

# The Latecomer

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Although it's completely deliberate, night after night, I loathe shitting in bed. Lowering myself to this act of self-debasement really is the most difficult consequence of the insane path I've taken late in life. But holding back in my sleep could only arouse the suspicions of my carers and, if I want to continue to play the role of a senile old man, I have no choice but to regularly soil my nappies. Because that's what it is: a role. I am nowhere near as far gone as I make those around me believe!

The acidity of my urine has started to scald my buttocks and that's not the most pleasant sensation I've ever experienced. The salves and ointments Aisha and Curvy Cora smear out over my cheeks while chatting about the tasty body of the Kukident adhesive paste rep, who comes to this home to peddle his wares, provide no relief at all. But again, under no circumstances can I cross incontinence off my script. Just imagine what would happen if they suddenly discovered that for several months now I've been successfully feigning dementia! That for weeks and weeks on end I've been babbling nonsense or wobbling apathetically in my chair while still quite capable of, to give an example, explaining things like contemporary political issues. The health insurance company would feel robbed and take me to court. The staff, especially the female staff of the Winterlight geriatric care institution would feel misused, as if their integrity has been compromised, and happily bash my brains in. The pity that my children still manage to feel for me, their father, would be transformed into boundless shame. And my wife, the bitch, assuming she survives me, and she will, would smother my grave with enormous amounts of bird feed so that the birds would shit on my memory for perpetuity.

So no, I don't have an alternative. I've burnt my bridges, there is no going back. Once in the old gits' home, always in the old gits' home. I knew what I was getting myself into. But that doesn't detract from the fact that, of all the particulars that go with the plausible simulation of a completely senile senior, it is incontinence that I find the most difficult. It's often with tears in my eyes that I lie here at night squeezing my guts out. No one can accuse me of a lack of willpower these last few months, but sometimes, waiting here in my own sticky filth, I began to doubt the whole enterprise. Those were the rare moments, the ripe moments, in which I asked myself, "Is it all worth it? Haven't I gone a tad too far?"

Since then the definitive answer to all those questions has presented itself. To my relief.

The vast quantities of pills the nurses here shove down our throats will have something to do with it, but last night I didn't wake up once. Snoozed like a corpse. In other words, I wasn't able to force myself to treat the social service sector to a big fat turd.

However.

Curvy Cora rushed into my room this morning, as hurried as ever (unbelievable how that girl stays so plump when you see how nervous she acts), opened the curtains and cried, "Rise and shine, Désiré! It's a brand new day and everything's going your way!"

That's when I felt it. To my surprise, I'd shat my bed! Spontaneously and without any effort! Hallelujah! My metabolism had taken over the task that was sometimes too onerous for my will.

"Désiré, can you hear me? Time to get up!"

I exclaimed, "Mother, Mother, the cows need to calve!" And Curvy Cora had to laugh, Curvy Cora can laugh beautifully. A lot of fat people have beautiful laughs. She said, "The cows have already calved, Désiré. Shall we go and have a look in the cowshed later? After breakfast? And we'll take some stale bread to feed the birds in the garden, they're already warbling away for you! But first, I need to freshen you up, so the women in the dining room will all say how handsome and well-preserved you are again." And she tossed my legs up in the air and dipped her flannel in a warm bowl.

"De civilitate morum puerilium," I cried. Inappropriate, perhaps, for someone who was going senile. But I still whooped it out. De civilitate porum puerilium! It is unseemly to greet someone who is just having a shit. Erasmus.

Whereupon, Curvy Cora replied, "So, Désiré, you've impressed me now! Is that the Bible?"

It really was a brand new day and nothing was going my way.

Clean and naked and smelling of disinfectant soap, I lay on the bed. Curvy Cora assessed my wardrobe with feigned solemnity and shouted. That too is a difficult aspect of premature admission to an old people's home. The horrific, never-ending shouting. After a few years on the job, the staff, who assume for convenience's sake that all old fogeys are as deaf as a post, have calluses on their vocal chords. Some geriatric workers are so used to bawling and bellowing, that conversation at an acceptable volume is completely beyond them. They yell constantly at their partner and kids too. Lovingly most of the time, but still.

And so Curvy Cora shouted, producing a deafening quantity of decibels. "Today we're going to put on our best suit, Désiré! And you know why?"

"Whazzat?"

"I said we're going to put on our best suit today?"

“Oh.”

“And you know why?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Why, Désiré?”

“Yes.”

“Because it’s our birthday today! And how old are we? Do you know that?”

