

# Salt

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**pp 48-64**

## It Wasn't the Stomach Cramps

It wasn't the stomach cramps or the bloody stools, nor the small, bluish creatures in Mister Harald's class, two or three of whom disappeared every year, sometimes more—children that no one talked about, as if they'd never existed; nor was it the rash on Paulsma's wife's face, or the itch that Archibald Harmsen's son began to complain about and that made him scratch his face, his arms and his belly until his skin was covered in weeping scabs; it wasn't even the gruesome way Herriger's wife had died after drinking large amounts of water from the brook—at first moaning in pain, later screaming; nor the miscarriages of Ellie Werdink and Beppie Keuning—

No, it was the Baroness who had him out frantically scouring the fields.

Ever since Julius Vrijmoedt's visit, Agnes Christina Helmstadt van Uitganck hadn't had another sip. Sometimes the memory of all the diseases that Vrijmoedt had enumerated would still make her gag—just as the memory of her trip to the bathroom the afternoon of his visit sometimes still made her shudder. Bent over the white porcelain, heaving and gagging, it had seemed to her as though the water at the bottom of the toilet bowl were coming to life, crawling up the smooth, curved surface—as if it had it in for her, wanted to invade and infect her until her body was a roiling mass, churning with blood. A pot of boiling pea soup, she'd thought, her hands clenched around the rim of the toilet; thick green pea soup, frothing with bubbles that burst at the surface. And that thought had brought everything inside her up. With a raw cry each time, it had all ended up in the toilet bowl—one meal after the next: the tea and the nice pastries from Bäckerei Gerhard Merschhofer in Liebtrecht, just over the border, specially delivered by courier to the castle that morning; the cake-like white bread from Verkerck in Aensfeld-on-Drege, the royal supplier, delivered a few days earlier by Johannes Verkerck himself, and even a little bit of the beef stew from the previous night—and after that, in endless jerking spasms, yellow bile and strands of strangely transparent saliva. And then nothing—nothing but gasping and whimpering, nothing but the feeling that all that could follow now was her own guts, her heart, her liver, her lungs. Everything went black.

She had come to in the canopy bed in her own room, propped up against soft pillows. Wilhelm was sitting next to her on the edge of the bed, one hand behind her head, the other carefully holding a glass up to her lips. Behind him, slightly bent-over, was Julius Vrijmoedt. He was looking worried, frightened—or was it maybe disgust that she could see in his face? Revulsion? Why did it have to be him, of all people, who had to witness her in this state? Behind Vrijmoedt, Agnes could make out some of the staff: Dina, her chambermaid; Marie's round figure; and Willemien, who also

worked in the kitchen. Behind the girls there was... there was... good Lord, was that Arend? Normally he never set foot inside the castle; at the most he'd step into Wilhelm's study to discuss matters relating to the horses or the garden. Had she cried out so loudly that even he had hurried inside? Had they perhaps even been able to hear her all the way from the village? Could it be that the farmers and workmen were standing under the window now, alarmed by the screams and other noises that she'd made? She was overcome with shame, and then immediately afterwards, a profound sense of exhaustion. Her whole body grew heavy. She felt how the glass Wilhelm was holding was now touching her lips. She just wanted to surrender, close her eyes, let herself go, open her mouth and drink... drink water... cool, clear, fresh water...

But the next moment she opened her eyes wide, staring at the glass right in front of her face with an expression somewhere between fear and revulsion, which to the others made her look cross-eyed, as if she was maybe about to pass out again—or worse. The Baron hesitated, moving the glass back a few inches, away from her lips—but at that same moment Agnes Christina's hand shot up. She knocked the glass away from her face and out of the Baron's hands. It flew across the room and shattered against the wall.

Not another sip—never again.

She shivered as she recalled it. The hairs on her arms were standing straight up.

Elixir d'Anvers, Chartreuse, Drambuie, Elsbitter, Underberg, Zwack Unicum, Gold Liqueur, Poire Williams, Danziger Goldwasser, Benedictine, Armagnac, Marc de Bourgogne, Raynal Grande Champagne Cognac—the rows of bottles in the drinks cabinet in the salon seemed endless. On a shelf in the cellar there were also various jars filled with sour cherries and other preserved fruit in brandy, and there was a decent selection of white and red wine, some of which dated all the way back to Baron Anselm von Rüdersdorf Helmstadt, Wilhelm's grandfather. There was Marie's stomach elixir. There was Buff Maagbitter from Echternach, “prepared according to the instructions given in a manuscript by the renowned professor and herbalist Dr. Herman Boerhaave (1668–1738) from the University of Leiden”—a provenance that the Baroness found very reassuring. And then there were a few bottles of Braeckman herbal liqueur, corn brandy flavored with aniseed, juniper berries and caraway.

