

The Dying Peasant

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An extract pp 13-32

Original title	De boer die sterft	Translation	Dutch into English
Publisher	Van Dishoeck, 1918. Republished by Davidsfonds in 2004.	Translator	Paul Vincent

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An old peasant lay dying. His bed stood in the upstairs room, in the sour-smelling air. Dusk was falling and the peasant lay peering out from the depths of his straw mattress, under the blanket that was grubby and grey. His dark bony fingers caught at the blanket, and he noticed it for a second, and thought: 'See, I'm already tying up my bundle.' But he peered, with the flat glazed sheen of his eyes above the taut yellow skin of his cheekbones, and nothing moved across his forehead or around his black sunken mouth. He saw the tall bed, and behind it his yellow chest with the Virgin Mary and the bowls on it. The walls were stained blue with salt and the red floor tiles were damp at the corners. He had long been without a wife and his children had all left home. Now an old woman came in occasionally. He thought of her, when he looked at the chest and then at the chair. 'The chair's not straight,' he thought. He saw that the evening light lay in ridges across the rush seat of the chair. Then he felt a little cold around his shoulder. Where had the woman got to? He did not make any effort to get deeper under the blanket. He knew he was on his deathbed.

The evening grew greyer and greyer. Soon there was not even a glimmer of light on the porcelain holy water font. He saw that too. He saw next to it the print of Bertha's first communion. It still shone. What did it say on that print again? He searched for a while in his head. All he knew was: his Bertha had eleven children of her own now. There was his Domien too, but he was in America. Though he was married to a girl from the village. Her name was Felicita. She stood by his bedside: 'How are you, father?' – 'Well,' he replied, 'a bit better than being possessed by the devil.' That was difficult to say: his mouth wouldn't open properly anymore. He glanced to the side, to where Felicita should be. But she wasn't there. – 'It's true,' he said, reflecting. He turned laboriously onto his left side, towards the wall. The bed creaked. He drew his arm under the blanket, because he was getting really cold. He smacked his lips, as they were very dry.

Then he looked between the wall and his bed. There it was already properly dark. There was a line of dust on the edge of the side plank of his bed, and it was almost white. He felt comfortable now. One knee rested heavily on the other. – 'Treze should give me some fresh milk,' he thought. 'It's going to be too late to come soon, silly woman.' He thought he heard the handle of the back door. He waited for a while with his ears pricked. – 'It probably wasn't her,' he said under his breath, and listened for a little longer, till it made him feel tired in his chest. Then he thought: 'It probably wasn't anyone.' Then he heard, under the window, something rummaging around like a snout in tough grass. 'It'll be her with her goat,' he reassured himself this time. But no one came in. – 'I'm lying here all on my own,' he thought.

He let his head roll to the other side, and adjusted his limbs, painfully. It was clearer to him now, but it was completely dark. His bed was bright yellow in the dark. And he also saw his cap hanging from the chair. Yes, it was his cap. But he didn't care. His head was so hollow inside, and so

big. What did he suddenly think of? He couldn't remember, but his lips were sticking together.— 'How alone I am lying here!' he sighed. He was rather angry, as he used to be at his wife. —'How long has she been gone?' he wondered, and he began counting. But he couldn't manage it. 'It's already too dark,' he soothed himself. He closed his eyes and saw a great, circular space in which nothing was visible but a double yellow swarming. He wanted to go on thinking. But he couldn't anymore.—'I'll just have a nap,' he said to himself, and he settled down properly to sleep. He lay deep and close and no longer felt what he was lying in. The swarming darkness in his eyes turned blue and there were yellow and green balls rolling around in it. His head became warm. He moved his tongue against his gums, and it was no longer as dry. And his thick knees were warm too, and his belly. 'But I still shan't be able to sleep,' he said to himself again and it was as if he found it necessary to feel unhappy. 'I'm lying here far too alone.' And then he thought: 'And I've been alone for so long' . . . He had no pain now, and was nice and warm everywhere, but it was as if he was about to burst into tears. There was no resistance, but something like stubbornness, because he was lying there alone, all alone. He used to be angry when he came home from work and saw his whole litter of children. Now he felt his sick loneliness. Again, it suddenly occurred to him that he was dying. And a whining voice in him said:

'I'll never get what I want.'

