

White is Always Nice

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An extract

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“Come on in, dear,” she said.

“Come on, you can come closer!”

“What’s the matter? Oh, it still gives you the willies, does it?”

“Yes but you always knew it would happen some day, didn’t you? Well, it’s happened now, hasn’t it!”

“And on top of everything, now just *look* at me lying here like a filthy slut, curled up like a baby, all tangled up in the bedspread — I can’t help it, you know, I never asked for this!”

“So? I don’t have to be embarrassed for you, now do I? For looking the way that I do, do I? Because it isn’t exactly a breeze, believe you me, dying. Not being able to catch your breath, no

matter how hard you try. It isn't exactly fun, you know. Oh, high time, high time, it was. And you can't imagine the relief, when it was all over."

"But it couldn't have been those waffles, could it? A body doesn't croak from eating waffles, does it! I only had one or two. Because I said to myself, I said, I'll just have one or two, or I'll be paying for it with my digestion. I'd even said so to myself, earlier, I said, Just one or two, tops, else I'll be paying for it later."

"And just feel my dress, will you! Still soaked through. Wet through with sweat. And something else as well. Go on, feel it."

"No, down there! Lower down."

"Can't you guess? But I couldn't help it, could I! And I did so try my best to keep everything decent, too. But there just was no way to hold it in, was there. Just as well there isn't a whole gaggle of strangers in here right now gawking. It's best if they all stay away until I've been laid out proper. I'll look a lot nicer then. You *have* called an undertaker, haven't you?"

"I would ask Modest Van De Langenbergh. He's the one I know best. They say that Jan Maes isn't bad either, but I never had aught to do with that one. They also say that he's very expensive, Jan Maes. I've heard it said about him. So why don't you just ask Dest. He's the one I know best. And tell him to get himself over here and be quick about it. So that I can rest in peace here on my bed, laid out all proper and decent."

“Oh, and make sure that someone runs the vacuum in here first. Before all the company gets here, later. The uncles and the aunts. So they don’t go around afterwards saying: Oh my, oh my, it wasn’t very tidy there at our Marie’s house, was it; someone might have run the vacuum first.”

“You’d better put out my gray flowered dress. It’s hanging in the closet.”

“No, not that one! The other one.”

“But of course you’ve seen it before, that lovely gray dress of mine! I’ve worn it before, I have, lots of times. But you never notice these things, do you!”

“And when he gets here, be sure and tell Modest, won’t you. And tell him to put a piece of plastic under the bed sheet. I have this feeling it’s going to keep on giving me trouble, this water. It would be a right shame, wouldn’t it, if it ended up ruining a perfectly good mattress, me lying here a couple of days.”

“You’ll find my knickers in the closet too. On the bottom shelf. Our Greet knows where they are. I bought some new undies with her just two weeks ago, in Hoogstraten, when we went there to buy me a new winter coat. And she’d better take my soiled things home with her as soon as she can, to launder. They shouldn’t be left lying around here. What with all the folks coming over later, and tomorrow as well.”

“And our Wim, poor thing! How are we ever going to get in touch with him? You *have* sent a telegram, haven’t you? If only can get himself home in time for my funeral!”

“And this now, look! Don’t you think my stomach’s awfully bloated? Could it have been those waffles, after all? Yet I only ate one, at Gusta’s-across-the-street’s earlier, she’d made us waffles as a treat for her sixty-fifth birthday. Oh, we were having such a time this afternoon, the four of us neighbors, such laughs! Gusta and Bertien and Tilleke and I. But when I took a sip of the coffee she poured us, the coffee to go with the waffles, that’s when it suddenly came over me, see. The sweat pouring down, all of a sudden. It was the hot coffee probably. I can’t think what else it could have been.

“But Marie! Gusta said. But Marie, what’s the matter with you? Aren’t you feeling well? My waffles aren’t too heavy for you, are they? Because it really made her feel bad, Gusta, that her waffles might not have agreed with me.

