

The Event

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An extract pp 9-15; 91-94; 103-106

Original title De gebeurtenis
Publisher De Bezige Bij, 2022

Translation Dutch into English
Translator David Doherty

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p 9-15

Juliette

The research team has chosen Juliette. The news reaches her two days before the test with Willem's upload is due to take place. She is flattered; they could easily have opted for Femke, his young widow. She sees it as an acknowledgement of her work, of the sacrifices she has made.

In her excitement, she rings Rosa's doorbell that evening. Rosa lives in the flat above hers, though they know each other from the launderette. They invite each other over for drinks on alternate Fridays. Today is Wednesday. It's me, Juliette says. Rosa puts her eye to the peephole and then peers tentatively round the door. Juliette holds up the champagne, purchased minutes before from the Turkish off-licence on the corner.

Rosa knows the story of Juliette's years of loyal service to Willem, the deceased writer, and Willem's marriage to Femke, an actress, forty-three years his junior.

The pickings in Rosa's fridge are slim. They share some leftover olives and a few desiccated slices of Italian ham. By eight o'clock the boozy glow that casts a gentle light on their solitary lives has come and gone. At nine, Juliette pulls the bedclothes up to her chin and listens to the muffled sounds above. Rosa lives at number twelve, Juliette at number eleven; their apartments are identical. She is glad she left the last glass of red untouched and downed two tumblers of water in the bathroom. Soon she is asleep.

The following day, edgy from the after-effects of the alcohol, she keeps expecting the doorbell to ring. She feels sure that Femke will file an objection to her selection for the test, a legal document to be handed to her personally. In the wake of Willem's death, seven months before, Femke had also contested his will. His priceless collection of original manuscripts and first editions from world literature, *and* the memory stick of his last dictated work – left to Juliette, his assistant? The verdict is pending, the matter unresolved. Knowing Femke's appetite for conflict, Juliette dresses for the eventuality and sits at the kitchen table until after midnight. She is not about to be surprised by anyone.

Next morning, she decides to take the bus. The stop is a brisk walk from the research centre. It feels good to be out in the fresh air, no reporters or cameras, sunlight picking out charming white houses amid the resplendent autumn colours.

What a tragedy it had been when Willem could no longer enjoy the English garden that unfurled across the landscape from the threshold of his study. A tragedy that, towards the end, the painful light in his failing eyes forced him to install himself at the other side of his pedestal desk. Not a word

of complaint crossed his lips, never, not to her. There was work to be done. Take note! Her heart leaps at the memory of that command. It's as if she is with him again, as it was in the beginning, a day spent listening to his back-lit silhouette, to the twisting procession of his thoughts.

But for his failing eyesight, they would never have met. In the eight years that she was his assistant, he never really saw her. At the very start, for a month or two, she had been a shadow and he would turn his face towards her when he spoke. She knew he was taken by her boyish profile. He did not say as much, but it came through in his stories. His female characters began wearing their hair short, ears exposed, or in the French bob favoured by silent movie stars. That Willem should enjoy such success so late in his career had been inexplicable to many. He put it down to his blindness, which stripped away distractions and let him see better.

Juliette put a good deal of thought into how she should dress on this strange day. The black suit she wore to the funeral was out of the question of course. Though science has succeeded in uploading Willem's brain, he is still dead and buried, his loss an open wound for many. Without slowing her pace, she approaches the entrance to the complex. She leaves the reporters' questions unanswered. Photographers call out her first name, a familiarity that shocks her. She keeps her eyes lowered, sees their ugly shoes. Inside, the director is waiting with a firm handshake, feigning indignation while basking in the commotion on his doorstep.

In a small, windowless conference room, she is greeted by the research team behind the project. A dozen scientists stand by their chairs, their faces earnest and pale. As if at a church service, they sit down in unison. It is cold. The lead researcher informs her that this project is unique in Europe, though another three teams are thought to be engaged in similar initiatives worldwide. One in Silicon Valley, two in South East Asia. The latter have shown less regard for the ethical aspects. Heavily funded by Chinese tech companies, their aim is to beat the Americans to the punch. According to *The Washington Post*, Apple has already taken out a patent on what has provisionally been called the 'iHead'.

We, the researcher explains, set our own course from the outset. When uploading to the bio-dock, we stimulated other areas of the brain and this has since proved key in achieving inorganic communication, affording us a slight advantage, or so we believe. Another factor, he says, has been our refusal to focus solely on nanotransponders. A couple of scientists permit themselves a satisfied smile.

At first, Juliette will have the chance to speak to Willem privately. If contact proves possible, which would be an absolute first, this will be followed by a formal phase comprising a series of standard questions, to be streamed live to the five affiliated universities. In consultation with the widow, excerpts will then be selected for broadcast at a press conference that same evening. This is bound to feel strange, the researcher adds. Take your time. I appreciate it is far from simple but try – I repeat, try – within the realm of what is possible to sound natural, to be the person he knows. We understand that there was no appreciable visual component to your relationship and, from our perspective, this purely auditory basis is a definite boon. After all, we are dealing with a bio-dock that hears but cannot see.