He opened his eyes a little, but it was as if he did not open them: the same blue darkness, and the velvet balls. Again, he closed his eyes, which were already tired from having been opened a little. His eyes were now warm too and even his chest. He could no longer feel himself lying there. Where on earth was he? There was his wife again. No, it was Bertha, the eldest. She had once had a little white dog with curls. The balls in the darkness, they rolled about like dogs with white curls . . . But again, there was a weeping voice within: 'I'll never get what I want.'

Now that darkness became white, like milk is when it grows dark. No, that wasn't it: his head was now white as milk, inside. Then there came like a distant tune: 'I'll . . . never . . . get . . . '—But that white, that round white, which did not shine, began to move gently. 'I'll . . . never . . . get . . . what I want': it was as if they were singing to lull him to sleep—'I expect it's Bertha.' and he saw someone standing there in the swaying motion, in a blue apron amid that white. 'But I still won't be able to sleep. I've never got what I wanted. I'm . . . '

Then he saw very clearly that it wasn't his daughter Bertha.

It was a young girl with a blue apron. She had lovely blonde hair, which was smooth and brown from the butter; she had a pure face that shone like an apple, and pale blue eyes like a calf's. And she was very neatly dressed in a cotton jacket and an apron, which, just unfolded, lay in a waffle pattern across her belly. It was as if her hands came from the washtub. She did not smell of anything. She looked as bright as spring after a fresh morning shower.

'Bah, bah, Nand, you've never got what you want,' she said. Her mouth was moist and red: 'O—Bah!' And her mouth remained a little open and her eyes laughed.

'Has she come here to make fun of me?' thought Nand grumpily. And he thought he said it to her, but he didn't.

'Bah,' said the girl again, as if she had not heard him. And then she was silent for a little. But then she no longer smiled and said:

'Nand, don't you recognise me. I'm your Eyes. Still, I've always been with you since I'm your Eyes. But you're growing old, man, and that's why you've forgotten me. And that's why you say that you've never got what you wanted, Nand. —Nand, don't you remember then? You were only a peasant farmer, a cowherd with one animal, and for the last five years you've had no animals any longer, because you sit by the fire with your pipe and have no land anymore. But you were always a good farmer. During the week you didn't see much else except your workplace and your bowl of food, and you had to think about what needed to be done. But on Sundays after mass you didn't go off playing skittles in the skittle alleys like the others and drinking a drop of gin at the game; but you went round your land and enjoyed it. You saw the sky, and if it was blue you were glad, if it

hadn't been dry for too long. But if the drought had gone on for too long then you were glad if the sky promised a downpour of rain. You saw that on Sunday, for during the week one works. It is on Sundays that you saw the damage the hail had caused in the orchard; but a wise peasant sells his fruit while it's still in blossom, and so you weren't that bothered. Archangels in the sky are signs of a storm; but if the grain is not too high, it can withstand it. On the contrary, it's good for it . . .

'But it is mainly your land that you saw, on Sundays. It lay round and high, but that is good for drainage. In the early spring you can still see the earth between the sprouts of grain; but in May the limp ear forms and you are content. The rapeseed blooms and is so yellow it hurts your eyes; and at night the fruit trees are even whiter than during the day, with all their blossoms. But it's sad when you see the tops of the potatoes burnt black from the frost, at that time; but it is still early in the season and they can still put out new shoots . . . When the summer comes, it is something else again that you see. On Sunday mornings you go walking among your patches of grain. You see that the rye is yellow as a dandelion; but the wheat, a little later, is as red as beer. The green of the clover is very green, but its fat bunches are already as beautiful as roses. The potatoes are also in flower, white or like the mallows that grow in wet corners. At that time you see the water too, because it is flat, and shiny. Because it is the time when nothing can hide from the sun. It is the time of the sunflowers by the dung heap, and by the back door the dahlias as big as children's heads . . . When autumn comes you dig up the potatoes; on Sunday after vespers, the cowherds come in their first-communion clothes, and make fires of the tops for roasting spuds in. The smoke lies in long wisps across the land. You see that getting on towards evening, when you go for a game of cards . . . Afterwards it is ploughed up, and on Sundays you see the work of the shire horse, and the earth that lies turned in fat, purple scales.

