

That This Is It

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An extract pp 125-132

Original title Russisch voor hoop
Publisher Ambo | Anthos, 2026

Translation Dutch into English
Translator Jonathan Reeder

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JUNGLE FUN !!!

He would make his usual birthday cake. First, drum of fluffy yellow, sliced into two perfect halves with a serrated knife. In between these, a flood of whipped cream, then everything coated with his special – secret! – glaze and decorated with some more tufts of whipped cream, and finally, the most important element: a handwritten message in his elegant but robust script. It was always an impressive creation. He baked about five of these a year, one for each of us and one for himself. He could probably do it in the dark, with one hand tied behind his back.

“H4PPY BIRTHD4Y”, it would say; he had been excited about this for weeks, and I also thought it jolly clever. Not so much the joke itself, but mostly because it was so unmistakably *him*. He, who came up with things that seemed so simple, and that everyone else reckoned they could have thought up themselves, but never did.

He had baked the cake that morning and I kept an eye on things to see how he got on. He worked on autopilot. Egg yolks frothed with sugar, butter at room temperature, all the right amounts. “With baking, everything must be weighed precisely,” was his motto, “except when I do it.” And this was indeed how it always looked. He floated around the kitchen, knew exactly where things were, because everything was right where it was supposed to be. The operation went smoothly, almost by rote. I felt relieved as I hung streamers and blew up balloons. With each balloon I became calmer: the proof that things were going well was right in front of me. I was fretting for nothing. By the time the perfectly baked cake came out of the oven, the house was decorated and the clouds had dispersed.

He whipped the cream and scooped a fingerful straight into his mouth. Then the same finger went back into the bowl; he extended it to me with a “try it?” look. I hesitated, if only for a second, but then was glad to be able to carry out this ritual. I closed my mouth around his finger. The whipped cream was perfect as always, with some lemon zest, to – as Hugo put it – give it some zip. I felt the edge of his fingernail against my tongue.

“Eew!”

I turned and saw Anna standing in the opening of the wide-open French doors at the back of the kitchen.

“Someone’s got to test it, yeah?” Hugo laughed, with faux indignance, as he filled the piping bag. Anna put down her bag, which held a large package with a showy red bow. I checked her eyes to gauge her mood and how the day would progress. It was the latest in many a family gathering where

she was on her own, without a plus-one. And you could never predict if she would be self-confidently single at that moment, or pathetically alone. It was four years since she'd brought someone, but that, too, had gone nowhere. It was a girl, I can't even remember her name, because even then she and Anna hadn't struck me as particularly in love.

"How're things?" I asked.

She shook her head sceptically.

"Fine, why?"

"It's just what people ask each other, hon." He tweaked her nose with his whipped-cream finger. She came over and kissed me on the cheek. She smelled nice, appeared to be in a good place.

Hugo sliced the cake in two. Anna and I watched, we saw the precision we were accustomed to with him. Dividing something that seemed indivisible.

"Voilà," he said.

Separated, the two halves no longer looked like a cake, or even like something meant to be eaten. Only together did they resemble something tasty and right, and I wanted him to hurry up and glue them back together. He smeared whipped cream onto the bottom half with a spatula. Evenly, and all the way to the edges. His hand moved firmly above the surface, the spatula danced as it did its work. I heard car doors open and shut, mild squabbling between two adults, and Nelson's shouts and yelps as he approached along the side of the house. He appeared in the door opening.

"Cake!" he screeched as he ran inside, tripping on the threshold and pulling himself back up on Hugo's trouser leg.

"Almost, kiddo," Hugo chuckled. He bent his stiff knees and hugged the boy. Then Nelson came charging over to me.

"Granny!" he shouted. I bent over and he flung his arms around my neck. I pressed my nose deep into the skin behind his ear, in the hope of catching a whiff of his baby smell. But instead, he smelled of the usual mix of dry biscuits and saliva. Anna and Rosa greeted each other the way people who have known each other for thirty-four years do. Not bothering to show some pleasure at seeing one another, the presumption of a mutual understanding, no need for decorum. Rosa patted Anna on the bottom. Everything was as it was supposed to be.

"Hi, Ma," Thomas said, gauche as can be, as he gave me a kiss and shook Hugo's hand. You could tell Rosa had picked out his clothes again.

"Come on, everybody out in the garden before it's a mess in here," I commanded. "Wolf!" I called in the direction of the hallway.

We went outside and sat at the table while Hugo finished the cake. I had set the table with napkins, cake forks and coffee cups.

The bounce house was Hugo's idea. Last year he had found it online, second-hand, and picked it up from the seller. JUNGLE FUN !!!, it was called. An elephant's face on the front of the pitched roof, a leg at each corner. Although elephants don't live in the jungle, do they? The contraption made a constant racket, its motor furiously pumping outside air into the thick plastic. Air that Nelson did his best to stomp back out. I felt a bit sorry for him that he always had to play in it on his own. It's different growing up without siblings and cousins, like in the old days. Sunday afternoons that all went the same, felt the same, and us never noticing that every week we'd got another week older. But times change, and as I watched the little prince blithely bounce in his inflatable castle, I was happy. I was satisfied; things were fine like this.

