A Tender Destruction

Hugo Claus

An extract

Original title Een zachte vernieling
Publisher De Bezige Bij, 1988

Translation Dutch into English
Translator David McKay

(...)

So back then I'm working in Ghent, painting houses with the cowboys. I'm not a cowboy myself; they won't have that. Instead, I'm an outsider they put up with for the time being. And how did I come to be a painter's helper? The cowboys don't ask; they have troubles of their own. All they care to know is that the new boy was thrown out by his well-heeled family and has sunk so low that he has to roll up his sleeves and get his pale, uncalloused, cack-handed hands dirty for a crust of bread with jam and a roof over his head.

'No offense meant, I'm sure,' said Madame Jeannot at the counter of the Mistinguett, 'but André, you are and always will be a fils à papa.' The cowboys, raising the first beer of the day to their lips at quarter to seven in the morning, gave a mutter of assent.

Bieke, my little Bieke, not knowing what a fils à papa was and not daring to ask, crept onto my lap and said, 'Don't let them rile you, honey, the only thing those cowboys can do is prattle.'

'And shoot!' the cowboys cried.

The sun is scorching Ghent with clammy fire. Vapour rises from the canals; the noxious fumes sear our eyes. 'Bad for the lungs,' the cowboys say, 'but good for the prick.' As I work the white spirit into my brush, I wish I could ask them, just by the by, why it is that hot, humid air is good for the prick. But at best they would respond with howls of derision. I'm still wet behind the ears.

Around the corner, in the adjoining alley, beneath the pink panel with Mistinguett in Gothic letters and the yellowed cardboard placard 'Waitress wanted', our boss's rickety DKW sputters to a halt. The cowboys spring into action, suddenly fully absorbed in whatever they're working on. I'm not scared of our boss, the Wrangler – the very idea! – but all the same, he makes me nervous. I nervously dunk my brush into the paint can and smear the creamy paint on the front wall. It spatters onto my boiler suit. The cowboy next to me is doggedly scrubbing away at the front doorstep while another one fills the bullet holes that machine guns made in the house front when Ghent was liberated.

It's taken this long for the Count de Comptine to get compensation from the city. They say the Canadian soldiers started spraying the house with bullets when some oddball, a valet, shook out a white tablecloth on the second floor. The oddball is still around. He never lowers himself to speak to us, but gives us the eye from behind the crochet curtains.

We haven't yet had the pleasure of seeing the Count de Comptine, who owns the building with the thirty-two high windows.

'Where could the lazy old fart be hiding out?'

I say, 'He's snoozing in the Senate in Brussels. Or playing whist at the Saint Sebastien Club on Kouter Square, or sailing the Mediterranean, or fingering the chambermaids at his apartment on Avenue Louise, or breeding ferrets at his château in Fatsville.'

'Ah, shut up,' the cowboys grumble.

'Get back to work.' - 'Hand me that turpentine, while you're at it.'

The cowboys claim that the countess appeared one day, in a flash, when a gust of wind swept aside the curtains. She was sampling a bowl of tomato meatball soup held out to her by the oddball. She had inordinately white dentures, which fell open when she saw Blue, the eldest of the cowboys, a freckle-face who should really be called Red, considering he's a communist. In that instant, she gave Blue a look of intense sorrow.

'She's weeping in there,' said Blue.

'André should bring that broad a little sunshine,' the cowboys said. 'He's got the equipment for it. Come on, André. One little poke and the old girl will be satisfied for weeks. Or how 'bout a sixty-nine? She'd pay good money for it.'

'One of these days,' I stammered. 'You just watch me.'

The cowboys cackled.

'One of these days,' they told Madame Jeannot, Della, and Bieke, in their rough, mocking voices, 'good old André's going to give it to the countess. They'll hear her squealing all the way from here to the sports ground.'

Madame Jeannot said solicitously, 'It'll bring you nothing but trouble, André. Don't go mucking about with the quality.'

'The very thought fills me with shame,' I said, beer in hand.

'I'm surprised at you, talking about a countess that way,' Bieke said, giving my nose a kiss and a nibble. Her breath was surprisingly fresh; she drinks Green Ladies, white wine with a drop or two of mint syrup.

By the wall at the street corner the Wrangler appears. Bits of him, anyway: an eye, an eyebrow, his right temple, and three fingers clutching the brick. He's checking up on us.