“But I said, Why, no, Gusta, how could they be! Your waffles are simply scrumptious! It’s just the coffee that’s made me come over so warm all of a sudden!

“And then Gusta starts wondering with Bertien and Tilleke if it couldn’t have been the honey she’d added to the batter. Because she always adds a couple of spoonfuls of honey, she said, to the batter, when she makes waffles, Gusta. Because she herself isn’t allowed to have much sugar anymore, she said, but one or two spoonfuls of honey does make them tastier, doesn’t it, the waffles. It couldn’t be that, could it? she kept saying.

“But I said: No way, Gusta, how can it be the honey? One or two spoonfuls of honey, that couldn’t possibly do a body harm, surely! How could it! It isn’t the honey, I’m telling you!

“But then it really did start getting to me, the heat there in the living room, and so I announced I’d rather go sit in the kitchen next door. Because the stove wasn’t lit out there. It was much cooler out there. I told them I’d start feeling my old self again in no time, out there.

“She hadn’t had this stove long, the one in the living room, Gusta said. Her son-in-law had bought it for her after she’d cracked her other stove’s firebox. She should never have started on it, she said, stoking the fire with those newfangled Futurex briquettes they have nowadays. She’d even given him a piece of her mind about it one time, her son-in-law, she said. Told him she didn’t trust it one bit, that Futurex. Regular coal, she told him, that’s the best. I’ve been burning regular coal in this stove for thirty years. But no, Mother, he’d said, you ought to be using Futurex, that’s much cleaner and much cheaper than coal! she said. But now you see what happened: the firebox all cracked and no replacement parts to be had for it anymore, naturally, and there she was, with a couple of tons of that Futurex on her hands and a cracked stove to boot. Then her son-in-law got her this kerosene stove. They’re from Japan, apparently, these stoves. That one does burn very clean and she’s practically never had any nasty fumes from it, but it’s very hard to regulate, she said. Sometimes it blazes like the dickens and then if she dares so much as turn it down a notch, you can hardly feel any heat coming out anymore, Gusta said.”

“But when I got up to go into the kitchen, that’s when I felt it: the water just gushing down my legs, out of the blue. Oh my, what’s going on here? I asked myself. Lord, what a nuisance! Just look at me, with my pants all wet. I’d better get home in a hurry, I can’t just sit around here with my pants all wet, can I.”

"How are you feeling, Marieke? Gusta was asking me, because she really felt bad that it was her waffles that had made me feel so poorly. And the sweat just pouring off of me. Even while I was sitting with her in her cool kitchen.

"And I say, Oh, Gusta, I'm really not feeling at all well all of a sudden, I says. I feel I'm suffocating, and the feeling won't go away. You'd better take me home because I'm really not feeling at all well, and it really isn't getting any better.

"Didn't I do a nice job of the wallpaper here in the kitchen, though? she asked me, Gusta.

"And I said, Oh my, yes, *very* nice! I said. Did you do it all by yourself? Such nice wallpaper, and so smooth. It looks just as if you'd had the painters in, I said, that's how nice it looks!

"But I'm really not at all well, Gusta, I said, I think I might be dying.

"Yes, she said, but it had been a lot of work and all. She'd had to strip all the old wallpaper off first. Because it was a dreadful eyesore, she said, the old wallpaper. All grubby and greasy. And peeling here and there, around the edges. She scraped the walls right down to the plaster, she did. Because otherwise you'd still be able to see it, she said, the raised bits would show right through, if you just papered right over it. Her daughter Josee had come to help her one day, said Gusta, because it really was a bit much for her these days. Up and down that stepladder all day long hauling those long strips of wallpaper, that wasn't for her anymore, she said. And Josee had told her the very same thing, she said. But Mother, she'd said to Gusta, you're not going to wallpaper the whole kitchen all by yourself, are you? That's too much! Climbing up and down that little stepladder every time, holding up the long strips of wallpaper dripping with glue and paste? You're not doing it all by yourself, you're not! I'll come by and help you one day, she'd said, Josee. Oh, fine then Josee, she'd said, Gusta, I'll just start with taking down the old paper because that's a lot of work too, taking down all the old paper, and when I'm done with that, I'll give you a ring. Well all right, you do that, Mother, Josee had said, and when you're done with it, you'll give me a ring and I'll stop by and help you some day. And then Josee had stopped by, said Gusta, and in just half a day they had it all up, the new wallpaper in the kitchen.