The adjacent room is warmer. On the table there is a glass and a bottle of mineral water, a box of tissues and a plastic plant. Her chair faces the screen on which the animation of Willem will appear. The door clicks behind her and Juliette is left in silence. Her heart pounds in her temples.

When the lights dim, Willem appears gradually, as if from a mist, an effect possibly designed to soften any shock. He looks considerably younger than he was when he died. From the collar of his shirt and the cut of his hair she can tell which photos they have used to create the animated head. A smaller head. Occasionally, his eyes blink in rapid succession, a feminine touch.

It's me, she says. Juliette. She waits a moment. You'll be tickled to know that they have given you long, dark lashes. Not a sound. His gaze is penetrating. She cannot escape the impression that he is

silent because he is looking at her for the first time, and that what he sees is a disappointment to him. But that is impossible. Go on. The voice of the lead researcher comes from a small speaker in the table. You are doing well. We see clear signs of activity.

Who are those people? Willem asks.

A muted cheer is heard through the wall. Willem's voice is grainy but remarkably true to life. He might have been speaking to her down a bad line on an old-fashioned telephone. In these unusual circumstances, it is as if Willem is in a far corner of the universe, light years away from her.

Who are those people, Juliette? They are the researchers, she answers. Who? The researchers. What are they doing in my study? We are not in your study. The face on the screen remains impassive. We are not in my study? No.

This has no frame of reference. It is neither a phone conversation, nor a reunion. He is dead. She wonders if his mind knows that his body is already decomposing and that he now has to go on alone, enclosed in the bio-dock. The inconceivable loneliness. When, step by step, she explains what happened: his tumour, the scientists, the upload shortly before his death, Willem bursts out laughing. Not Willem, but a recording of another man, perhaps an excerpt lifted from a film. It startles her. The laugh, booming and unrestrained, fills the room. The shoulders of the animation move appropriately but its facial expression is more subdued, so that someone just out of shot appears to be shaking Willem by the lapels.

I see. So I have breathed my last and my mind has been preserved, Willem says when the laughing has stopped. He says it more to himself than to her. And you are talking to me from a research centre seven months after my death. Juliette, he says. Honestly, Juliette, you are... He does not complete his thought. What an imagination...

Now then, he says after a pause, enough dawdling. Where were we? Read that last passage back to me, will you? We are not working, Juliette says tentatively. I am not here to take notes. This is a test, she says, we are not writing a book. Don't give me that, Willem answers, his voice hesitant. I know damn well what we are working on. You don't have to read it to me. It goes quiet, as if he is thinking, picking at the thread of a story. He gazes into the room, his face stoic and unmoving. Apart from the occasional blink.

Go on, the researcher asks. Keep talking. But whatever Juliette asks or says, Willem remains silent.

Anna

1.

His wife would not die. There was talk of a medical miracle. Anna had been terminally ill for three years and the team at the university hospital were in complete agreement. This was unheard of.

A Croatian, a Brazilian, a brilliant young French doctor with Asian features: the case attracted interest from across the profession. Anna's diagnosing physician, a tanned, white-haired rheumatologist who wore sneakers and zipped up and down the department's corridors on a scooter, had given her two to four months at most. Now he shrugged, filled his mouth to bursting from the metal cylinder by his computer and glugged the water from his bulging cheeks. Michel was a lucky man, he said. His wife was lucky, the gods had smiled on them. MRI scans did not lie, after all. Radiologists, neurologists, everyone was stumped as to how her brain allowed her body to function, granting her another relatively normal day of dressing in the morning, three modest meals and even the odd attempt at a rudimentary conversation.

I appreciate that this is far from easy, the rheumatologist said, walking them to the door of his office. Some struggle to cope with the extra time they are given. But try to live, not sit and wait. No one can say when it will happen.

Michel pushed his wife through the corridors in her wheelchair. In the glass-domed central hall with its jarring acoustics, Anna pressed her hands to her ears. Seeing her like this took him back to the intense, stabbing pains with which it all began. Several times a day, he had seen her sitting or standing with her head in her hands, teeth clenched, eyes tight shut. In fear, he waited until the high-pitched sound she made, a sound like pain itself, sank from her throat to her chest and finally ceased, until she heaved one deep sigh, then another, and gave him a tearful smile.

Michel helped her into the car without much trouble, no need for special transport as yet. He had never known Anna to be anything other than light and slender, the build of a ballerina, even if the painkillers and years of restricted movement had caused her to gain a few pounds. Happily, she was still able to find a fleeting strength in her legs and, as a painter who stood at his canvas, Michel's back was sturdy for a man of seventy-four. Trading in the old Jaguar for a new Range Rover had been a smart move. The car had high seats, snug leather upholstery and plenty of leg room. As he rounded the bonnet, he winked at his wife through the windscreen, already safe in her seat. With an air of contentment, as if he had successfully wrapped a gift, Michel slid into the driving seat.