So I shimmy right up the ladder, hoist myself into the gutter, and lie with my belly against the tiles. You make an extra five francs an hour on the roof, because it's supposed to be dangerous. You can snooze there for a while undisturbed, you can look out over the rooftops of Ghent, and you could even make out the bishop if he happened to be saying his prayers in the tower of St. Bavo's Cathedral. You can go down the ladder every ten minutes or so – very carefully, of course – to take

a leak or fetch a rag, a palette knife, or turpentine. I stretch out on my back: little clouds, pigeons, the radio at the Mistinguett – odd, since the girls sleep in the afternoon. Special clients, maybe, dropping in unannounced.

I peep down over the gutter. The Wrangler is giving instructions. Between his legs, resting against one ankle, is the briefcase holding the courses that will earn him a Master of Laws degree next year. As usual, he's wringing his hands, washing them without water, a habit he picked up in the seminary while preparing for the priesthood. When he'd finished studying for free, or as good as free, he suddenly found – a child could have guessed it – that he had lost his calling. I could have gone to university. Mama would have liked nothing better.

Blue waves goodbye as the Wrangler walks away. Arse-licker. And no sooner is he gone than the cowboys head to the Mistinguett for their second and final visit of the day. Two pints, usually, and a couple hands of blackjack. Madame Jeannot doesn't like the cowboys hanging around her establishment after six, because she gets a different crowd in the evening. When Blue starts griping, she says, No, not better, just different. But Blue can't help taking it personally. 'She's rotten through and through with capitalism. You can feel it, 'specially when you have it off with her. You can tell that while you're going at it, she's thinking about her profits. No, I'm telling you, I can feel it in my cock.'

I would not dream of screwing Madame Jeannot, or even Bieke, for that matter, who's crazy about me. I can just hear the soldiers in the barracks last year, describing the ruthless insertion of the metal rod, a tiny umbrella with barbs to scrape you clean.

Madame Jeannot turns down the radio when we come in.

'What do you say, Madame Jeannot, is there time for a quickie?'

She likes to play cards, Madame Jeannot does. But she can't keep her mind on the game today, between the pills to calm her down and the pills to keep her awake. She gets them from a john, Doctor Lovert, and they work if you don't drink too much alcohol, don't eat too much chocolate or too many eggs, and drink two litres of water every day. 'I put water in my wine,' Madame Jeannot says sorrowfully. Now and then she sings snatches of French chansons.

The day after tomorrow we'll start on the count's windows. By then we'll have given the house front a satin-smooth coat of respectable pigeon-grey, and its high windows will open, divulging its secrets, namely the countess and her daughter.

The daughter, her shadow, her silhouette through the curtains.

'Man, the tits on her.'

'The mother?'

'No, the daughter.'

'And?'

'She wasn't wearing any lawn-zheray.'

‘No brassiere?’

‘No bras here, no bras there, no bras anywhere.’

‘Did you get a good look at her?’

‘How could I miss that round little backside?’

‘She gets it from playing tennis.’

‘She was poking her butt through the curtains as if to say, Allez, bring on the thermometer.’

‘And her face? Did you get a look at her face?’

‘Ach, André, my boy, we can always hang a towel over her face.’

At the end of the day I take the local tram to Elzegem, to my grotty day-labourer’s lodgings. I buy soup from the village butcher, who throws in three slices of pâté de tête, fused by the heat.

I sit beneath the lime tree in front of the house. Just in front of my feet, where the dunghill used to be, grow weeds as high as a man. The languid lowing of the cows, the bumblebees – what’s to complain about? Last winter I was scratching embers out of the frozen footpath for my stove. In spring, crazed with hunger, I stole two packets of cream cheese from the greengrocer’s, bolted them down too fast, and threw up into a hedgerow. That day I considered joining the Foreign Legion.

I make coffee and read The Wonders of the World. Plato had a water clock that he could use as an alarm. Nero had a lift in his palace that was forty metres high. And then I re-read the pale blue slip of paper with its slanted, benighted scrawl: ‘André, your mother and I have talked things over. We must forgive and forget, and we shall draw a veil of silence over your conduct. If you promise and swear that you will stop disgracing us, then you may return home. Mr Van Wette will look for suitable work, especially given your lack of qualifications despite all our admonitions. Your mother has resigned herself to the situation. Father. Write to us without delay so that we know the lay of the land. Father. And as for that woman who says she is a widow but is divorced, put an end to it once and for all. Cut off all relations with her. We shall forget the past. And make sure you lead a decent life. Father.’

Iris, who was divorced from her engineer, spent four weeks living with me in my country cottage. She bought and hung the curtains in the bedroom. Once or twice, she danced in her underwear in the apple orchard. She told me I was like her husband, only younger. She trimmed my toenails. And then one morning she was nowhere to be found.

