

SAMPLE TRANSLATION: THE BURLAP HOUSE BY ANNET HUIZING

4 chapters: 1, 2, 21 & 23

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1.

My father can cycle with just one leg. But then he only has one leg. Or a leg and a half, to be precise. He can cycle with one leg while carrying a baby in a carrier on his chest and leaning his crutches on the handlebar.

I never saw him carrying a baby, because I was that baby, so it's something he told me about. He likes to tell me about it. As if he had won the world championship in cycling-with-one-leg-while-carrying-a-baby.

'You should have seen me', is how he always begins. 'I would take you on the bicycle to the day care centre. Everyone would stand and stare. Some mothers told me straight to my face that I was being irresponsible. Ir-re-sponsible, with such a young baby. What if I fell? But I never fell. Why would I?'

'But most of them were impressed, right?'

'Sure, they would crowd around me, those women. I still had a great head of hair at the time.'

'And did they also look at me?' I know what he'll say, but I want to hear him say it.

'Oh yes, Ole, you were such an endearing child with your beautiful red curls.'

And then, if I remain silent for a moment, he adds: 'You're still a great guy of course.'

That's what I mean.

My dad was born that way, with a leg and a half.

'Bad genes', is what he always says. 'Arie didn't turn out well either, but I was already on the way before my parents noticed. They would never had started on a second child, otherwise.'

'But I've got some of the same genes, right?' I once asked. We had just learned about DNA and heredity in school.

'Indeed, but you worked out wonderfully. That's why we left it at one. We figured we had used up all the good genes.' He loved to laugh at that, so I laughed along.

My mother was forty-five when I came along. A big surprise, is what she calls me. You could also say, a big accident. She doesn't say so, but I do. But accident or not, here I am. My father was fifty-five at the time. Now he's sixty-eight and retired. People who don't know us usually take him for my grandfather. They really do. I like that, sometimes, since I don't have a grandfather. No grandpas and no grandmas. My parents were both orphaned at a young age. At least, that's what they told me.

Once in school, we had this family project where Amelie told us all about her stepsisters and half-brothers and her mother's new husband, so now she had four grandpas and grandmas and a whole train load of uncles and aunts and cousins, and that her mother sometimes took in sorry foster children as well. Even more annoying were the photographs she showed us, of all these people seated at long tables in the orchard on a farm owned by one of the grandfathers down south, with bottles of wine and jugs of lemonade. Even though her parents were divorced, everyone still got along with everyone. Our teacher fluttered with her hands saying it made her feel 'so emotional'. 'It's so wonderful!' she said.

After that it was our turn to draw our family tree and to paste in photographs of family members. And, said the teacher, it really did-not-matter-at-all if you had a small family. Really not. Small could be very cosy. Especially cosy. Yeah, right.

I just made up a wife and six children for my uncle Arie. I printed out four photographs of elderly people from the internet, as my grandparents. That's where I messed up, because one of the photos was of a certain George Clooney, who turned out to be a famous American actor. My parents had to come to school to talk to the teacher. She thought it was abnormal for me to be inventing these things, and thought that I should see a psychologist. My mother told her it was just a phase and that she would have a serious talk with me.

And she did. 'I promised the teacher that I would talk to you. It wasn't very smart of you. George Clooney! He's at least 10 years younger than your father. So how could he be your granddad?'

'He's got grey hair. And he looks like a nice guy.'

'He sure is nice. And the same age as me. If I didn't have your father, well, I wouldn't hesitate.' She giggled.

My parents didn't tell the teacher that Arie doesn't have a wife or any children. Arie probably doesn't even know how people have babies. Good thing he doesn't know.

'But let's be serious for a moment, Ole. Don't do this sort of stuff', my mother had said. 'Just don't do it. You really don't need that.'

2.

Then it turned out that I did have a granddad all those years, after all. Just one. But I only found out the day he died. Or actually the day after, on the second of January.

My dad and I had to undecorate the Christmas tree. 'A real man's job,' my mother had said. Which was nonsense, since she would tell us exactly how to do it. But now she was sitting on the sofa, reading, as we stuffed all the ornaments into boxes without wrapping them separately.

