

The Whole Nine Yards

Marita De Sterck

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Translator Laura Watkinson

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August 2003

Tist is dead.

The grandfather of my father, the father of my grandfather is no more.

Some people call me Tist the second now.

‘Joppe,’ I say to them. ‘I’m Joppe the first.’

I can hear them thinking: another bolshy one. They circle around me, chewing on their questions. They’re all fishing, each of them in their own way. They’re so keen to know how Tist died, what his last words were and whether he took his secret to the grave.

I’m in great demand as a fishpond. I was, after all, the last one to see Tist alive.

I answer with one of the conversation-stoppers that Tist always used to come out with. ‘A person leaves this world as he enters it: helpless and at someone else’s mercy. A person doesn’t choose his end. There are no words to express it.’

That last part’s true, of course. Are there any words for what happened? But I can’t keep silent. How could I keep my mouth shut about what’s happened in the past few months?

Nothing that I’d seen or heard in my eighteen years could have prepared me for what was lying ahead. Not even Tist, with his hundred thousand stories.

March 2003

I’m walking on air through a house that will soon be all mine for a whole week. I can’t wait for my parents and sister to pack their suitcases.

‘Pity you can’t come too, Joppe.’ My mum’s trying to cram all of the overflowing bits and pieces into her suitcase.

I go and sit on the lid and rock to and fro until she can click the locks closed. 'That assignment for school's got to be finished.'

You can see it's on the tip of her tongue: you could have started it sooner. But she doesn't say it. She always needs a deadline herself to get her engine firing on all cylinders.

'You will take good care of my bonsais, won't you?'

'Course.' I run away before she manages to get any more promises out of me.

Kaat's door is ajar. It looks as though a bomb's gone off in her room. The floor's covered in clothes and bottles and pots. With my sister, a city trip pretty quickly takes on the dimensions of an expedition of several months. And she doesn't really need to take any clothes either. She's bargaining on hours of shopping and parents who have forgotten where all the boundaries are for a little while.

'You don't know what you're missing. Everyone says that Barcelona's fantastic!'

'You don't know what you're missing. Everyone says this is going to be the peace offensive of the century. Finally something's going to happen that'll wake up this dormitory town and get us into the newspapers.'

'Are you all meeting here?'

'There'll be more than enough space once you've gone.' As soon as the door closes behind my family, I'm going to phone my friends from school. There's enough food in the fridge and the freezer to survive a siege. My dad always squirrels enough away for half the town. They can sleep over, all of them, and one in particular. Imagine Alya comes, imagine she stays, imagine we...

I'm getting ahead of myself again, but I can't help taking a quick peek in the linen cupboard. The yellow silk sheets are all ready, washed and ironed. I'll take that as a good omen.

My dad's sticking instructions on the washing machine: turn the knobs from left to right. Count to twenty before yanking the door open!

'You will be careful with the cooker and the iron, won't you?'

'What could go wrong? You won't find a safer house anywhere.'

'Not funny.' When it comes to his job, my dad's sense of humour drops to freezing point. Safety's no laughing matter for safety advisors.

'I'm just popping to the supermarket with Tist's shopping list. See you later.'

Tist's right: show me someone's shopping list or his trolley and I'll tell you who he is.

Take the trolley behind me, for example: mineral water, brown bread, two tomatoes, economy-sized piece of steak... This lady's dull and alone and desperate and it looks as though she'll stay that way for the next half century.

But my shopping list and trolley have a far more exciting story to tell. Duvel, raisins and rice pudding, Tist's survival pack. Our family old-timer has lived to a really ripe old age on this diet, supplemented with one aspirin a day. And then there's a whole pile of cheap crisps and beer for my classmates. And last but not least: du pain, du vin et du Boursin for two.

Life is a conveyor belt. One day it's just boring things gliding past and the conveyor belt moves agonizingly slowly. The next day it's all exciting things floating by and pulling you along with them until the minutes are running, flying.

The bill's even more exciting than the contents of my trolley. That'll be more than three evenings' work at Ristorante Federico, scraping food off plates, bashing congealed sauces out of pans, braving Italian operas at full blast.

I load up two plastic bags and stuff them into my rucksack.

With the right purchases in your rucksack, the town looks different. It smells full of promise, like the fresh pizzas that Federico slides into his wood oven.

My dad's cough gives him away before he says a word. 'I don't know whether we can go.'

What is it? Airport strike, hotel bankrupt, Barcelona flooded? There's not one reason good enough to call off this trip, not even my dad's fear of flying.

'It's safer than ever now. If a plane's just crashed, then they pay twice as much attention. Well, that's what you always say.'