She left five hundred francs on the kitchen table, under an ashtray overflowing with her English cigarettes, and a note: ‘You don’t love me. You don’t love anyone. I can’t take it.’

‘Don’t tell us you’ll be losing a moment’s sleep over her,’ the cowboys said. ‘When you think how many cracks there are in Ghent just waiting to be – ’

‘Admit it, her frontage wasn’t exactly terrific.’

‘Two runny eggs.’

‘Undercooked, and all oozy on top.’

‘Two push pins.’

‘Leave the boy alone, I know how he feels,’ Madame Jeannot said, and she sang Chagrin d’amour.

Bieke downed her Green Lady in one gulp and led me by the hand to the salon. To the sound of the cowboys’ catcalls, she jerked me off on the sofa, saying, ‘Just ignore them, honey.’

The only places where painters are allowed in the count’s home are the garage, where we keep our paint pots and ladders, and the rooms where the window frames need painting. Katrien, a scrawny girl in a black dress with a white lace collar, points to the newspapers spread across the floor beside the rolled-up carpet.

‘You may come up to here. And no further.’

‘Who says?’

‘I say.’

‘Afraid I might jump you?’

‘You may sit on the windowsill, but you must keep your grubby hands off the walls. And don’t let me see you wearing shoes in here. And if you get paint on anything, wipe it off right away, because you look like a beginner to me.’

Suddenly her harried expression transforms into a childlike grin. She is looking out the window, beneath which two cowboys have slyly put up a ladder, their rascally mugs sticking out just above the sill. They invite her to go to the cinema with them tonight, and then to the dance hall, Metro.

‘Are you utterly soft in the head?’ she giggles.

‘Why yes, I been bouncing around on it all day,’ one of the cowboys quips. Katrien bursts out laughing.

‘Katrien,’ says the oddball, entering the room. She obeys the unspoken command at once, averting her gaze as she leaves the room. The oddball leans against the doorpost, watching me paint the window frame for a quarter of an hour. Then he’s gone, but I can feel his presence in the large room with its pink satin walls, its corners that are pale and mottled with mould, its sofas in flowered chintz, and its chest of drawers with gilded lion paws.

A very old woman in black shuffles into the room. She must be almost blind; her rust-freckled hands are tracing the edges of the small, round marble tables. She lowers herself, groaning, into a bergère, produces a dainty pair of unframed spectacles, slides them onto her long, crooked nose, and picks up an English newspaper. I can see the headline: Nautilus launched. First atomic submarine. She lets out two wheezy farts and says without looking up, ‘How are you getting on, young man?’

‘Can’t complain, ma’am,’ I say, as gruff and laconic as a cowboy.

‘You must be getting hot.’

(Later, at the Mistinguett: ‘Then I say, “Madame Countess, come on over here and I’ll show you how hot I can get.”’)

Right away, the sweat starts gushing down my forehead and from my armpits. I tell her it’s not so bad, but she doesn’t hear me, because at that very moment she’s opening her English newspaper.

‘What a lovely house you have, ma’am,’ I say a bit later, like a farm boy in a cathedral.

‘Do you think so?’

I nod. I paint. Now and then my paint pot wobbles perilously. The sun beats down.

‘Theo,’ she says without raising her voice, as if beginning a story about a man named Theo who, in the days of the French Revolution, when she was still a blithe and innocent lass, tried to catch her unawares and defile her.

Theo, the oddball, the eavesdropper, is standing in the doorway.

‘Theo, is there any lemon pie left from this afternoon? I’m sure this young man would like a piece of pie.’

‘Oh, no, thank you, ma’am,’ I blurt out lamely. ‘I don’t care much for lemon.’

‘I imagine the lad would prefer a wee drop of beer,’ Theo says in a thick Ghent accent, and the drawled-out, wee little words demand satisfaction, vengeance, a blob of paint in his condescending face.

‘Oh, how silly of me, what was I thinking? Of course. Hurry along, then, Theo.’

I scurry off too. I won’t be finishing those windows today; the Wrangler will chew me out.

‘I suppose you finished your training quite recently?’

I must defend the honour of the firm. ‘A year ago,’ I lie. ‘A year and two months.’

The beer that the oddball brings me is pale ale. ‘Santé, ma’am,’ I say, as if I were in a pub in some country village.