Then you sowed with your sowing apron on, with a wise grasp and wide sweep, and the firm tread of someone sowing his own land. You even did it on Sunday, because one must take the time as it comes, and the work one enjoys doing.

'If the beets are being got in, then winter is at the door. You've seen it often enough, the trees turned black with the wet, and the crows sailing through the air, and looking for carrion on the empty land. And then it's snow, great broad tracts of snow on the earth and on the roofs. A farmer has no work then except for a little in the house and the barn. But through the window you see the snow under the leaden sky, the white snow that immediately turns blue . . .

'And Nand, you have seen so many other things. You have seen the town and lots of inns, when you went to market to sell your calves with their long legs and the bare round spot on their foreheads like a sacred host. You always had those small Breton cows, and you can still see them in your shed, or when your children led them along the canal. Once you bought a dog for pulling carts. It was a massive beast, yellow like the butchers had. On the way home, it tugged at the lead so hard that you had to trot the whole time. You saw then, that summer afternoon, how the dust can rise when you walk. All the leaves were wiggling on the willows along the road. And you couldn't even pop into the *Half Way Inn* to grab a crafty pint, that dog was pulling so hard . . . —Do you remember, in the town you saw two posh houses where your daughters were in service. One can relax in the kitchen. And you also saw the Brussels Exhibition, and you still remember very well how it made your head spin and your legs hurt with the effort . . .

'And then, have you forgotten, Nand? Didn't you have your wife, your Wanne? You were not long out of the army. Your father was still alive. One morning in spring you saw her passing by. There happened to be a fresh wind blowing. All her hair blew onto her forehead, because she had lots of those fine ringlets. On her body and legs the wind made her clothes blow backwards. She was laughing too; she was red as a cabbage. You immediately started to fall in love with her. You married her. She gave you children, like peonies. And she was certainly always a good wife . . . Bah, Nand, did you never get what you wanted? Are you forgetting Wanne your wife? And what about the children then? You saw them all grow up. They were like flowers, like peonies. They were good children, and they worked for their parents. Domien got married a little too early, but still he's

dutiful. He's in America. You've not seen his children. But you know all Bertha's children. She's a good woman, and she does her duty by her twelve children. You know, don't you, that the eldest is called Nandje? . . .'

The young woman said nothing after this question. And Nand said to himself that he knew about Nandje. He was just like Bertha when she was small, but he was a boy. He smiled. Bertha was still concerned about him, bringing eggs for him every week. She had lots of chickens. Her husband fiddled about with the chicken run on Sundays. In the week he worked in town. You earn a lot more with that than with farming. He was a good man. But Bertha was good too. Was that Bertha standing beside him now, or was it Nandje? Yes, he had had no complaints about his children. Or about his wife, not by a long chalk. A person shouldn't brag, but he had always done pretty well, with the animals and with the land. It's just . . . It's just that a person is never . . . Isn't that so, Bertha, you know, don't you, child? Bertha? Isn't that so, Bertha? . . . Bertha, why don't you answer me? Bertha . . .

He wanted to turn over a bit. But he didn't have to. He saw without turning over. It wasn't Bertha. Nor was it the girl with the fresh apron.

But another woman was standing there now.

'It's true, man, it's true . . .'

And she opened and closed her eyes elegantly. Her face was very white, but you couldn't see what it looked like. But that didn't matter. She was dressed completely in black, like Marie Burgemeesters when she sits behind the curtain in the cool front room in the afternoons with her needlework. You don't see her sitting there unless you know. She's no longer young, but has perfect manners. One could not see this one here very well either, with her dress without an apron. But one could hear her speak in a deep voice, like the organ in church when it plays quietly with a kind of trill.

'It's true, man,' she said; 'with the pleasure of his eyes alone a person won't make fat soup.'

She spoke daintily, like the tenant farmers' daughters who've been to boarding school. She kept opening and closing her eyes: always a white spot and a dark spot, so that it began to tire Nand out. He closed his eyes too, and there was just the beautiful blue darkness. He had to laugh a bit at this. It was as if he had played a trick on that Marie Burgemeesters. 'Let her go on talking!' he thought . . . but he had to listen anyway, because what she said was sound, and as beautiful as a trembling organ during the consecration. And she said:

'With your eyes you would be nothing, if you had no ears: Nand, man, I'm your Ears. I always have been, although you didn't know. But I don't hold that against you, since you always used your hearing well. And it has given you pleasure, has it not?'