She had started with small, almost medicinal sips, as if she'd been ordered to drink by Dr. Haman from Aensfeld-on-Drege—a tall, balding man who, once per year, made his rounds of the village in his carriage. The Baron and the Baroness, however, went to see him several times a year—for a fistula, a rash or a stubborn cough, a horse-riding injury or the sort of women's problems that the Baron preferred not to ask about. Sometimes they would have him make a house call, like the time when Berend Weltink had been kicked in the breastbone in the stables and, breathing laboriously, had stuck it out for another 24 hours only to finally give up the ghost just as Dr. Haman was turning onto the driveway.

Tiny sips, to calm her stomach.

A glass of wine to quench the thirst.

A bottle of Rheingau just before noon and a drop of Elsbitter liqueur just before lunch.

After that, it all went very fast: the days became muddled; she lost track of the hours—she'd think it was still morning, or already evening; she'd knock back one drink after the other, one bottle after the next. By this point she'd usually already have sent Wilhelm out to dig. “Water! Water!” She'd fall asleep on the chaise longue or sitting in a Louis XVI chair, a little slumped, chin on her chest, mouth open, legs akimbo. The staff would tiptoe around her snoring figure, a little taken aback by such loss of decorum, not knowing what to do. Some of them would suggest in a whisper that it may be more appropriate to move the Baroness to her room, but no one knew how to go about that. Even Dina, who always helped the Baroness get dressed, shuddered at the thought of grabbing her under the armpits and, with someone else taking her legs, lugging her over to the canopy bed.

Agnes Christina dreamt of a lake amid tall fir trees. The smooth, glassy water reflected the sky, bluer than she could remember ever having seen before, a sky without so much as a hint of cloud. A stag with huge antlers appeared on the shore. The antlers were so big that the reflection seemed to cause a slight ripple in the water's surface. The animal bent down and drank without hesitation. When it lifted its head again it looked straight at her, and Agnes Christina realized that she was standing right in the middle of the lake. She felt something brush past her legs and looked down. She wasn't wearing any clothes. She was naked. She was a girl. The water came up to her waist. When she looked up again, it was no longer the stag that was standing by the shore but a large black dog, its tail pointing upwards, its ears pricked up. It fixed her with its gaze. It had Julius Vrijmoedt's eyes. Ashamed, she crossed her arms over her breasts and looked down again. And then it was as if the color of her skin poured out into the water, as if she'd been covered in skin-tone paint that was now slowly dissolving into the lake. At the same time, she felt the water rising, from her belly button to her chest, up to her neck. Or maybe she was sinking deeper and deeper into the mud. Now the water was murky all the way to the shore. Here and there, bubbles escaped from the depths. Before long she would disappear beneath the water, swallowed up by what seemed to her a poisonous sludge. Before long she would dissolve into nothingness. Nothing could be seen on the shore anymore now. She tried to kick off against the slick, slippery bottom of the lake.

When she jolted awake, she was lying on the floor next to the chair. Her tongue felt like it was made of leather and she had a bitter taste in her mouth. There was no one else in the room. With some effort she rose to her feet, stumbled over to the armchair by the window and scrabbled for the table bell. She needed something to drink now, she urgently needed something to drink.

But all that had just been the beginning, the Baron knew. He, for his part, sometimes had trouble staying on his feet, not losing his balance when he turned into the hallway from the salon—to say nothing of the balancing act required outdoors. Not infrequently he found himself having to lean on Arend for support, who'd grab him by the elbow at the right moment to prevent him from falling into one of the holes, or clutch his shoulder to steer him left or right before any accidents could happen. He acted like a blind man at times. Often, while he was sitting on a pile of sand as Arend was digging away beside him, he'd have a hard time staying awake. Oh, to lie down and be quiet, he thought, pull the covers over me. He unscrewed the lid of his canteen and took a sip of cognac, which only exacerbated his thirst. He, too, was desperately craving water. "Off you go! Hurry!" Agnes Christina had spurred him on. "Deeper! Deeper!" But they could only dig as deep as Arend could, at full stretch, throw the dirt out of the hole with his shovel. He had tried to think of a way to get the soil up from out of deeper holes too. He had considered a human chain, with ladders and scaffolding and buckets full of soil passed from one person to the next, but for that he'd need help from the locals. Arend had made a gesture that had told the Baron not to count on it. The men of Lende stood together motionless on the other side of the paddock, watching them, but no one lifted a finger. And besides, he had no idea where to dig—no idea which spot would actually reward that kind of effort with the only thing that counted, the only thing that could save Agnes Christina from the madness that was consuming her more with every passing day: pure, drinkable water.

