

The Book of Daniel

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p 9-11

Prologue

It was past midnight. They walked away from the village, crossed the viaduct and made it to the street where they needed to be. To the left of the junction stood a small cluster of workers' houses, set back from a dirt road through the fields, but at this hour nobody was about. Right in front of them loomed the imposing outline of my Uncle Daniel's courtyard farm.

They stood still and looked at it for a while, rigid with adrenaline. Breaking and entering wasn't something they did every day.

They sneaked towards the farmhouse. Rachid took out his knife and cut through the rope with which the gate was fastened. There was a chain on it as well, which he yanked off so they could both slip through. They peered into the dark courtyard. A whole load of old machinery and tools.

Tentatively they entered this world they'd never seen before, passing the ancient hay tedder behind the gate as they crossed the muddy yard to the back. A pitchfork and a shovel stood beside a wheelbarrow.

Quietly they opened a door. To their astonishment they saw four cows. The bittersweet smell of manure and straw and cattle feed wafted into their faces.

The beasts started mooing loudly.

Once they'd recovered from the shock, they noticed the faint glow of a lamp across the courtyard. That must be where the old farmer lived.

'Give me that stick,' Rachid said.

'Why?' Ahmed asked.

'To fend him off in case he comes charging at us.'

Ahmed handed him the pitchfork.

They peered through a crack in the door. The old man was lying on the floor beside the stove, his head resting on the sofa, his eyes closed. His breathing was laboured. He appeared to be in a deep sleep.

The door creaked and squeaked, but Uncle Daniel didn't wake up. The place was a mess. The rectangular table in the middle was littered with plates, cutlery, scraps of food, packaging and bottles. The peeling walls were dark with smoke from the stove.

There was something strange on a side table. A black Bakelite handset, with a rotary dial, a mechanical bell and a thick cord, no doubt many decades old, from a time when telephoning someone was still a big deal. These days a new iPhone came out virtually every year. Change was happening faster than ever, whereas everything inside this farmhouse exuded an air of stagnation and fossilisation.

There was nothing worth stealing: no laptop, no smartphone, not even a television. As if the person living here refused to view the world via a screen or to amass earthly possessions. In doing so, he gave the impression that what others owned and did was ridiculous. It rubbed people the wrong way.

Scattered across the floor were the groceries the old man had bought in the supermarket. It looked as if the bag had simply slipped from his hands. Ahmed noticed a packet of frozen chips and bottles of beer, among other things.

Without a sound, they went and stood beside the body on the floor by the stove. The wrinkly, bearded head reminded Rachid of his grandfather, with whom he'd kept a long vigil as he lay dying.

The sight of the old man lying there so helplessly did nothing to ease his nerves; on the contrary, it only agitated him more.

He took the heavy pitchfork in both hands. He lifted the handle over his head to the back of his neck. He glanced sideways at his cousin.

Ahmed took out his iPhone. He started filming.

p 13-22

Steak and Rodenbach

As always on a Saturday, Uncle Daniel had gone to the supermarket in the evening. He was only allowed in the store very late, when there were hardly any other customers around. He went along with it, even though it meant going out in the dark.

The shop staff knew what he usually bought on a Saturday: Belgian Blue steak of about a centimetre thick, a few heads of endive, a small bag of frozen chips, a pre-packaged sandwich for Sunday morning and the occasional crate of Rodenbach beer.

He was a familiar sight, but considered eccentric by others, like someone outside time, outside society. He was eighty-four, but still healthy and spry. The gossip behind his back didn't bother him. By his own standards he was doing fine. He took every day as it came. He did his own thing, he lived his life, and in the end he and his farm would go down together.

Daniel Maroy was my 'rich uncle', and we were due to inherit his courtyard farm. I only really know the end of his life. While growing up, I'd occasionally see him at one of the many funerals in our extended farming family. My mother used to tell me, not without envy, about his traditional courtyard farm in the region of Hainaut with its fertile loam soil. She remembered walking through the gate and standing in the courtyard, surrounded by the perfectly connected buildings, all with the same red-tiled gable roofs. Although hardly anybody really knew him, she thought Daniel was a good man, chaotic and guarded perhaps, but essentially a good man. He'd spent his whole life looking after his family and the family business before suddenly shutting himself off from everything and everyone. His story intrigued me and it scared me too. But it has to be told.

It was in early spring, halfway through Lent, late March 2014 to be precise, after he'd worked in his yard all day and after he'd fed the cows, that Uncle Daniel set off for the supermarket that Saturday evening, around six o'clock, in the soft light of the setting sun. The land was empty, deserted. Sometimes, on a clear day, you could see the water of the Espierre Canal glisten in the distance as it cut straight through the fields. Sometimes you'd even glimpse, through the bare trees lining the canal, the gothic façade of the medieval Tempelhoeve, which used to be home to his Aunt Elise, and now her descendants.