'Think about it: whether old or young, you always lay awake for a long time listening for the cock to crow, the sign that you had to get up for work. And it was only on Monday morning, when your head was a bit heavy from the pints of beer, that you didn't lie and listen, and in the winter, when you didn't have to get up before dawn and the cockerel crowed in the middle of the night: then, already awake, you lay there for a bit and said: "Get lost!" but you heard the animals, which started getting restless in the shed, and you got up anyway, with gooseflesh on your calves from the cold, so that the hair stood on end . . . But in spring, when you lay waiting for the crowing of the cock, there was always a bird that kept you awake with its song. It's the bird that always has something to ask, one would say; or in rainy weather, the water bird that peeps like a pump. — Right, you're up. Now there are a hundred birds fighting and fussing in the trees, while the dew splashes down from them. Your wife's skirts wrap around her. While she makes coffee, you are already in the farmyard. The cow is trampling her straw; the goat is scratching itself on the wall of the shed; the pig's snout gives a wet snort under the half door. You go back to the house. Your wife stands in the doorway and calls: "Tee! Ti-ti-titi," and all the hens trip over themselves in their cackling rush, while the stately cock that lifts his legs high, gives a suspicious "Cock, cock, cock." And you hear all that, and you enjoy everything going so well. In the summer everyone has left for

work at that time. From flax harvesting time till after the oat harvest you have to be up early. And on the road you hear the echoing procession of the workmen, while it is still dark in the houses. Every so often they stop and there is a long, beautiful call, on their way, to upbraid their mates who have not come out yet. And where they walk on the paths, the flax rustles, or they make the grain rustle and shake it loudly with their hands. And in no time at all there is the singing fall of the pickaxe; you hear the whetstone shimmer over the steel, and from afar the jolly hammer sounds. In autumn weather, it is later in the morning that the rain patters against your window. You're not in such a hurry, although the cock crowed a while ago.—“The cock will soon grow hoarse from this weather,” you think, and you pull your trousers on. You stay in the house a bit later now, and you lounge about. Now you hear the noises inside the house better: the children gabbling or shouting before they go to school; your wife washing up in the sloshing water. She tells you something. Then you go and thresh in your barn, and the flail thuds in time with a glad force. Or you need to winnow, or to sieve with the sieve that hangs from the loft; and then you hear the grains falling like hail on to the tarpaulin. In the stall next door the pig snores and sighs. On the manger sit the pigeons behind their screen, stamping their feet and cooing. —And isn't it true, in the winter the morning has no sound, and you can't hear the snow . . .

‘But at midday!—When, in May, you come home at midday: hark how your wife sings as she strikes the churning pole. Not much is said at table, because you're eating. But it's May, and so children come, or old duffers and they carry the Maypole with the paper flowers and the basket of eggs, and they sing *Jesus the lovely Maypole*. They come at noon, because the farmer is at home too then. And then the song is over, then they are given their two eggs. After the meal it's time for relaxing. But it's only when the hay has been piled up, that leisure time comes. You lie on your belly in the cold grass; on your belly because of the bumblebees. They buzz around your ear till it hurts. At first you can't sleep, but in the end they buzz you to sleep. And then you don't hear the snoring of the others anymore, who are lying there in the orchard, but you yourself snore so loud, that you start awake.—Do you remember? In the approaching autumn you hear, while you're eating your lunch, the apples falling with a sweet thud out of the silent tree into the lush grass. A little later, the children start hitting with pitchforks or poking with long bean poles in the walnut tree, so that the thick foliage rustles loudly and the nuts tumble down like marbles. And it will become the time when, while you are eating in the cowshed the cow will start lowing for food. Because the animals will be inside now, because of the wet, and because winter is coming on. And in winter when you come home, at midday, it is not your wife that you hear singing in the distance: it is the Christmas pig squealing and choking under the slaughterer's big knife. You are quickly there: you hear the hair being singed off; you hear the hard scrubbing-brush over the skin; you hear the plentiful splashing of water. Once the opened-up animal is hanging on the ladder, you can go to eat, and tomorrow, Sunday, there will be chops.