Recently a smell had begun to linger in the hallways of the castle that could only be described as rancid. The air in the rooms was thick and heavy. Whenever the Baron entered the castle it would stop him in his tracks. It smelled like off butter or stale wine—acidic. He'd feel his chest beginning to tighten; tears would prick his eyes. Not just in the kitchen or near the lavatory, but in the hallways now and other rooms too, the constant buzzing of flies could be heard. Alfred—his valet—and Arend had hung up strips of cardboard covered in syrup and glue all over the castle. They'd usually be black with insects after just one day—some still twitching, trying to free themselves from the viscous goo that they were trapped in. He had seen how the chambermaid would pull a scarf sprinkled with cologne up over her face the moment she was out of the

Baroness's sight, and when he himself was with Agnes Christina, he too would breathe through his mouth as much as he could. The stench was unbearable.

The Baroness was so afraid of the lethal effect of the water that she refused to wash herself in the mornings or evenings anymore. She reacted to every drop like a demon in a font of holy water. It had started one day when Dina had unsuspectingly filled up the cast-iron claw-foot bath tub to about three-quarters full with hot water from kettles, and poured in some ethereal oil—oil which the Baron had once brought back especially for his wife from a long, long journey to a distant, hot country where, he'd told her, you could see elephants and crocodiles roaming in the wild. Then the maid had walked into the Baroness's room in a haze of roses, citronella and a trace of sandalwood to come and get her for her weekly bathing ritual. She hadn't thought anything of it; she'd been acting in accordance with the established custom. Yet she'd found the Baroness with her arms locked tightly around one of the wood-carved posts of the four-poster, as if she was expecting Dina to try and drag her to the bath by force. "Out! Out!" she'd shrieked, flapping one arm to shoo the maid away, and then firmly clinging onto the bedpost again.

The following morning, too, the Baroness had refused to wash herself with the lightly perfumed water that Dina had poured from the pitcher into the bowl, same as she always did, before making further preparations for Madame's daily toilet. Dina had stopped getting instructions about which gown to put out some time before. Now in the evenings the Baroness was too inebriated to express her sartorial wishes for the following day—if she wasn't passed out altogether, sprawled crosswise on the canopy bed. So Dina had been forced to take matters into her own hands, going into the large oak wardrobe and taking out a dress, a white tulle chemisette with a finely embroidered collar, and a black taffeta visiting cloak with pagoda sleeves and a pleated trim made of gathered ribbon. She chose shoes with a low heel, embroidered with stylized flowers, with blue taffeta ribbon around the instep in double box pleats—shoes that she'd once secretly tried on herself, and that made her feel that, somewhere behind the hills and the woods, past Busch Brook and the Drege River, a world existed in which there was light and joy, where you could dance and float in shoes like these and weren't constantly dragged down by the heavy, ugly clodhoppers she wore on her own feet. They were perhaps a little too frivolous for a Sunday morning, these shoes, for this day of the Lord, but Madame had stopped going to church some time ago—right around the time the digging had begun in fact—as had the Baron. The pews were emptier with every passing week as it was. Was that because the Baron and Baroness were no longer in attendance, or because the route to the church had become so difficult and unpredictable on account of the many holes that now pockmarked the landscape? Or was it because, rather than threatening God's wrath, all Reverend Tol would do since the incident with his wife was beg for His mercy in his hoarse voice? It was hard to tell. The pump organ sounded thin and mournful, no matter how hard Freddy Broekink stepped on the pedals.

Dina had heard banging noises coming from the bedroom next to the dressing room. She'd cast a worried glance at the door which connected the two rooms, which was slightly ajar. Had Madame had another fall? Would she have to help her up despite her trepidation—revulsion, even—and help her to shuffle, step by step, to the mirror in the dressing room? But before she could take a step towards the door, it had swung open. And there she was. There she'd been, Dina had recounted later, a shudder passing through her—there, in the door opening, slightly hunched over, was the Baroness, Agnes Christina, naked, exposed, with no clothes on at all, without the nightgown she'd been wearing just moments ago, without anything, nude, pale, with breasts that seemed to rock gently back and forth to the rhythm of her heaving breath, with nipples large as saucers and straw-yellow hair under her armpits and on her abdomen, coarse hair, wiry hair, a yellow-green-purple bruise on the inside of her thigh—the remnant of a fall earlier that week—and a knotted bird's nest on her head, all that remained of the previous day's hairdo. She was wobbling on her feet; she groped for the door handle with her left hand for support, straightening herself. For just a moment, she regained her regal bearing; for just a moment, it seemed as if she'd shaken

off all the drinking and hardship and had recovered her dignity and pride, even if she was nude, stark naked, without so much as a stitch of clothing on. She pointed at Dina, or so Dina thought—in fact she was pointing at the gown that was draped over the back of a chair, at the visiting cloak that was hanging from a hook on the wardrobe door, at the shoes in Dina’s hand—she was pointing at her entire wardrobe, it turned out, and she said, still standing proudly upright: “All this, all this, needs to be burned!”

