Cheese

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p 3-6

1

I'm writing to you again at last because great things are about to happen, and it's all Mr van Schoonbeke's doing.
I should tell you that my mother has died.
A nasty business of course, not only for her, but also for my sisters, as the vigil nearly killed them.
She was old, very old. I don't remember precisely how old to the exact year. She wasn't really ill, just thoroughly worn out.
My eldest sister, with whom she lived, was good to her. She soaked her bread in milk, made sure she went to the toilet, and gave her potatoes to peel to keep her occupied. She peeled and peeled as though she had an army to feed. We all took our potatoes to my sister's, and on top of that Mother did the lady's upstairs and a couple more neighbours' besides, because once, when they'd tried giving her a bucket of potatoes that were already peeled to repeel, because stocks were low, she'd noticed and actually said, 'They've already been peeled.'
When she couldn't peel any more, because she could no longer co-ordinate her hands and eyes very well, my sister gave her wool and kapok which had been compressed into little hard lumps through having been slept on, to pick apart. It made a lot of dust and Mother herself was covered in fluff from head to toe.
It went on and on, day and night: dozing, picking, dozing, picking. Punctuated by the occasional smile, God knows at whom.
She couldn't remember a thing about my father, who'd only been dead about five years, even though they'd had nine children together.
When I went to visit her, I used to talk about him occasionally to try and put a spark of life in her. I'd ask her if she really couldn't remember Chris (that had been his name).
She made a terrific effort to follow what I was on about. She seemed to grasp that she needed to grasp something, leaned forward in her chair, and stared at me with her face all tense and the veins in her temples bulging: like a guttering lamp threatening to go out with a bang.
After a little while the spark would be extinguished again and she'd give you that smile that went right through you. If I pressed her too hard she'd get frightened.
No, the past no longer existed for her. There was no Chris, no children, just picking kapok.
There was only one thing that still played on her mind: the thought that a last little mortgage on one of her houses hadn't been paid off yet. Was she trying to scrape together that piffling amount before she went?

My sister, bless her, would talk about her, while she was present, like someone who wasn't there: 'She ate well. She's been very tiresome today.'
When she couldn't pick any more she sat for a time with her blue, gnarled hands placed parallel on her lap or scratching at her chair for hours as though she couldn't stop picking. She could no longer tell yesterday from tomorrow. All that either of them meant was 'not now'. Was it because her sight was failing or because she was tormented by evil spirits the whole time? At any rate, she no longer knew whether it was day or night, and got up when she should have been in bed and went to sleep when she was supposed to talk.
If she held on to walls and furniture, she could still walk a bit. At night when everyone was asleep, she'd totter over to her chair and start picking kapok that wasn't there, or hunt till she found the coffee grinder, as though she were about to make coffee for some crony or other.
And she'd always have that black hat on her grey head, even at night. Do you believe in witchcraft?
Finally she lay down and when she calmly allowed the hat to be taken off, I knew she wouldn't be getting up again.

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p 7-14

2

That evening I'd played cards in the Three Kings till midnight and drunk four or so pale ales, so I was in perfect shape to sleep right through the night.
I tried to get undressed as quietly as possible, as my wife had been in bed for ages and I don't like all that nagging.
But when I stood on one leg to get my first sock off, I fell against the bedside table and she woke with a start.
'You should be ashamed of yourself,' she began.
And then the front doorbell sounded right through our silent house, making my wife sit up.
There's something solemn about a ring like that at night.
We both waited till the jangling in the stairwell had died away, I with heart pounding and my right foot in my hands.
'Whatever can that be?' she whispered. 'Go and have a look out of the window, you're only half undressed.'
That wasn't the way things usually ended up, but the bell had stopped her in her tracks.
'If you don't go and look this instant, I'll go myself,' she threatened.
But I knew what it was. What else could it be?
Outside I saw a shadowy figure standing at our door who called up that he was Oscar and asked me to come straight to Mother with him. Oscar is one of my brothers-in-law, a man who's indispensable on occasions like this.
I told my wife the reason for the ring, put my clothes back on and went and opened the door.
'It'll be tonight,' guaranteed my brother-in-law. 'She's in her death throes. And put a scarf on, it's cold.'
I did as he said and went with him.
Outside it was quiet and clear, and we walked briskly along like two people on their way to some nightshift job or other.
When we reached the house I automatically reached for the bell, but Oscar stopped me, asked me if I was off my head, and rattled the letterbox gently.
My niece, a daughter of Oscar, let us in. She closed the door behind us without a sound and said I