'That's not it. Tist phoned. He's ill.'

'So what's wrong with him? I was at his place yesterday. He was as fit as a fiddle; he ordered Duvel and rice pudding. I've just gone to buy it for him.'

'He's coughing. It's probably flu. He didn't want to have the vaccination this year again. What if it gets worse while we're away...'

My mum sighs. 'Remember last year, when Tist passed his flu on to us? We were in bed for a week and he was skipping around again after just a day. That grandfather of yours is indestructible. Joppe can just as easily keep an eye on him, can't he? And maybe for once those neighbours of Tist's can ...'

'That's not what he wants. You know Tist. He's not the easiest of people...'

That's putting it mildly. Tist is a know-all, a troublemaker, a bolshy bugger. Talk about headstrong! He's got an even stronger head on him than that beer he's so fond of: Duvel. He's not an ordinary grandfather, not an ordinary great-grandfather. No one calls him Grandad, Gramps, Great-Grampa or whatever. No pet names for Tist. Tist is Tist.

It's just like him to put a spoke in the wheels right at the last moment. What a time to become ill! I don't feel like taking care of him; I've got something else on my mind. How can he do this to me? Wasn't he young once himself? Didn't he ever feel like fooling around?

October 1913

‘Tist, stand still. Stop fooling around all the time!’

Tist tried to stand stock-still, while his father took his measurements.

‘Arms up.’ Father placed the tape measure around Tist’s chest, his waist, his hips. He took the pencil that was always behind his ear and scribbled down the measurements on a piece of paper.

‘You just keep on growing! Soon you’ll be sticking out through the roof! We’ll make the sleeves and the legs a little longer and put a hem in. Then we can always let them out later. Mark my words: a clever tailor always adds a couple of sizes for children’s clothes, to allow for growth. If they go walking around the village a month later with sleeves and trouser legs that are too short, people blame the tailor, not the growth. And every inch of cloth we sell counts.’

Tist nodded. ‘We’ve sold a lot.’

‘Yes, you can see from miles away that the fair’s on. Everyone’s going around in new clothes.’

‘May I go to the fair by myself this year? Now that I’m big enough for long trousers?’

‘We’ll go together.’

‘May I go with Fonne? He’s nine already. The little ones always dawdle. They want to do different things than us. We can’t do as we please if the little ones are with us.’

‘You have to go over the dyke.’

‘I’ll keep Fonne away from the river.’

‘The mud gobbles children up, Tist.’

‘I really will take care.’

‘You can’t be careful enough.’ Father threw a roll of material onto the table. Tist stared at the dark-grey fabric that no one chose. He so wanted the blue-green material for his first pair of long trousers, but he knew that protesting wouldn’t help.

‘I won’t let go of Fonne’s hand for a second.’

‘One second is all that’s needed. The pitch-devils lie in wait in that mud day and night.

They’ve already caught hundreds of children. You can hear them wailing for their mothers whenever the wind sighs through the reeds.’ Father unrolled the material. ‘As soon as you even get anywhere near that mud, you’re lost. The arms of the pitch-devils are long. Before you know it, they have hold of you. They drag you down, deeper and deeper, down into the deepest darkness, on the bottom of the river. That’s where the bone lady is waiting. The moment she smells a child her

mouth starts watering. And she can smell them from a long way away, from miles away. She's smacking her lips and belching before she's tasted even one bite of them.'

Father attacked the material with his huge scissors. 'The children that the bone lady gets hold of really know what it means to suffer. First she gnaws off their fingers and toes one by one, then she tears the flesh from their arms and legs. She saves the ball of their hands, the softest parts of belly and backside for later. And only right at the end does she eat up the head. The children can hear and see and feel everything the entire time. Tist, there is no death more gruesome!'

Tist shivered. 'Has she no pity at all for the poor little children?'

'She's used up all of her pity. She was not allowed to keep her own child. There's nothing worse. A person can't survive that. A person dies as well, or becomes a lunatic, or a beast, or worse than a beast. The bone lady screamed her soul out of her body when she had to give up her child. She went everywhere in search of it. All the way to the mud of the pitch-black river. She saw the pitch-devils sitting there. She begged them to call her child. She could now only whisper in a tiny squeak herself. Her voice had gone. She looked so hideous that even the vicious pitch-devils took pity on her. When the pitch-devils heard children laughing on the dyke, they would call out to them in their squeakiest little voices: "Come along, children, come here!"