The gently rolling landscape had looked like this since time immemorial. But this year, spring had arrived unusually early. After an exceptionally mild and snowless winter, the past few weeks had seen the warmest days ever recorded in March. The farmers had already started fertilising, ploughing and sowing. The magnolias were a riot of blossom. The pollarded willows were sprouting, the birds were pecking in the undergrowth and animals were emerging from their holes.

Here and there, a fresh molehill or mole run appeared in the grass. This was the only season when the subterranean burrower would occasionally surface and risk falling victim to birds of prey, foxes and cats.

The days would be lengthening fast. And then the poplars along the canal would be in leaf again, the grass grow like crazy and the landscape be at its most beautiful. His four ageing Belgian Blues could finally go out to pasture again after a long winter in the airless tie stall.

But the weather had turned overnight. It had grown chilly and wet. There was a thunder in the air and a strong south-westerly wind.

It took Daniel forty-five minutes to cover the two kilometres uphill to the supermarket, on foot, while leaning on his old, rusty bicycle. In the street he tended to be rather gruff. But while he was quiet and curt with his neighbours, he was talkative and boisterous inside the store. Sometimes he hadn't spoken to a single soul all week.

Dusk had fallen by the time he parked his bike right inside the entrance, which he wasn't really supposed to do. At 18.48 he wheeled his trolley past the tills and walked in. The supermarket was brightly lit. The last few customers were scurrying around; the exuberance of a Saturday evening.

Uncle Daniel was in the habit of going to the 'samplers' first. At these counters he'd drink one or two or even three of those tiny glasses of wine or liqueur. Sometimes with a piece of sheep's cheese or garlic sausage. He'd take his time. He relished it.

But the bulk of his time was spent in the butcher's at the back of the supermarket, where he'd buy the best steak. Never mind that two pounds of cow here cost multiple times the amount he'd fetch for it at the farm.

He'd always talk at length with the shop assistants who were dressed in white smocks and red aprons. He was popular with them, because other customers had little or no time, and he had all the time in the world. They spoke in the local French dialect, but Daniel would throw in the odd Flemish word. His loud, strident voice carried over the shelves and could be heard throughout the store. About the weather that was turning the seasons upside-down, about the farm that was his father's pride and joy, about his cows that could smell the grass and were tugging at their chains.

Sometimes he'd talk to himself, the way old men who live alone occasionally do.

A topic close to his heart were the youngsters he'd see hanging around his farm. Not that long ago, they'd even broken into his house; it had happened while he was in the supermarket. They seemed to know his routine. On the phone to the police he'd said that 'highwaymen' had ransacked his farm, but the officers never even bothered to come and have a look. He didn't own much of value, except his cash, because he no longer trusted banks. He always carried a fat bundle of notes, which he'd openly display in the store. Why did he do that, the staff wondered. Was he trying to tempt fate?

'Please be careful, Daniel,' they'd told him so many times. 'You ought to use a debit card, Daniel.'

He'd laugh with a snort. He'd shake his beard.

'Anyone who wants my money will have to do me in first,' was his usual response. 'Over my dead body.'

Another one of his stock phrases, whenever those youths came up, was the rather terse, 'thugs and yobs, the lot of them.' One day a shop assistant held the intercom in front of him without him realising it. Everybody burst out laughing as it boomed across the supermarket: 'thugs and yobs, the lot of them!'

There was a trainee in the butcher's with whom Daniel often discussed the meat and cows. Rafael, a nineteen-year-old student at Moeskroen's technical college, had a passion for the trade, but he also had learning difficulties. Daniel would end the conversation by saying: 'Bon courage and bon weekend.'

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That evening Daniel pushed his trolley to the till, pulled out his bundle of cash and paid with a few crumpled notes. Then he took his time stuffing the change into a plastic bag and tucking everything away under his thick brown overcoat. Turning his back on the babble of voices, he slowly sauntered to the exit. At 19.51 he shuffled across the large car park, again with his bike on his right, now with a heavy shopping bag dangling from the handlebar, past the cars with their headlights on, his shoulders slightly hunched, his beard blowing about in the wind. It was getting darker and darker. The grey concrete façade featured the supermarket's name and slogan: COLRUYT – MEILLEURS PRIX / LOWEST PRICES.

Daniel walked past the Brasserie du Peuple and the Ladbrokes betting shop, which was always busy, and turned into the long Rue de Saint-Léger in the direction home. In this Frenchified region, just across the language border, it was a peculiar street; up here still part of Moeskroen, but further away it crossed into Saint-Léger, the small farming village that was named after the patron saint invoked against blindness and possession. At the top of the street were shops and townhouses, below terraced houses and businesses.

