lurches on. In disbelief he stares at his hands, his feet; this is his body, it is a day like any other, wedged between yesterday and tomorrow. *Nothing is the matter*, he thinks, therefore he still is and so nothing *is* the matter. His name is called again. He does not hear it.

Who is the man who once answered to this name? A complex question, and the complexity deepens the more you get to know him. How do we sum someone up, reduce the infinite detail of a human life to a simple, unambiguous sentence beginning with he *is*, she *is*?

It doesn't help that this particular man is notoriously hard to pin down. In eight days' time, mourners will gather in a chapel to pay their last respects and at least five of those present will think at one point or another: I honestly don't believe I knew this man at all. Even so, let me attempt to summon an image, albeit more shadow than photograph.

First, the facts. He is a son, an ex-husband and the father of three grown children: Tessel (b. 1981), Moor (b. 1985) and Cat (b. 1989). It's been years since he last spoke to their mother, Elise, though he thinks of her almost every day. Nobody knows this and perhaps it is better that way.

No newspaper has ever reflected on his life's work and only one interview with him made it into print, part of a student magazine feature on his reportage photos of Amsterdam during the unrest of the sixties and seventies. Perhaps he will merit a retrospective for the dedicated film buff, an afternoon at a local cinema where the lightbulb in the hallway fizzes and flickers. For many years, he was a hardy independent in the eternally young film world, and on occasion had what might be termed a success. But lately he had increasingly begun to see the smattering of job offers that still came his way as an omen of that dreaded phenomenon retirement. Watching TV one drizzly Tuesday evening a fortnight or so ago, he happened upon a saccharine Dutch romcom. Unable to name a single actor, he recalled what his old Hollywood pal Gene Grift had once told him: that something – a job, a world –

appears perfectly self-evident when you are in the thick of it, but utterly ludicrous from the margins. In front of his TV that night, our man realised that he had become an outsider, possibly some time ago. Who could say? Perhaps he had been a laughing stock for years. Who's the old guy in the corner and what's he doing on set?

He opened his laptop and booked himself a cheap flight to Porto. Looking in the mirror this morning, he contemplated his approaching holiday, his first in years, and planned to mark his arrival with a glass of liver-red tawny at one of the run of old port houses by the harbour.

How does he sound? What does he look like?

His voice is seasoned, deep and earnest, ideal for an emergency broadcast. When overcome by rage, by deep feelings, by anything bigger and stronger than himself, he descends into stuttering. A voice made for radio with a face to match. Skin like tree bark – coarse, stained, pockmarked – with a bloom of purple threads either side of his nose. A furrowed brow, lines carved by deep thought, disturbing dreams, and a tendency to read by insufficient light. Not so much ugly, as unpolished. A painter might call it medieval, a face from the period just before portraiture embraced detail and subtlety in the rendering of human features. Place of birth: Oosterhout. Year of birth: 1946. Height: five feet eight and three-quarters. Date of death: today.

His near collapse between two gates, the snipping of the strings, the lurch: it is a primal scene, animal, raw. Bystanders are startled but do not look away. They forget to breathe, their pupils widen, some call for a doctor. These cries do not reach him, or as distant vibrations at best. His cheeks are burning. Why on earth is it so warm?

These bystanders, do they see a good man? A bad man? What would his friends have to say on this matter? His children?

He loves his children, certainly, in his own way. They have learned not to expect a pat on the back. His love flows obliquely. In the early hours of Queen's Day, when people were unpacking their second-hand goods for sale, he would head out to find the pick of the toys. In the damp, dawn air, hands thrust deep in his Breton skipper's coat, he would scour the improvised market stalls on Apollolaan, in search of Stormtroopers, Ewoks or comic books for Moor, colouring pencils and pens for Tessel, dolls for Cat. The spoils would be waiting on them when they stumbled drowsily downstairs later that morning. When Tessel and her family go on holiday, always to France, he unfolds his old road map, spreads it on his desk and sticks pins in the towns where they spend the night, travelling with them in his way. He

thumbs through old travel guides, locating worthwhile cafés, restaurants, sights and cheesy local museums. He calls but never seems to reach her. Attention lavished on little things.

