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Nepvriendjes

It’s been said that the Dutch are some of the happiest people in the world, and you don’t need a lot of charts and graphs to prove this: watch the way small children sing and clap on the fronts of their parents’ bicycles, just as yours did, their faces lit up with cold and delight, and you’ll realize the answer is right there in front of you on the Nassaukade. The Nassaukade is a canal street that runs through a residential neighborhood just outside of Amsterdam’s central canal ring. It is minutes away from the tourists but noticeably quieter, marked by a flower stall here, a night shop there. On the corner of the Nassaukade where DeClercqstraat meets the Rozengracht, there is a shop called De Sterk; Google gives it 4.8 stars out of five and calls it, inexplicably, a “cold cut store.” You never attempted to buy cold cuts there, though they probably existed. But it was your corner store for quite awhile and you would often pull over in the late evening after work, parking your bike out front to run in for a few things.

“Goeie avond,” the woman behind the counter would trill. Her voice was clear and distinctive and loud, her hair bleached blonde past the point at which it should have been grey. She looked like someone who back in the day sang with Andre Hazes, the old Dutch folk singer, or at minimum did a great rendition of *Zij Gelooft in Mij* when closing down her local pub. Her name may have been Geerta, or Magda; you don’t remember. Let’s call her Lotte.

“Goeie avond,” Lotte would say.

“Goeie avond,” you’d say, affecting your best Amsterdamse accent, so guttural and unattractive but such fun to roll around your mouth. “Alles goed?”

“Alles goed, mevrouw,” Lotte would say, beginning to ring up your groceries, baptizing each item, approval in her voice.

“Lekker appelflaap,” Lotte would say—delicious apple turnover, your favorite.

“Lekker kersenflaap,” she’d add—delicious cherry turnover, your husband’s favorite.

“Lekker gevulde koeken,” Lotte would say—almond cookies, for your children.

“Lekker koffie. Lekker melk.” Everything you’d eat for breakfast the next morning would be laid out on the counter, and anyone standing behind you waiting to pay would know all about it. You made a point not to buy your tampons there. “Lekker tampon,” doesn’t sound good in any language.

“Negen euro vijfenvijftig,” Lotte would say—nine euros fifty-five cents.

“Mag ik pinnen?” you’d ask—“Can I pin?” Long before Americans were in the habit of using debit cards, the Dutch slid their chip cards into readers and entered pin codes on the tiny machines. It felt like the future because it was the future. You loved pinning; it made you a local.

“Natuurlijk, mevrouw,” Lotte would say, gripping the waxy paper pastry bags with her long fingernails and placing them delicately atop the bag of coffee and the carton of milk.

You’d gather your groceries and say goodnight to Lotte—“Een fijne avond,” she’d cry out to you in return, the bell ringing over your head as you stepped into the night.

There wouldn’t be many small children on bikes this time of night. They were home by now, eating *stamppot*, singing little Dutch nursery rhymes in the bath, settling into pajamas decorated with pictures of Nijntje, the unsmiling bunny. The light from their bedroom windows bounced off the canals below, creating a shimmering light show; it looked as though the houseboats were dancing in a sea of tiny candles. Every once in awhile a boat would cruise by—colleagues out for a ride after work; a couple with a bottle of wine onboard. Once, in the deepest part of a very cold winter night, the canals finally froze over and you saw a solitary ice skater making looping figure eights, her hands held loosely behind her back. It was the most effortless and lovely thing you could imagine. By the time you bought yourself skates the next day, the ice was already starting to melt. You had missed your chance.

The cobbles under your wheels made your old bike bounce as you rode along, its loose bell jangling ever so quietly. You had a little headlight that gained more power the faster you pedaled, and you liked to keep it bright, on general principal. Some of the bridges were curved enough that you had to stand up on your pedals to get up and over, and then you’d fly down the back side, merging with other cyclists on their way home. When you think of it now you can feel the thrum of the machine under your weight, your legs pumping and pushing, your body swaying side to side. Just seeing a map of Amsterdam brings those sensations back, that tingle in your legs so like biting into a madeleine.

When you stepped off your bicycle, you’d swing your right leg over the low bar and perch it by your left leg on the left pedal. You’d ride the last ten, twelve, fifteen feet like that, both feet together, standing on one pedal, feeling graceful and strong, before stepping off and hoisting your bike up and in between the bars of the rack across the Nassaukade from your apartment. You’d turn the key on the speed lock, pull the chain lock out of your saddle bag and wrap it swiftly around the bars. Tap-tap-tap—the boots you bought in Den Haag clicked across the street and you’d push the door open and walk up five flights of stairs. The first few flights you could fly up, but then you’d be breathless and slow, so you learned to pace yourself and arrive at the top with enough air left to open the door and greet your husband quietly. He’d be watching “The Wire,” and if he were homesick for America that week he’d be eating a Snickers bar or nacho cheese Doritos, the two American junk foods you could reliably find next to the aisles and aisles of black licorice and ribbon candy. You could hear the children breathing softly in their sleep. You’d put the milk in the fridge, the pastries on the counter, the coffee in the cupboard. You’d look out the window and across the canal to the bar that you never went to but liked looking at. You liked seeing people out there late into the night, their movement comforting, their laughter like the sound of rain against the window. You’d force your husband to turn off “The Wire,” put down the junk food, climb quietly into bed, hold hands, talk. It would be morning before long, and you’d hear the rattle of bikes from five floors up, hear the sound of the children on the front of the bikes, singing.

Of course, your children weren’t on the front of your bike, and they weren’t breathing softly when you arrived home. You didn’t buy them gevulde koeken—you invented that part. Your children weren’t yet born when you lived in Amsterdam. Your husband wasn’t there either, come to think of it—or, that is to say, he was there, but he wasn’t your husband yet. It’s hard for you to remember a time before he was your husband. It’s hard for you to think of him as anything but that. And it’s impossible to imagine that the two of you had a life together in a country far away that didn’t include your children. In your imagination, you spent mornings at the playground a block from your apartment. Your daughter greeted the man at the flower market, helped you choose ranunculus in the spring, perhaps a bouquet of colorful leaves and berries in the fall. Your son toddled around the Albert Heijn grocery store, reaching for yogurt or apples or a jar of crunchy *pindakaas*, his pudgy fingers exploring every shelf and every fallen grape in the produce aisle. They were in the pockets of your warm winter coat, your children, or perched on the windowsill, tiny legs swinging, eating almond cookies. They were your *nepvriendjes*—your imaginary friends. Your children weren’t there, but when you lived there you didn’t know they weren’t there, because there was no hole where they should be. It is only now that you feel the hole, a hole like a missing tooth that your tongue wants to worry. You never sang *Zij Gelooft in Mij* to close down your local pub, but if you had it would have been for them. The lyrics are “Zij gelooft in mij. Zij ziet toekomst in ons allebei.” Loose translation: “She believes in me. She sees a future for us together.” You did; you do. It feels like the future because it is the future.