Uncle Daniel made his way down. On his left he passed Résidence Richelieu and Seniorie Ma Maison. Daniel didn't want to go into a retirement home or a flat, under no circumstances. He was the kind of person who wanted to die in the place where he was born. The farm where he grew up dated back to the eighteenth century and had been in the family for three generations. But there was no one to take over.

On the right, Segaert's old butcher's shop. Daniel always paused here for a few minutes, his eyes fixed on the house. This is where Yvette lived. Long ago, he'd declared his love for her. He'd had dreams, but they proved to be unattainable. He had no experience with women. Yet he was still fond of this place. It was enough for him to linger here a while. Like him, Yvette had remained unmarried.

He passed a few large villas he'd known his whole life. He could walk the two kilometres home with his eyes closed. A hundred metres down the road, he walked along the abandoned, half-demolished station. The railway itself had been turned into a gravel path. One of the annexes now housed a kindergarden. A bit further still were the old workshops of the Vanoverveldt joinery. Across the road a row of small, white workers' houses. This is where the footpath ended and he had to continue in the street, past the Pont Bleu industrial estate, up to the traffic lights by the highway, which thundered from roundabout to roundabout to France, just a few kilometres away.

This is where he was overtaken by Rafael, the trainee he often spoke to in the supermarket. The young man was cycling home from work. Rafael spotted the frail figure at the junction. Daniel's bicycle dragged heavily on his arm. A few minutes earlier, at 20.13, Rafael had received a text message from Arno and Pascal, two mates he'd been friendly with since an early age.

'Did you see the old pervert in Colruyt?' Arno and Pascal wanted to know.

'Yes,' Rafael had replied.

The pervert, they called him. The old pervert.

It has to be said that Daniel was shabby. He always wore the same threadbare clothes: a long, waterproof overcoat with epaulettes on the shoulders, black cotton trousers that were baggy around his legs and a felt hat with a dented crown. Although balding on top, he had long stringy hair on the sides and a wild, unkempt beard. His weathered face and calloused hands were full of creases and no amount of washing could get the dirt out.

Rafael continued cycling home. Without looking up, Daniel stomped across the road. It felt strange to see the ground beside and beneath his feet on the highway; he'd been so keen to cultivate it. Good soil, which was going to waste because of the disease of motorways and roundabouts and industrial estates.

Some fifty metres past the junction he turned right into Rue du Chien, which led towards his farm. At the corner the lights of the legendary Au Repos des Alliés illuminated the asphalt. Even though the café was close to home, Daniel had only been a handful of times; he wasn't the kind of man who went on benders; he led a simple, spartan life. Steak and Rodenbach were the greatest pleasures he allowed himself. But when, long ago, he'd bought a tractor he'd sealed and celebrated the deal in the café. In the years that followed, he used the blue Ford 4630 for the farm work but also for trips to the supermarket, the townhall and the church and became known for it around the area. But four months ago he'd had a bit of a mishap in this very spot right by the café. In the rain he'd shunted a car that had suddenly braked at the traffic lights. The police found that the tractor was uninsured and confiscated it. It was the beginning of his trials and tribulations.

It's why he was now hobbling on foot, leaning on his old bike, along Rue du Chien, a narrow, meandering lane through fields and meadows. The road was deserted, all seemed peaceful. He passed the house of his neighbour Micheline, who had a large, neatly laid out garden full of flowerbeds, small statues and ornamental shrubs. Behind it lay his stubble-field of cut maize, and in the corner the black agricultural

plastic covering the maize silage pit, where he came to fetch a wheelbarrow full of feed every morning and evening. Around the corner, he passed four terraced houses and the old, monumental courtyard farm that belonged to his late Uncle Julien; sold a long time ago, it was now some Frenchman's dilapidated country pile. A power line crossed the street from pylon to pylon. It marked the boundary of Daniel's meadow, which was already full of spring flowers, and bordered by gnarled, windswept trees and bushes.

Soon he could rest his weary limbs on his sofa, have a beer and listen to the radio or his cows, while warming himself by his roaring hot stove.

He could see Maroy Farm loom up beyond the junction. It gave off an air of immense desolation. The forecourt with its weeds springing up through the concrete slabs. The shed, all but collapsed after a devastating storm. The long house with its shuttered windows facing the road. Beside it, the gatehouse and the stables, overgrown with ivy, and filled with old junk. The wooden gate, cracked and dotted with holes and tied shut with a blue rope normally used to bind hay bales.

This once magnificent farm now looked neglected, like a withered plant with wilted leaves. But this was his farm, this was his home.

It might look like a mess, but it was his mess. He could find a small screw if and when he needed it.

It was almost pitch-dark now, except for the faint light of the crescent moon.

Strange. It took him nearly ten minutes to loosen the rope he'd knotted himself and to open the gate.

Daniel hesitated. Then he entered.

Oh, Uncle Daniel.