We were just untangling the string of lights when my father's phone barked. I change his ring tone from time to time without him knowing it. Then when the phone rings, he looks around wildly in surprise. But he was already used to the dog so he simply answered the phone.

'Piet Akkerman... Yes, that's me... Oh I see... Well thank you... When did... Yes... Right... Right... No... So he was... Hmm... Alright... Clear.'

Then he listened quietly for a bit. I tried to imagine what it was about. I stuffed the lights into a bag. The string always gets tangled up anyway, no matter how neatly you try to roll it up. So it makes more sense to only untangle it when it's time to decorate the tree. But that's typically a male argument, my mother says. Which is nonsense again, since it actually makes very good sense.

'When's the funeral?' my father asked.

Startled, I looked at him.

My mother stopped reading.

Dad smiled at us, shook his head and gave us a thumbs up. 'Not?' he said to the telephone. 'Oh right, that's just like him,' he added shortly after. 'Well that just makes things easier. Thank you for calling... Yes, yes, best wishes to you too.'

'Who was that?' I asked.

My father continued to stare at his telephone.

'Who died?' my mother asked.

'The civil notary.'

'Notary? We don't know any notary, do we?' said my mother.

'It was the notary calling, about the old man.'

'Old man? Which old man?' I asked.

'My err... my err... my father. He died yesterday. On New Year's Day.'

'Huh? Your father? He died? I thought he died ages ago!'

My father looked at my mother. She didn't seem very shocked but just said 'oh'. And then: 'Well alright then.'

My father didn't speak.

'Dad, come on, say something. What's this all about?'

'Well.... It's all quite simple, really.'

Silence again.

I wanted to say something, but my mother signalled I should keep quiet. It took a while before my father spoke again.

'It's all quite simple. He was a horrible person. For me and for Arie. So he no longer existed for us. There you have the whole story.'

The whole story? 'But why? And why did you never tell me? You lied to me all those years. You've lied to me all my life. So I did have a goddam grandpa after all! I had a grandfather and you never told me.'

I was bursting with anger and felt like kicking his one good leg.

'We don't curse in this household,' my father said. He sat down next to my mother on the sofa and looked at the Christmas tree.

'Mom, why don't you say something?'

'It's your father's choice not to talk about it. We need to respect that.'

Respect that, right! While she always insists that we talk about everything. She'll pull the words out of your mouth if she needs to.

'But he's *my* grandfather! Where did he live?' I looked at my father. He was still staring at the tree.

'Brabant, he lived in Brabant,' my mother said.

'So you knew he was still alive too, you even knew where he lived. Why didn't you tell me? So you've always lied to me as well!'

'I wouldn't put it that way,' she said. 'We wanted to protect you.'

'Protect me? How come?'

'Well that's the point, your father doesn't want to stir it all up again.'

'But it's still my grandfather, right?'

'Yes sweetie, that's true, but...'. She pulled me close to her.

I hate it when she calls me 'sweetie'.

I wrestled free and wanted to go to my room. I turned around at the door. 'When is the funeral? And where? I want to know. It's my right to know.' I wasn't sure about that last bit, but I wanted to see my grandfather. In his coffin. I was going to go, no matter what. Even though I had never seen a dead person before.

'Right, Piet, when is the funeral? Or will he be cremated?' my mother asked.

My father stood up, removed the spire from the Christmas tree and added it to the bag with the lights. Guaranteed to break when we pull those lights out again, next Christmas.

'Piet?'

'No funeral. He left his body to science.'

'Now what does that mean?' I asked.

'It's for medical students,' my mother said. 'So they can practice surgery skills and so on. They conserve the body so that it keeps well for a while, and then...'

'That's awful, please stop. I wish you hadn't said that.' I tried hard not to picture it. If I were to become a medical student, I might just bump into my grandpa that way. So horrible. Good thing I wasn't planning on becoming a doctor.

'There's nothing we need to do, they've already collected the body,' my father said. He closed the boxes containing Christmas balls and stacked them up.