I could get very annoyed at her for her bizarre habit of speaking in the first person plural. Was it something she’d picked up during training? If so, I was very curious about the philosophy behind a rule like that.

“Seventy-four, Désiré! Isn’t that a grand age!”

With my seventy-four years, I’m definitely one of the babies at Winterlight geriatric care. Everyone under eighty is seen more or less as a hard-luck case. A person whose brains – even though they might have got a respectable dollop from mother nature, capable of deciphering the most complicated things or storing all kinds of useful information – had come with a disappointingly short shelf life.

Take Etienne Thijs from Room 18. He’s under seventy-five too. An egghead his whole life, a professor of biology, pioneering research into resistance against certain antibiotics, and now as loony as a room full of cuckoo clocks. He puts all his clothes on back to front and keeps a scrapbook with pictures he’s cut out of Meow!, the cat-lovers’ monthly. Sad. And his wife who’s a thousand times thicker but fit as a fiddle mentally (where have I heard that before?), now has another bloke, a retired butcher. When she comes to the home to visit, she brings her lover with her. Professor Thijs doesn’t even realise, and that’s something we can only be glad of.

In any case, the most insane character in Winterlight geriatrics isn’t Prof. Thijs. That honour is reserved for Walter De Bodt, nicknamed Camp Commandant Alzheimer, more than a century old, bald and bony, one enormous liver spot and often to be seen sitting in a wheelchair in his khaki-coloured ex-army pyjamas. The only person he respects is the head of geriatrics, “a care manager” as he is tendentiously known, who Camp Commandant Alzheimer always greets with a rigid right arm and, if his false teeth are in properly, a cry of “Heil!”

And if a seventy-something who has lost his mental moorings is not seen as a hard-luck case, it’s because they think of you as someone who had it coming. You’re under suspicion of not having eaten enough fatty fish when you had the chance, or nuts. You preferred soap series to books with complicated plots, you drank so much alcohol you pickled your brain, you turned your nose up at crossword puzzles and never read a newspaper in another language. You were one of those people who preferred to avoid any kind of mental strain, you couldn’t find the energy to keep up with new technology. You are fully and solely to blame for your own dementia! That’s the way some people look at you.

That’s how my wife looks at me. When she visits. Something she, fortunately, does less and less.

It's my first birthday in this institution and I'm in the mood. Hip, hip, hooray for me. OK, to cut costs and reduce stress, I will have to share my party with any other residents who happen to have had their birthdays in the last fortnight. Mostly that will be two or three birthday boys and girls to make a simultaneous fuss of and if one of them's turning a hundred, you're guaranteed a journalist from the local newspaper will show up to cover the happy event and photograph the celebrated hundred year old, and the alderman responsible for births, deaths and marriages will also drop by. He'll give a short speech (always the same one, but with a senile audience that's the least of his worries), present the new centenarian with a pot of flowers on behalf of the full council, wish them many, many happy returns, scoff a piece of cake, press the flesh of any eligible voters and disappear. Ninety-eight year olds were less fascinating for this alderman (a Christian-Democrat, but I don't think that really matters). And the celebration of a seventy-fourth birthday undoubtedly meant nothing to him at all. An even better opportunity for the alderman to put in an appearance is when the chance of immortalising four generations at once has the regional press photographer scurrying our way yet again. The moving portrait: a quivering bag of bones with a freshly pressed great-grandson on his lap.

Today, praise the Lord, there are no hundred year olds in the birthday batch. In other words, the alderman can amuse himself with more useful affairs. You won't hear me complaining. The way he sometimes dares to look at me, I get the feeling he's the only one who's seen through my little game. The only one who knows I've still got all my marbles – that I'm taking them for a ride. It's a feeling, nothing else. Pure intuition.

Curvy Cora: "Look at you, Désiré, all squeaky clean again. Off to the dining room!"

94 decibels.

To the tune of a patronising, "Why don't we put today's birthday boys next to each other at the breakfast table?" she wheels me round and parks me in the spot which, until recently, was occupied by Rosa Rozendaal. The little hair she had left pointed in all directions. She shoved a slice of bread into her gob like a boxer replacing his mouth guard and talked to herself.

In Rosa Rozendaal's old spot and right next to Camp Commandant Alzheimer. The commandant has already launched his attack on his tasteless white sandwiches, though not without dunking them in a mug of weak coffee first.

I look into his glassy eyes and say, "How do you like the butter? Good, isn't it? Made from the body fat of Jews! A real delicatessen!"