"Before, when her husband was still alive, the two of them always used to do it together, she said, Gusta, the wallpapering. But what a pain *that* was, she said, standing there hanging wallpaper with him! Because such a *grouch* the man was, when there was wallpapering to be done! Keep it straight, the paper! You're not holding it straight! Or: Take this strip down again, it's nothing but air-blisters, and it's as cockeyed as your uncle! Just look at it, will you! And now this, the paper won't stick here in this corner because you didn't spread enough paste on the other side! Nothing but bitching and moaning the whole entire time, she said. But this time, with her daughter, it was much more pleasant, she said, the wallpapering. She had tons more patience than her father ever had. Because she's a persnickity one you know, our Josee, said Gusta. Whenever that one starts on something, it's got to be done right, and then it when all's said and done it ends up being done right, too!

"But now everyone keeps saying to me, said Gusta, Oh, my, Gusta, it's so white here in your kitchen! Won't it get dirty awfully quickly, all that white? But it isn't really *paper*, this wallpaper, she said. There's plastic in it, there is. You can wash it down. It does cost a little more than regular

wallpaper of course, this white paper, she said. But fine, she said, if it's washable, the paper, then it can cost little more, can't it.

"But I didn't think it was *that* nice, her kitchen. All that white. I really thought it was a little *too* white. Just like a hospital, I said to myself."

"Still and all, I'm really not feeling very well, Gusta, I said. Just look at me sitting here, I'm still sweating like a horse."

"It really is too bad, said Gusta, that you had to come over so poorly on my birthday! On my birthday, of all days! But I said, Yes, but Gusta, it isn't as if I can help it, can I, that I happen to be feeling this poorly today of all days. Because I always do enjoy coming over here for a cup of coffee, I said. But it's getting really bad now. You'd best take me home right away, if you'd be so kind."

"And then Bertien went and called our Hilde, who lives next door — lucky she was home, our Hilde! — and they were ever so careful carrying me, soaked from top to toe, sitting in my chair and all, across the street and into my own house. And I was so happy to be home again at last, because there was no stopping it now, all that water gushing, and I was worried that I'd soil Gusta's furniture and her carpets with my water. I can't tell you how happy I was. OK, OK, just let me be now. Let me be. It hurts, such a wrenching pain suddenly, inside. But that's OK, I'm OK now. Hilde and Bertien and Tilleke and Gusta, thank you so much for carrying me home, I thank you all. Just let me be, now. But stay a while longer, because I've got the feeling the doctor you phoned won't get here in time. Phoning won't do us any good now, I said."

"But don't you think you should call some of the others, now? I asked our Hilde. Our Greet, and our Robert and our Annemie and all the rest? I'm not in any state to do it myself, mind you. I'm much too tired. I just don't have the breath for it anymore, I said."

"And then, boom, just like that, it was over."

"Although, you could look at it the other way — it's only the beginning, isn't that right? I suppose there'll be quite a few folks coming over, to have a look-see."

“You did ring Dest, didn’t you? Where the hell is he, that Dest? He’d better hurry up and get over here! What’s the story, with him? He’s taking his time, isn’t he! Maybe you’d better call him again!”

“Oh, that’ll be him!”

“I have to say this about him, he is pretty prompt, that Dest. He can’t have dawdled at home for very long, if you ask me. He made it here in reasonably good time then, after all, that Dest. Go, hurry and open the door, because that’ll be him.”