'So where is he now?' I asked.

'At some university, I guess, in a kind of refrigerator.'

'With no clothes on?'

'How should I know? And I don't care either.'

'Does Arie know?' Mom asked.

'Perhaps they covered him with a white sheet,' I said. They weren't listening.

'I'll go to Arie now,' My father took the car keys, and holding his crutches he grabbed the top of the Christmas tree. He walked out the room, dragging the tree with him as he went. It left a trail of needles on the floor.

At the door he turned around. 'By the way, there is an inheritance. We inherited the house in Brabant.'

The Christmas tree got jammed in the doorway.

That same afternoon I tried to hear my mother out. We were in the attic, where I had to help her hang up the laundry. She only knew that the house was somewhere around Orpel, near the Belgian border, in the east of Brabant. She had never been there, and had never met my grandfather.

'Your father never told me much either. He wanted to break completely with the past. We started with a clean slate after we met.' She flapped a towel with a bang before hanging it on the line. 'We wanted to reinvent ourselves, you know what I mean?'

'No I don't, it sounds ridiculous.'

I felt that she knew much more than she was telling me now.

'We live in the present.' She flapped another towel. 'Don't stay stuck in the past, don't dream about the future, but concentrate your mind on the present moment.'

My mother could say sensible things sometimes, but now she was really prattling.

'Buddha,' she added.

What good is that bloody Buddha to me now?

'And what does your Buddha say about lying?' I flapped a kitchen towel with a bang.

She seemed startled. 'Come, let's have a cup of tea.'

'I don't want tea.'

'Looking back now, perhaps we didn't make all the right choices, I admit it. How about a hug?' She opened her arms wide.

'Not for a while.'

21.

I began to gather saliva while getting my bicycle from the shed. I waved to Anastazja, on her way to Dutch language lessons, and slowly cycled through the village. By the time I reached the cafeteria I had gathered enough for a serious gob. I slowed down even further. The men were hanging out on the street, as usual. I looked their way. But as luck would have it, this time Sjef didn't clear his throat. He didn't take his cigar from his mouth either. I did have a mouth full of spit, however, so I spat it out anyway, right in front of his feet. The spit was a bit watery, so it didn't quite work as intended, and part of it dribbled down my chin. It was a smallish puddle, not a nice shiny gob. I looked straight ahead and kept biking. I didn't wipe my chin until I was out of sight.

Bollocks. I should have practiced more.

I had already passed the sign GODBEY when I heard a moped coming up behind me. The kind that makes this whining sound. I had sometimes heard it passing by at night, if it was wind still. The driver honked, so I steered closer to the side of the road. He honked again, and slowed down. He seemed to want to stay on my tail. Don't turn to look, I thought. Just look straight ahead and keep biking. He was right behind me now. I was cycling almost off the road, so he could easily overtake me. But he didn't. Cars were passing on the road, so he couldn't do anything to me here. But if I turned off the road and into the forest...

The moped drew up next to me. I looked sideways and saw that it was Sjef. With his cigar still firmly in his mouth. Here's trouble, I thought.

'Just stop for a second!' He lay his hand on my arm. 'I'm not going to eat you!'

My legs froze. I had to get off my bicycle. Cars continued to pass on the road. There's nothing he can do to you here, I kept reminding myself. Nothing at all. But I did get off my bike on the right-hand side, keeping the bicycle between us.

Sjef switched off the moped, took the cigar from his mouth and looked down. 'My old lady just gave me hell,' he said. He grinned. 'She is one tough lady, got me wrapped around her finger!' He looked around, as if he didn't want anyone to see us talking. 'She said there's nothing you can do about it.' 'Do about what?'

Sjef looked past me now, at the pastures. He actually didn't look so menacing now.

'That your granddad... how shall I put it ...'

'Was a terrible person?'

Sjef turned red. He spat on the ground. 'Your dad must have told you.'

I nodded.

'We were glad the redhead died. What a roughneck. And even more treacherous than his rotten Alsatian. Quite a few people in the village would have loved to put him down. And I mean your granddad, not the dog.'