This kind of talk always rekindles Camp Commandant Alzheimer's old glory. It seems to remind his empty head that it once contained thoughts. He parrots, "We will have more jobs, wider motorways, better railway connections!" then stabs his knife deep into the butter to demonstratively smear a fat, greasy layer on a new slice of bread. But the man shakes so badly the butter's soon hanging off everything except his knife.

I whisper, "You don't recognise me, do you?"

Now he looks uncomfortable. It's the uncomfortable look of a dementia-sufferer furiously rifling through his memory in search of something that's probably not there anymore. The look I have spent hours rehearsing and have now mastered.

"You don't recognise me anymore? Look closer! It was the last winter of the war, that cold winter... You shot me dead and threw me on a pile! No? My face doesn't ring any bells? Oh well, I understand. You killed so many. Remembering all those faces would hardly be human. Still, I was one of them. And I've come back. Arisen from the dead, out of the ovens. To blight your old age. To stick a garden hose up your ancient arse and turn on the tap until it's running clean out your nostrils."

The social service sector isn't just underpaid, it's also understaffed. And so it takes a while before someone arrives to smother the camp commandant's piggy squeals with a comforting gesture and a quick sedative.

"Walter, come now, there's no reason for you to scream the building down just because you've dropped some butter on the floor. That's really nothing to worry about, dear. But next time, just ask us if you want some extra butter on your sandwich. That's what we're here for, after all. Isn't it? Is that a deal? OK?"

Of all my birthdays, none began as promisingly as the very last.

All the world's best ideas mature slowly like extra-tasty, crumbly cheese. My plan to fake dementia was also built up one step at a time, sometimes without me even realising it. I can't identify with any certainty just when and where it began but if I was forced to pick a single moment, then I'd say it was that afternoon – when exactly? – two years ago, two and a half maybe, at the pétanque club. Because, yes, I enjoyed throwing the boules with my mates. I found it very relaxing. Not my wife. She thought pétanque was an activity for loafers, a game that had been invented by the tax department to maintain the level of alcohol and tobacco consumption, and many times she treated me to statements like, "When it comes to raking the moss out of the lawn you're always feeling a little peaky, then suddenly you're energetic and sprightly enough to make a fool of yourself by tossing balls around a sandpit. I have to go down on bended knee a hundred times, Désiré, to ask you to please come with me to Hatem's Furniture Emporium to look for a new cupboard for the tea towels. And then it's always your blood pressure this or your bad back that and you're never able to. As far as you're concerned, that cupboard for my tea towels can always wait. But if it's to go petanqueing, you never have a problem. Not with your blood pressure, not with your back, not with anything..."

I've long stopped sticking up for myself in the face of my wife's tirades. I'm one of the many, perhaps millions of silent men who armour themselves against their wife's vagaries with a shield of indifference. It took me years of patient practice. At first I resisted every unjustified accusation. With a clear conscience, I would insist that I never drank more than three glasses, that during our

entire marriage I had come home drunk a maximum of four or five times, which, as I now realise, was probably far too infrequently for my mental health. What's more, I used to have the gall to try to correct her ridiculous view of things. I would say, "Listen here, for starters you don't play petanque in a sandpit, it's a bit more elevated than that." But as my youth and hair receded, I learnt to be insensitive to her verbal fusillades and keep my replies to myself. By the time the house was paid off, it surrounded me like a prison. But I boosted my self-respect with an act of resistance: it was her venom versus my detachment. We both stubbornly occupied our positions and grew unromantically old together, even surviving friends whose marriages were loving. When the mayor of our town honoured us in the town hall on the occasion of our silver wedding anniversary, I felt guilty with regard to all those magnificent couples that had been torn apart way too soon by cancer or a fool with a gearstick. To get a grip on myself, I accepted the mayor's tribute, but only as something I had earned through bravery and self-sacrifice.

Since people round here treat sayings as dogma and unthinkingly assume that where there's smoke there must be fire, some of them undoubtedly believed my wife when she had once again spread the story that I am an incorrigible drunk. It's true that I drink two glasses of red wine daily. Drink? Drank! Two. Sometimes, as an exception, three...in the evening after dinner. It was a habit I developed some time in my mid-thirties and it stuck. I almost said "and it has stuck", but a senile shuffler in an old folks' home is not granted much pleasure after the evening meal: the staff don't want to organise any evening activities and just pump him full of all kinds of stupefying preparations so he can doze off like a good boy in front of the boob tube in his room.