Everything that had ever so much as touched the murderous water had to go: china, glasses, tea towels, but also the entire wardrobe—after all, many of the items of clothing had been washed in Busch Brook at some point. And so, from that point on, Baroness Agnes Christina Helmstadt van Uitganck tottered down the hallways of ‘t Raesfelt Castle naked and reeking of booze. Waddling and wobbling, she’d make her way to the salon and tumble into the large armchair by the window, her head spinning, and ring the table bell to get Dina or Marie or Willemien—even Alfred, if need be—to bring her a good bottle of Spätlease from the cellar. It took longer and longer for someone to appear. Marie had been unable to stomach it any longer; she’d come to the Baron, one of the rare times he was in his study rather than out with Arend somewhere digging holes, and had made a kind of curtsy. He was sitting with his head in his hands at the large mahogany desk, silently bemoaning his fate, though he didn’t always do this in silence. Sometimes Alfred had heard him moaning softly, he’d said. “Curse the day I was born,” Alfred thought he’d heard him mumbling. “Why didn’t I die during childbirth, why were there knees waiting to bounce me, why breasts for me to nurse upon?” Alfred thought he’d said. He’d hurriedly closed the door again. He thought of Madame’s heaving breasts, which he’d seen in passing as he’d been heading up the stairs and passed her in the landing. He thought of her knees. He’d seen her firm thighs and the fold of skin that separated her stomach from her abdomen. It had confused him terribly. Gammon, he’d thought as he’d watched her go, before he’d taken the next stairs—on tiptoe now. Just like gammon.

Marie coughed. The Baron looked up. Once again she bent at the knees a little awkwardly and said that she was very sorry, but she, and the rest of the kitchen staff, and Alfred too, actually, everyone, really, actually, except maybe Arend, whom they almost never saw, but then again Mr. Baron already knew that, because...—anyway, she, and everyone else, without meaning any disrespect (she didn’t put it in those terms, but that’s what she meant), without meaning to be impolite towards the Baron or towards Madame, she, the staff, Dina too, really, maybe Dina more than anyone, Marie said, mopping the sweat off her brow with her sleeve—everyone was very concerned about the... about the... the changes in the castle, the... (“stench,” she’d wanted to say, and the fact that the Baroness walked around without any clothes on—“stark naked,” she’d wanted to say, and that was inappropriate, it made Alfred agitated, made him all hot and bothered—horny, more like, and that bothered them in the kitchen—Alfred, who’d always been such a gentleman—she’d wanted to say, but she hadn’t said it)... concerned about the state Madame was in, she said, and, without wishing to be in any way rude, and at the risk of speaking of things that were not her place to discuss, was there nothing the Baron could do? Couldn’t Dr. Haman come, for example, because, with all due respect, sir, she didn’t think she’d be able to stand it much longer like this, and neither would Willemien, much less Dina (she was wrong on that score).

The Baron had stared at her for some time, prompting Marie to curtsy one more time. Finally he’d nodded. But he hadn’t said anything.

Dr. Haman... of course... he’d already considered that himself. He’d even thought about writing a letter to Julius Vrijmoedt and asking for his help. But shame was stopping him. Agnes Christina would go straight back to normal if he could only find water. He had to find water. He had to go deeper, deeper. He was the only one who could solve the problem, he had to solve it, he was the Baron, the landdrost, the man in charge, Lende’s protector, and Agnes Christina’s: his wife, whom

he loved, without whom he was no one. He had to go outside, he had to dig with Arend once again, deeper than ever before, deeper than was possible.

Marie hadn't come back the following day. Willemien had left a few days later. Not long after that, Alfred had started drinking too, and at a certain point he stopped showing up. Dina was the last one standing, the one who, swathed in scarves soaked in perfume, tried as best she could to continue to offer her services to Agnes Christina Helmstadt van Uitganck—a naked, dirty creature with a matted tangle of hair, sitting by the window in an armchair that stank of sweat and stale body odor, taking swigs from a bottle of lemon gin, mumbling incoherently to herself, occasionally barking a loud curse.

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