Other elements of his character are harder to defend. He is quick-tempered, though he would insist otherwise. He had no qualms about physical punishment if a child (the son, Moor) was not inclined to listen. Driving after dark, he blasts his car horn at every cyclist without a headlight, relishes scaring them witless. When someone on television says they have been traumatised, he feels the urge to break something. And yes, he has made mistakes, plenty of them. But that is for later. Inappropriate, I feel, for a moment like this.

A good man, a bad man: what weight do these moralistic platitudes carry? His time is close now and who is in a position to judge? Am I? Are you?

Things are moving fast. All notion of his seat, his meal, his entitlement to pretzels has faded. Every last train of thought has slipped his mind, life is unfolding, but in a diffuse, complex manner only he could explain, if he were not in this wordless, departing state. He is preoccupied by glimpses, flashes, by fragmented, condensed memories and experiences shaken free from the chronology that held them in place. Everything is happening in one and the same instant. Stained-glass colours the taut, grey face of Father Doomernik as it looms closer, the wink of a cyclops. Amsterdam, the sight of his first Nikon F, its weight in his hands, seeing the world through a lens, at a slight remove yet fiercely engaged. The look on the face of Elise, his ex, in their first years together, her sleepy eyes, so full of hope, so unashamedly glad to be waking by his side. The cool breeze through the open window of his rented Cadillac on a drive through Hollywood. The warm scent of his little mites before they grew too old for nuzzling. So many lives enmeshed in one. Amid the lights and flickering screens of Schiphol he sees fireflies, the first of the year, illuminating the darkness around his parents' home on Pastoriestraat in Oosterhout, tracing supple, halogenous figures of eight. He reaches out and they vanish. Layer after layer is unpeeling. Everything that was self-evident falling away. Every coincidence now appears fateful. And vice versa.

Everything, a single second.

The flashes blur and all that remains is atmosphere, a haze of impressions and feelings once sensed or experienced; severed from the memories to which they once belonged, they swarm inside him never to settle again. They stem from him but are no longer part of him. Sinking to the floor, arms outstretched, instead of fireflies he takes a roll of fruit gums down with him, clawed from a rack outside a kiosk. A small child who had set his heart on those very sweets points indignantly, a mother clasps her hand to her mouth, a man lugging five

dry-cleaned jackets drops them all. The inevitable has been set in motion. The bystanders are witnesses to an occurrence as brutal as it is solemn: a fellow human is losing his life.

The multiplicity of a human life, the exact characteristics no one but the person dying will ever exhibit, the thoughts no one else will have in precisely the same way, the belongings – the children's socks, the shirts, the sports shoes – all that stuff. The choices that made his life his, the curses, the crushes, the slips of the tongue, the songs he loved, the photos he appears in, the body that blossomed, matured, began to falter, and at its centre that one organ that determines everything, beating slower, slower still. The length of a life, the expanse of death, the lightning shift from one to the other.

No one is with him, there are no farewells. But being alone is, perhaps for the first time in many years, no longer of consequence. This is a pure and concentrated loneliness, akin to a star, to a rock falling from a cliff.

What lies ahead is clear. He feels it. None of us has died before, yet we will all know when it is happening, when it has begun. It will happen quickly, he senses this and not without wonder, perhaps with a hint of reverence. He has always been afraid of death, of dying. As if he might not be up to the task, not without losing his dignity, a test he was doomed to fail. But he is up to it. This is not beyond him. A pass mark is within reach.

He yields. A feeling, soft and warm, one he did not expect, flows through his entire body. No one will hurt him again; there is no more need to take out that pain on someone else. A tightening of the jaw stops the feeling from spreading into a smile; it remains unexpressed, as if it had never existed. His lungs no longer take in air. Instead they expel, a little, a little less, until...

It is happening, it has happened, it happened.

Oh... and his name was Oskar.