I didn't need to give up my small, hen-pecked pleasures entirely. Here in the canteen I can order a glass of red now and then in the daytime. When I'm sitting in my armchair with a daft, depressive look on my face and Curvy Cora comes to give me a little professional cheer, rubbing my shoulders and saying, "Oh, Désiré, you're sitting here all quiet and alone without so much as a drink. If you're not careful you'll get dehydrated. Should I go and fetch you something to drink?" Then I'm brave enough to ask for a glass of wine. That's allowed. It's the cheapest plonk, of course, more grape juice than wine, and you'd need to guzzle a whole crate of it to cancel the effect of the medication – a watery concoction I sip expressionlessly.

"Here, look, your glass of wine, Désiré. Enjoy. But make sure you don't get drunk and start singing, huh? The other residents might think it's the dance afternoon."

...Ooh, cootchie-cootchie-coo.

It was divine providence, by the way, that I happened to be sitting in the canteen with a glass – unfortunately still dirty – of Chateau de Crâp the first time my wife came to visit me in this home. The day after my admission. I can still see her walking in with a basket of fruit, a TV-commercial smile and a box of chocolates. Of course, I pretended not to know her.

"Look who's come to see you, Désiré, your wife!"

"Whozzat?"

“Your wife!”

“Oh...”

Once the image of her straying husband had fully sunk in, she screeched theatrically, hoping that the nursing staff would lend their compassionate and militantly feminist ears to her litany of woes as an unhappy housewife.

“I can’t believe it, Désiré. You’re drinking again already! And then you act surprised you’re going mad!”

Which inspired me to the declaration, “Sit down next to me, Camilla, and have one yourself. It’s on me. I’ve got a tab here!”

No need to add that this reunion and my remark insulted her deeply, not least of all because my wife isn’t called Camilla at all, but Moniek. Moniek De Petter. A beautiful name...to put on a headstone.

(Incidentally, according to her passport she’s not Moniek, but Monique. But she thought spelling it like that was much too musty and didn’t suit her at all. People who consider it necessary to change their name... Need I say more?)

But I’m getting ahead of myself, I was still explaining when and where the idea of giving myself the role of a lifetime began to take shape and that it was probably during a game of pétanque. More specifically because of something Roland, my regular partner, said...

Of all my buddies, Roland has always been the most modern. He was the first person in my circle of acquaintance who refused to be intimidated by apocalyptic warnings about all kinds of tumours and warmed up his meals with a microwave. The first who knew that, unlike an LP, a CD did not have two playable sides. The first to acquire a mobile phone and praise its advantages. The one who sent text messages and, as if that wasn’t enough, sent them to the people who were meant to receive them. The first computer I ever saw in real life was in his living room. When the rest of us were still pondering the possible effects the Internet would have on our private lives, he’d already done a course and cobbled together a website for the club. Roland did his banking online, booked trips from his armchair, took digital photos of our games and put them on his Facebook page (without asking us if we thought it was OK first). He’d long switched to buying his balls and equipment on auction sites. That kind of guy, someone who keeps abreast of everything, who knocks someone else’s boule out of the solar system, then says, “You’ve got to hear this...”

A lot of Roland’s tallest tales began with, “You’ve got to hear this...”

And this was definitely something we had to hear: an Australian had put his whole life up for sale on the Internet!!! His actual life. All he had and all he was. His wife wasn’t included in the price; she’d left him, you see, and that was the reason the nutcase was flogging his whole existence to the



highest bidder. You did get his crappy job in a carpet shop in Perth, along with his friends Melanie and Em. His hobby (skydiving), his three-bedroom house, his Jet Ski, his barbie and his sneakers (Converse, size 8) were all part of the package. Completely disillusioned about all kinds of things, the guy wanted to wipe the slate of his existence. And what was possibly even crazier was that there were already more than a hundred registered bidders and the price of his life had shot up to almost two million Australian dollars!

The fantasy of just-selling-off-your-whole-existence amused us no end, and discussing it, we tried to imagine what it would be like associating with someone you didn't know at all but had just purchased as your ex-lover. Or going up to someone and saying, "Pleased to meet you. I just bought you as my dad. How's Mum? Oh, she's dead? Whoops, didn't know that, it wasn't in the ad. How long now?"

That afternoon I didn't play my best. Unable to concentrate on the match, I kept fantasising about that crazy Aussie escape artist. I can still hear Roland shouting, "Hey, Désiré, wake up! It's your throw! You're staring into thin air as if you've gone completely senile!"

And how they laughed. Especially when I, incomprehensibly, threw my boule in the wrong direction.