"How about we move the table more in the sun?" Rosa suggested.

"Good idea," Anna said, getting up and gesturing to me to do the same.

We shifted the table a few feet towards the grass. Yes, better. I had been looking forward to this for a long time – life had become surprisingly dull since I retired, and it felt good to make a big day of it today.

"Who's for coffee?" Hugo came out with the coffee pot and started filling the cups.

"Me," said Anna, Rosa slid hers forward half an inch, I didn't need to reply, and Wolf appeared from the kitchen and said, "Yes, please." Hugo did the honours. The bowl of sugar cubes was already on the table. The milk pitcher, too; Thomas would take a tiny dash in his coffee, and the rest would end up getting poured into the sink.

"Coffee for you, Nelson?" Hugo called out to the bouncing toddler. The boy broke out laughing.

"Haha grandpa, I don't drink cofffffeeeee!"

Everyone had a good laugh, and I laughed along because it was so good to hear the others in good spirits. I picked up my mobile, checked the weather app. It still looked good; they only expected rain around eight this evening. The bounce house would be deflated and folded up by then, the children will have gone. Then Hugo and I would relax on the sofa, he on the left and me on the right, each of us with a cup of tea and a piece of leftover cake.

Everyone chatted blithely. None of them was aware that we were entering a new phase. I had lived in his house for thirty-three years, twenty-one of them with Wolf here too. And now, that period was coming to an end. For them, it was less of a thing than for me. I felt like saying something, a speech of sorts. I wouldn't, of course. Today, it wasn't about me.

"I'll go get the cake," I announced, getting up and heading for the kitchen. Hugo had already cleared up. Everything was back in its place. The sun shone through the window, illuminating the brass tap; I put the coffee pot back in the machine and it pumped its last bit of water from the reservoir with a satisfied gurgle. Even the birds contributed to my good mood.

I opened the fridge, the light popped on. Little tubs of yogurt, a bottle of white for later – but otherwise, nothing. Taken aback, I scanned the rest of the fridge, but there weren't that many places it could be. Still holding the open door, I looked behind me, maybe the cake was just sitting on the counter and had escaped my notice. But no. I closed the fridge door. Droplets of sweat seemed determined to ooze their way out of my temples. I opened the cupboard doors, one at a time, in search of a large birthday cake that must be here somewhere. Not with the pots and pans, not in with the dry goods, not in the oven – fortunately not in the oven. One more glance in the fridge.

"Cake!" Nelson shouted from his bounce house.

"Coming!" I replied.

I took a knife and cake server from the top drawer, brought them outside and set them on the table.

"Okay, that's this, anyway," I said, hoping no one would notice me scanning the garden in the hope of happening upon a cake. No luck. "Now for the rest." I chuckled nervously, hopefully not too anxiously.

"Bring a chocolate milk too, for the birthday boy here?" Hugo asked. He took carefree sips of coffee, put his arm around Nelson, who sat kicking his heels against the legs of the chair.

I had to go back inside and find a cake. A cake that, according to its maker, was in the fridge. I went back in, took a deep breath, optimistically opened the fridge door, determined that there was clearly no birthday cake, grabbed a carton of chocolate milk from the plastic six-pack, and opened the rubbish-bin cupboard door to throw away the cap, and then I saw it.

Not in the bin, but next to it. The sides glistening like a fresh aubergine (Hugo's secret glaze), the little white tufts on top. The plate was balanced atop the bucket of cleaning supplies, tilted with its side leaning against the wall, the way a girl might sit next to a smelly man in the metro.

H4PPY BIRTHD4Y, it said, just as it was supposed to.

More shouts of "Cake!" from the garden.

"All right!" I replied, louder than I meant to. Followed by: "Coming!", more gently, hoping they would think they misheard my tone of voice just now. I took the plate, got up, and held it askew

so that the cake could slide gently back towards the middle. There was a small indentation in the side, but you'd overlook it if you didn't know. With the back of my hand, I wiped the droplet of perspiration that did eventually come and tried to twist my face into a smile.

"Look what I found!" Anna took a picture of me and the cake. Nelson went into overdrive with delight, banging his cutlery loudly against the metal garden table. They really should be stricter, rein him in. I set the cake on the table, the dent turned towards me. Hugo took the big slicing knife and planted it smack in the middle.

Anna looked at the photo she had just taken and then at me.

"Everything OK, Mum?" she said, over Nelson's clatter and Hugo's hearty laughter.

"Cake," I said.

"It got a bit of a ding," she said, pointing to the obvious dent.

"Nah," I said. "It's perfect."

I don't think she heard my voice crack. There was too much tumult as Nelson knocked over his chocolate milk, Rosa leapt up, and Hugo let out a guffaw.