‘And as it gets towards evening . . . —Do you remember, do you remember, Nand, what it's like, when it's gradually getting towards summer, and you can sit at the door for a bit with your pipe? Evarist was already courting your Bertha. You liked him. He was a bricklayer's mate, in town, he didn't drink. Drink wrecks everything; a drop of gin after High Mass on Sundays, and in the evening a couple of pints playing cards. When you're still young it's a bit different, then it's everyone's right to be drunk on occasion; but you must be able to leave it alone in time. Evarist didn't drink. In the evening he came from town, from a distance white with lime dust, on his bike that rattled gently closer. Then he would go and squat for a bit against an apple tree. Bertha was knitting by the doorway so that the needles clashed together. They chatted very sweetly. The sky whispered. Bertha laughed, so that it was like a glow. And the cows came back from the meadow, quietly lowing . . . You crept into the pig sty. Wanne, your wife was already there; she had already heard the sow squeaking, sighing and whining. You turned on the globe lamps: the sow was not yet giving birth. But you stayed with Wanne and you even played a game of cards whispering there in the straw. Then the sow, lying on her back, with her closed eyes from which water ran, groaned a

little louder and, suddenly gave a loud “oh!”; it was the first piglet. After that everything went smoothly; she gave a few more short squeals; she stamped with her front feet and made the straw crackle; then she just rolled about a bit and snuffled her young ones with her wet snout. She had fourteen. Wanne stayed with her for a bit to make sure she didn’t have a turn. You went outside. The whole heavens were singing loudly with the song of a nightingale, to which you would listen all your life . . . —But it is especially in late summer that the evening is loud. All the ponds of the chateau are croaking with frogs; it is as if those creatures like living with rich people. With the poor it’s the cricket, the clattering cricket who does not live far from his winter lodgings. But it is the flax-harvesters who in the evening distance ring out most beautifully, when a section is finished and they sing happily on their work in the moonlight, and together they answer the question “Shall we eat the harvest porridge?” with a long, high-pitched “Yes!” in the affirmative to the skies. At St John the children crow like young cocks. And later, all the grain is picked: when the folk come in from the fields, all the red evening sun on the glistening sweat of their bare chests, then you hear them coming on their rough clogs and their singing blares out: “And there’s still oil in it, oil in it!” . . . Now all the mosquitoes swarm, the mosquitoes are razor sharp. It is a sign that the evening is soon going to be quiet.

‘But in autumn it is not quiet. You are indoors, in the approaching darkness, and the harsh wind blows under the door up against your trouser legs. You hear it swirling in the chimney and shaking the cowshed doors. It can yell like a woman in labour, and rage like the village policeman when he’s drunk. And he is quite often drunk! . . . And the children listen. But they are content to play school. You hear that they have to say “Sister” to Bertha. You hear that Bertha beats in time on the back door, at which the others say: “Ba, be, bi, bo, bu” But you hear your wife say: “I’ll light the lamp: then we won’t hear the wind so much.” So, winter comes into the land, sad because you always hear it raining so. I know, it can do no harm, and everything is harvested, but if you have to go to the animals, which are restless because their evening feed, you have to put a jute sack on top of your waistcoat, and you hear your clogs squelching along. But the beautiful time of song from Christmas Eve to Twelfth Night! “O star, O star, whither shall we go?”; and when the carol was over, it was suddenly very quiet. And “We three kings of Orient are” . . . I can see from your mouth, Nand: it’s as if you were there . . .

‘Because isn’t it true, Nand, think about it: you enjoyed all that. I know full well you weren’t a great farmer, but a man is a man, and has pleasure from his ears. You may not have been much more than a cowherd, but . . . !

‘Isn’t that foolish woman going to stop soon?’ it began going round in Nand’s head. ‘With all her words in my ears it’s as if a spider were running round in my head. It’s as if I had nothing but my ears. Isn’t it just as if I . . . ?’—It now went on and on, like a bobbin, a bobbin that plays across the loom. ‘Isn’t it as if a person can do nothing else . . . ?’ It turned into a jumble of the same repeated words in his tired head, constantly confused. He tried to put them in order. He wanted to say it carefully with his own lips. He could no longer hear that Marie Burgemeesters. He had to say with concentration: ‘Just as if I blooming well can’t do anything but . . .’

Then he was suddenly startled by a loud laugh.