As her illness had progressed, she lost interest in classical music and tuned to a commercial station that churned out pop hits. It was hard to know whether the damage to her brain had altered her taste. He had heard of patients undergoing a change of character. Perhaps she had simply had her fill. Woody, her clarinet, had been confined to its case for years, buried at the bottom of her grandmother's ottoman long before she became ill, along with the countless scores that formed a diary of her life as an orchestral musician.

A text message. His phone vibrating on the console between their seats made her jump. The lit screen, a detail from one of his canvases, dimmed within seconds. Anna looked at him. Michel acted as if he was preoccupied with the traffic, then reached for the phone after all. It would seem odd not to look. He knew it was Frouke. A question mark, nothing more. He deleted the message and placed the phone back on the console. Anna looked at him quizzically. She had rare moments of what appeared to be lucidity, her eyes revealing a hint of the quiet wisdom that had enchanted him when they first met. Rudy, he said. She tapped his arm, a sign of irritation. She was searching for a word or

her mouth was refusing to form one. That was Rudy, he enunciated. Rudy, from the gallery. Wants me to get my act together. Michel rubbed thumb and forefinger together to indicate money. As a joke it was half-cocked, and lazy into the bargain. Rudy would never pressure him into a deadline. Anna turned her face away and stared at the truck ahead, as if she had received bad news. You know, Michel said. Rudy. From the gallery. Bald.

He didn't push it. The headlights came on, they were driving into darkness. Thick rainclouds clogged the sky and the wind had picked up, teasing autumn leaves from the treetops in playful streamers. People waiting at a bus stop hunkered down in their coats. The rear-view mirror framed a stripe of bright evening sky on the horizon. No point in pushing it.

Once he would have tried to bring interactions of this kind to a satisfactory conclusion, to elicit a memory, a confirmation. A victory of sorts. He would have persisted until she knew who he meant. Sometimes she nodded to appease him, sensing the importance he attached to her answer. She may not have understood anything, barely even registered the question, but still she nodded. Looked him straight in the eye and bluffed.

Anna

4.

They pulled up by the bus stops on the square outside the station. The city lay black and monolithic beneath the deep blue of the night sky. Frouke did not get out immediately. A short distance from the Range Rover they saw three homeless people by the bike racks. The huddled figures appeared to know each other but, like cats, preferred to keep their distance. Two of them were drunk. The hoarse recriminations they hurled were interspersed by lulls that lasted some time. Amplified by the modern architecture, the effect was sinister.

It was not a plan as such. It occurred to him in an instant.

Perhaps it was the sight of the drunks in the resinous gloom of the lampposts, an urge to protect Frouke, to take her under his wing.

Why not move in with me? he asked. Move into the house?

The proposition surprised him as much as it did her. The thought arose as he heard the words coming from his mouth. It sounded strangely like a plan, a topic he had mulled over for some time but been hesitant to broach. From every conceivable angle it was madness. An idea Frouke could only reject as laughable. Why should she give it the slightest consideration? A peal of laughter, a kiss on his cheek and she would walk home to her little house without a backward glance.

She stared out the window. Michel had the impression that she was offended, that he had let her down. She was right, this was more than simply laughable.

It's not as crazy as it sounds, he persisted. The house is big. You've never been there, you should see it.

A cyclist skirted the car, the large, loping dog at his side decked out in flickering lights. One of the drunks let out a wolfish howl.

This afternoon she didn't know who Rudy was, Michel said. You remember Rudy?

She nodded.

At times I think she doesn't know who I am. I'm just there, he said. I'm the man who's always there.

Depressed by his own words, he longed for the evening to be over. Perhaps it would be better if Frouke ditched him. What sense did any of it make? He was an old man. Not that he *felt* old, but to all intents and purposes he was. He would preserve his dignity, never stoop to pathos.

Do you honestly mean that? Frouke asked. That I should move in while your wife is... you know... living in the same house?

He heard something in her voice. He could not see her eyes but he heard something he had not expected, a doubt. He had started down a path. Was there a way back? Could he go on? Perhaps it wasn't such a mad idea after all. Excitement seized him, a taste of conquest. Perhaps he should have thought of this earlier, paved the way more carefully. If only he wasn't throwing away this one and only chance.

It's a big place, he said, with conviction. You should see it. There is plenty of space between rooms. Anna barely knows who I am. The home help, the nurses, she can barely tell them apart. She has lost all interest. A white coat in a hurry is a nurse. A woman with a Hoover must be the help. She has no real contact with people.

Here it was, within his grasp. All those agonising years, and now their fate was almost in their hands. Frouke turned to him in the darkened car and he saw the white of her teeth. A smile.

And you would do that for me? she asked.

He nodded, wary that his answer might provide final proof of his insanity, that she could still laugh in his face, slam the car door and disappear back into her own life.

I mean it, he said. No one needs to know. No one who comes to the house ever sets foot in a theatre. Anna has no family, nor do I. You could be an artist's model, my assistant, a student under my supervision. The daughter of a good friend who needs some time to herself.

At the house, no one can see us, he said.