‘You have the hands of a pianist,’ says the old lady with the hundreds of wrinkles in the sun. I hold out my spattered meathooks. ‘It’s having a wide reach that counts, isn’t it? Do you know who made this?’ She points at a dented bird in reddish-brown pottery on the round marble table beside her. ‘My granddaughter. It’s just a pastime, but she’s already sold three of them. To acquaintances. It’s meant to be a swan, but it’s modern. That’s how they teach them to do it at the Academy.’

‘Oh, she’s been to art school, then?’

‘She’s still studying. This is her third year at the Academy.’

The statuette looks like a massively pregnant duck with a turned-up nose.

‘The swan is part of our coat of arms. It was Empress Josephine’s favourite bird. Are your parents still alive?’

‘Er . . . very much so, thank you.’

‘And in good health?’

‘My mother has kidney trouble.’

‘As long as it isn’t stones,’ she says, and turns the page. I read: Inflation a grand illusion: government tots up its figures.

‘The most important thing is to keep off port wine. Tell your mother I have it from a very reliable source: surtout pas de porto. Those stones can shoot straight out of the kidneys, and if they end up in the bladder they can obstruct the renal pelvis.’

‘Mumu was an infirmière on the front in the First World War,’ says a girl’s husky voice with the barest trace of a Ghent accent, and through the unframed door cut into the red satin wall comes a golden-haired girl in a tartan skirt and a big collarless black pullover.

‘Sabine, this young man’s mother has renal colic. You simply cannot imagine how painful that is.’

The girl slides into the concave curve of a chair shaped like a gondola. I turn to the window, my head in the clouds, staring down at my formless, spattered shoes and my worn, filthy boiler suit.

‘He admires our interior,’ the old lady says approvingly.

‘Our interior? Are you interested in interiors?’

‘Yes. Sure. Often I am,’ I say to the dusty window in which I see her cross her legs.

‘We have a room downstairs in Empire style, but you’ve probably already seen it.’

‘No. Not yet.’

‘Theo,’ the old lady says again without raising her voice.

‘Theo is fetching petit fours for tea,’ the girl says, and she’s about to stand up but I will her – sweating, my mouth screwed shut – to stay, and she settles back into her chair and sticks an empty cigarette holder into her mouth, which is full, voracious, moist, a silver line of sweat running down her fine, straight nose to her upper lip.

The old lady points. ‘That causeuse comes straight from Malmaison. Do you know who once sat in it?’

I set down my brush on the rim of my paint pot and turn towards the ladies. Triumphantly, I shed my proletarian mask and say:

'Louis Dix-Huit, King of France, when he fled to Ghent.'

'Wrong,' the ancient, near-blind woman crows, and the girl smiles – half provocatively, half searchingly – and says, 'Brahms.'

I'd like to revert to my cowboy role and snarl, 'Tell it to the marines!' but I cannot hide the awe in my voice: 'Johannes Brahms?'

(A dinosaur; a man from The Wonders of the World; his quartets on the radio in Elzegem in the evening.)

'I can just see him sitting there, in that very spot. They told me to come in and shake his hand before I went to bed. Just there. He couldn't keep his eyes off – '

'Off of you, of course, Mumu,' the girl broke in.

'No, off that Dürer there, the drawing of the apostle Paul. He gave me a kiss. His beard reeked of tobacco.'

I take a few steps towards her; my toe bumps up against the rolled-up carpet. Out of politeness, but mainly out of sheer surprise, I strain to see the drawing beyond the glare of the glass, when outside, below, the voice of the Wrangler bellows, 'Maertens! Maertens! Lazy toad!'

I turn to the girl. 'Eh, it's for me . . . that is . . . I'm Maertens.'

She gracefully disengages herself from the gondola, heads straight towards me, pushes me aside, and leans out the window, pressing her muscled fingers into perfect crescents against the pane. She says, 'We'll be needing Maertens just a moment longer, if it's not too much trouble. Just one moment.'

'Oh, naturally, Miss Sabine. No trouble at all.' I can smell the perfume wafting its way from her golden hair, from her sweater, to my nose. Her fingers leave the window. Around her wrist she wears a golden circlet, which just a moment ago was tapping the breast button of my boiler suit. She steps over the roll of carpet.

I say, 'You make lovely birds.'

I haven't a shred of talent,' she says.

'Sure you do. It's a beautiful bird,' I stammer mulishly, and I've turned back into a filthy cowboy; I can't stand this any more; I don't dare look up; I fling my leg over the windowsill and find the top rung of the ladder. 'Thanks for the beer, ma'am,' I say, and I clamber down the ladder as if fire had broken out in the house, as if that girl, Sabine, were pushing me from behind.

It's Sunday, there's a football match on the radio, and my father is washing up.