'You too?'

'My old lady wouldn't let me, she's very strict.' He grinned again. 'Did you ever meet your grandfather? Your dad just suddenly disappeared, along with Arie – nobody knew where he'd gone. The police were too scared to pay the redhead a visit. The last copper who tried ended up in hospital with a dog bite in his arse. Which, I admit, we did think was pretty funny.'

He paused for a moment and then looked me straight in the face. It was the first time I clearly saw his eyes.

'You don't know, do you? You don't know the first thing about your granddad. Don't bother denying it, I can tell by looking at you. Your dad never told you. And I don't blame him.'

'I know he smuggled butter.'

'Everyone was a smuggler, boy.'

'You too?'

'No I couldn't. Our dad was a customs inspector, so his job was to catch the smugglers. But as a child I secretly crossed the border once or twice with a burlap. Just for the thrill of it. But when my father found out, there was hell to pay.'

Burlap. That's the word the doctor had used too.

'So did you smuggle Burlaps, then?'

Sjef laughed. 'Oh boy, you really are still wet behind the ears, aren't you? A burlap is a kind of bag. They would stuff the contraband into a burlap bag and carry it across their shoulder, walking the forest paths across the border to Belgium. They used the word 'juting' for the whole business. That was before they starting smuggling butter big time, using cars and lorries.' He paused again. 'Which is when the trouble really started.'

'What trouble?'

'No, it's probably better for you not to know. As my wife said, the kid can't help it.'

I didn't dare ask what I couldn't help.

'How about Arie, how's he?'

'He's living in a home in Driebergen.'

'They should have taken the poor kid away from the redhead, along with Piet, but no one dared intervene. And no one figured that the cripple... err, your father would suddenly disappear like that. He was just sixteen, mind you. We were in the same class.'

I nodded as if that was old news. Sjef looked a lot older than my father.

'So what did my grandfather do exactly?' I asked.

'That's a long story, and very long ago. You don't want to know it. But why did your father come back?'

'We couldn't sell the house. And we were short on money.' I realised my dad wouldn't have wanted me to share that information.

Sjef didn't react to it. 'Well boy, good luck to you then. I need to get home, or my old lady will throw a fit.'

'You don't live in Orpel?' I asked.

He pointed to a few farms some way off the road, near the edge of the forest. 'That's where I live, on the Agnes farm. That's my wife's name, you see. She runs a small shop there. You should come for an ice cream, it's much better than what they sell at the cafeteria. She makes it herself. Best choose the apricot ice cream, made with our own apricots. Our goat's cheese is good too. So take care!'

'Take care,' I said, but he had already started up the whining moped.

The next day I looked at Sjef as I cycled past the men on the street. He nodded the faintest of nods. And he didn't spit as I passed.

23.

I couldn't see anything in the mirror, but my cheek felt as if it was on fire. I had gotten slapped in the face. Just like you sometimes see in a movie. It sounded exactly like that, too.

I had spent the whole afternoon in the library. The librarian, who was a man with a huge belly and a grey pony tail, had said that there were no books on the smuggling of butter. If I really wanted to find out more about it, I should look at old newspapers. Newspapers from between 1950 and 1970, since that was the golden age of smuggling.

'Is it for a school assignment?' he asked.

'Something like that,' I said. 'Where do you keep the old newspapers?'

'You're not entirely up to date, are you? They are all online of course. Did you bring a laptop?' He showed me a website where you can search old newspapers.

I didn't understand how it worked at first, but he was willing to explain. 'It isn't really my job,' he said. 'If I had to explain to every child how everything works, I wouldn't have time for anything else.'

He showed me which information I could search for and how, but I was a bit distracted by his fingers. They were so pudgy that I was amazed he could type at all.

'And here's me thinking that young people nowadays are so good at handling computers.' He walked back to the counter. His pony tail bounced from left to right.

I entered 'smuggling butter' and the years and clicked on SEARCH. Nothing happened at first, but then a list of newspaper articles appeared.