should go up, which I did behind Oscar. I'd taken my hat off, which I didn't usually do when I went to see Mother.
My brother, my three sisters and the lady from upstairs were sitting together in the kitchen, next to the room where she must still be lying. Where else could she be lying?
An old nun, another cousin of ours, glided in - audibly out of the room where the dying woman was, into the kitchen and then back again.
They all looked at me as though I'd something to answer for, and one of them whispered a welcome.
Was I supposed to sit or stand?
If I stood it was as though I was ready to leave again immediately, and if I sat down, it was as though I were taking it all in my stride, including what was happening to Mother. But as they were all seated, I got a chair too and stayed at the back, out of the light of the lamp. The atmosphere was unusually tense. Perhaps because they had stopped the clock?
It was damned hot in the kitchen. And on top of that there was the bunch of women with swollen eyes, as though they'd been peeling onions.
I didn't know what to say.
It was no good asking how Mother was, as everyone knew she was fading fast.
Crying would have been the best thing to do, but how was I supposed to start? Just give a sudden sob? Or get out my handkerchief and dab my eyes, whether they were wet or not?
That wretched pale ale was now finally beginning to take effect, obviously because of the heat in the kitchen, and made me break out in a sweat.
So as to have something to do I stood up. 'Go and have a look,' said my brother, who's a doctor.
He spoke normally, not too loud, but just loud enough for me to be sure that my nocturnal journey had not been for nothing. I followed his advice, as I was frightened of being sick from all that beer, and the heat and the mood in the kitchen. They would probably put it down to emotion, but just imagine if I'd started throwing up.
It was cooler and almost dark in there, to my relief.
On the bedside table there was a solitary candle which did not light up mother in her high bed, so I wasn't upset by her death agony. Our cousin the nun was sitting praying.
When I'd stood there for a while my brother came in too, picked up the candle, held it up like in a torchlight procession and lit up Mother.
He must have seen something, because he went into the kitchen and asked everyone to come in.
I heard chairs being pushed back and there they all were.
A moment later my sister said that it was over, but the nun contradicted her, saying that the two tears hadn't yet fallen. Were they supposed to come from Mother?
It went on for a good hour, with me still full of beer, but finally she was pronounced dead.
And they were right, for however hard I silently willed her to sit up and make the whole lot of them scatter with that fearsome smile of hers, it was no good. She lay as still as only the dead can lie.
It had gone pretty fast and I nearly hadn't made it in time.
I went completely cold when the women's chorus started wailing, and couldn't join in.
Where on earth did they get all those tears from, for they weren't the first, I could tell from their faces. Fortunately my brother wasn't crying either. But he's a doctor and we all know that he's used to such scenes, so it was still embarrassing for me.
I tried to make up for everything by hugging the womenfolk and shaking their hands firmly. I thought it was outrageous that she should have been alive just a short while ago and wasn't any longer.
And suddenly my sisters stopped crying, fetched water, soap and towels, and started washing her.
The effect of the beer had now completely worn off, which proves that I was moved at least as deeply as the others.
I went back and sat in the kitchen till they'd finished her toilet, and then we were called back to her

bedside.
They had worked hard in that short time and the precious corpse now looked better than it had while still alive and laughing to itself as it peeled or picked. ‘Auntie looks really beautiful,’ said our cousin the nun, gazing with satisfaction at the bed with Mother in it.
And she should know, since she’s in an order at Lier, the kind that means that from her youth to her last breath she is sent from one sick person to another, and so spends all her time sitting next to corpses.
Then my niece made coffee, which the women had earned, and Oscar was given permission to entrust the funeral arrangements to a friend of his who according to him was as good and as cheap as anyone else. ‘That’s fine, Oscar,’ my eldest sister said with a weary gesture, as though she were not the least interested in the question of price.
I saw that the gathering was about to break up but didn’t really dare to take the lead, as I’d been the last to arrive.
One of my sisters yawned while still shedding a few tears, whereupon my brother put his hat on, shook hands with everyone again and left.
‘I may as well go with Karel,’ I said at this point. They were the first words I uttered, I think. Perhaps they would give the impression that I was going for Karel’s sake, for even a doctor might be in need of comfort, mightn’t he?
And so I was able to get out of the house.
It was three o’clock by the time I was back in our bedroom holding one foot in my hand and taking off my first sock. I was asleep on my feet, and so as not to have to tell the whole story I just said there was no change.
There’s not much to say about the funeral. It went off quite normally and I wouldn’t be mentioning it, the whole business of my mother’s death, if it weren’t for the fact that that was how I came into contact with Mr Van Schoonbeke.
As is customary my brother, myself, my brothers-in- law and four cousins were standing in a semicircle around the coffin, before it was taken away. More distant relatives, and friends and acquaintances then came in and shook hands with each of us with a whispered word of condolence or a fixed stare, straight in the eye. There were lots of them, far too many really, I thought, since it went on and on.
My wife had put a black armband on my arm, as I had agreed with my brother not to have a mourning suit specially made, seeing as you have so little use for it after the funeral. And the wretched armband must have been too big as it kept slipping down. Every three or four handshakes I had to push it back up. And then Mr Van Schoonbeke came, who was a friend and also a patient of my brother. He did the same as the others but was much more chic and modest about it. I could tell he was a man of the world.
He went to the church and the cemetery with us and got into one of the carriages with my brother and me. I was introduced to him and he invited me to call on him. Which I did.