Until those poor little dunces would plod out into the mud. Then they would grab hold of the little children and drag them down to the bone lady. As soon as the bone lady saw that her own child was not amongst them, she became raving with grief. She ate the children up, bones and all. But it wasn't enough that the children should die. No, the bone lady was so broken-hearted, everything inside her was grinding so badly, that she wanted it to take as long as possible for those little children to die. Tist, the children that the bone lady gets hold of die for weeks, months, years on end. In actual fact, they're dying for the rest of their entire lives.'

March 2003

I want to have the house all to myself. Double-locking my room isn't enough. I want an entire house without one single parental or sisterly sound, not even a gentle sigh in the background.

'You should go. You just have to let a little dose of the flu run its course. That's what Dr Pennaert always says: sleep a lot, drink a lot, there's nothing else you can do. Whether you're here or there really isn't going to make any difference.'

Now they look hurt. I correct myself quickly: 'Of course it makes a difference, but I'll manage fine. I'll go round to Tist's not just once, but twice a day. I'll get someone to stand in for me at Federico's.'

My mum looks at my dad. 'We really do need a holiday, Lex. A whole week long with no appointments, no files, no traffic jams, no stress. If we stay at home, they'll still know how to get hold of us. Dr Pennaert lives nearby. Gaston too. One phone call and half a minute later they'll be with Tist.'

They have to go. It took an eternity for them to organise this trip – I don't want to wait for another fifty years. I weigh up the pros and cons and make a move of desperation. 'I'll go and stay with Tist. How much safer could it be? Even if you stayed at home, you'd be working all day and we couldn't get hold of you half the time. I'll take my schoolwork with me.'

My brain's firing on all cylinders. Plan A: I feed Tist a battery of vitamin pills and as soon as he's better I run back home. Plan B: if I really have to stay with him, we'll meet in Gaston's café, opposite Tist's flat. Where I'll tell my classmates about my sacrifice. Alya will melt. When the meeting's over, I'll smuggle her into Tist's flat. When she sees how I'm working my socks off to help the grumpy old sod, she'll fall for me. My arms are open wide already, just thinking about it.

'Joppe, weren't you supposed to be taking part in that big peace demonstration?'

'That's not for another five days. Tist'll be better by then and if he's not I'll just stay with him.'

I can't believe myself. Just coming out with it like that. I want to work with my class to help organise part of the demo and I'm absolutely determined to walk in that march. It's going to be really spectacular. Nearly all of the schools and organisations are taking part. The town's going to shake on its foundations. I don't want to miss that. In the worst case, I'll dash backwards and forwards between the demo and Tist's flat. I'll come up with something.

'If anything at all goes wrong, I'll phone. You've got cancellation insurance, haven't you? If necessary, you'll be back in through that door sooner than if you'd been stuck in a traffic jam here. But nothing's going to go wrong. Before you're sitting outside a Spanish café, Tist will be sitting outside on his balcony.'

With a Duvel in his hand, I want to add, but I swallow it. My dad already thinks that Tist drinks too much beer.

I use all the ammo I've got. My age: eighteen; my six months' training as a nurse. I'm only in the first year, doing the basic module, but what I've learnt in those six months sounds really impressive when I hear myself saying it.

I grab the telephone. 'Shall I call Tist? If he says it's fine, you can go, can't you?'

My mum almost nods her head off, and Kaat's already at the front door. Now just Fortress Father. It's not as though my dad and Tist are the best of mates. Tist is his step-grandfather. They never talk about it openly, but apparently everything that could have gone wrong between the two of them really has gone wrong. I can see why. Tist has all the sensitivity of a grumpy mountain gorilla. He can be incredibly blunt. You could fill books with his blunders. But they only have each other. Dad's never known his real father and grandfather and the rest of his family has disappeared from the world now as well. But that's a long story. That's still to come.

'Hi Tist, it's Joppe. You don't sound that ill! They want to stay at home to look after you. But I can do that, can't I?'

Tist grumbles: 'What do they want to go to Spain for? Can't they just go on holiday here?'

'I'll make fresh soup and herbal tea with honey specially for you. I'm coming to stay, like I used to. While you're asleep, I'll do my work for school.'

I keep on at the grumpy old sod, until he mumbles: 'Well, all right. I sleep like a log day and night anyway – that's still the best medicine.'

I hear him take a swig from his bottle of cough syrup and then burp. You see, the devil takes care of his own. He's as hard as granite, our own family fossil, prehistoric, but indestructible. I hand the receiver to my dad.

'Are you sure, Tist?'

Fortress Father submits, the battlements crumble, the tower groans, the drawbridge creaks, then crashes to the ground.

'OK then. But call us if there's anything at all, eh?'

I could almost dance. I'm so ready for it. For a major part in a huge demonstration. For Alya. For life. And with a little juggling, I can easily handle a sniffing Tist as well!