FLEEING SMUGGLER SHOT IN FOOT

It was a short piece about the road spikes produced by Theo K. Just as Imke had said. It seems it was big news at the time, since another newspaper reported the same story. And an Amsterdam-based newspaper had an interview with a customs officer:

CUSTOMS OFFICERS LOATHE ROAD SPIKES

According to the customs officer:

'The whole region is terrorised by them. They strew the road with road spikes by throwing them out in big glass jars, or whole boxes at a time. There's nothing you can do about it. The

driver pulls a lever and there goes another box of road spikes. You can evade them if you're driving at 30 km per hour. While the smuggler drives off at 130 km per hour. Laughing all the way.'

The customs officer said that strewing the road with road spikes was equal to attempted manslaughter, though it had not resulted in fatal accidents so far. I could understand the thrill of smuggling.

ARMoured CARS RACE ACROSS THE BORDER AT NIGHT ,

I read.

NOTORIOUS SMUGGLING CAR AGAIN SMASHES THROUGH ROAD BLOCK

And:

HAVE OFFICERS FINALLY CAUGHT THE REAL 'GHOST CAR' – OR NOT?

There was also an article describing how a lorry had evaded customs officers by driving straight through the doors of a barn. I really didn't see why my father was being so difficult. I wished I could have been a part of that! The lorry had loaded 4000 kilos of butter, and the customs officers had surrounded the loading site. They had even parked an old car filled with sandbags in front of the barn. But the lorry simply knocked it aside and took off with part of the garden fence stuck to its bumper. The customs officers didn't shoot to avoid killing people.

I downloaded the articles onto my laptop. Then I searched for 'Burlap House Orpel'. It turned up one brief article, in the *Oost-Brabants Nieuwsblad*.

POLICE RAID THE 'BURLAP HOUSE'

Police in Orpel last Tuesday raided the smithy at Grensweg, locally known as the Burlap House. The owner, Piet A., was suspected of producing large quantities of road spikes and selling them to smugglers. The police did not find anything unusual.

'Found what you were looking for?' The librarian was suddenly standing next to me, peering at my

screen.

I could feel my head turning red. 'Err, yes, I think I have enough information now, thanks,' I said and quickly closed my laptop.

'You know,' he said while he looked around, 'we don't like it much in Orpel. Digging up the past. The more you stir in shit, the more it starts to stink, is what we say around here.'

It made me think of our outdoor loo. 'What starts to stink, then?'

'Things happened here. Between families, even within families. This butter smuggling business may sound fun and exciting now, but people spent months in prison, and some even got killed. There was a boy from Orpel who went smuggling for the first time. Others had convinced him to cross the border just once in order to make some quick money. Just once. He didn't want his friends to think he didn't dare. And then he got shot and died. His parents have never been able to talk about it.'

The librarian paused for a moment. 'You had better not rake up the past.'

I arrived home at five thirty.

'Where were you?' my dad asked.

'Just. Doing homework with Anastazja in the library,' I said.

'Oh really, that's very interesting,' he said.

'How so?'

'Anastazja passed by here to pick up a book.'

'Right, and after that she came to the library.'

He looked at me, shaking his head. 'You are lying, Ole. You are standing here, lying straight to my face. Unbelievable.'

'Well that's interesting, coming from you.'

'Wait, what do you mean by that, "coming from you"?''

'You even lied your own father to death.'

And then... whack... he slapped me in the face. For a moment I saw stars, just like in a comic strip, and I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

My father sagged back down on the kitchen chair, dropping his crutches and clutching his hands to his face. 'Oh what did I do, what did I do ...'

'It's OK, I'm not bleeding.'

My cheek was glowing but it didn't really hurt. My mother would probably have been furious with my father. She's always going on about non-violent communication.

He sat quietly now, but still leaning forward, his hands covering his face. I made coffee and poured

him a mug.

'Thank you,' he said softly. And then, 'I'm so sorry, Ole. I don't know how to make it up to you. I wish your mother was here.'

But that would take another forty-nine days.

'Shall we start cooking dinner?' I asked.

He didn't ask again where I had spent the afternoon.