Author of *The Twin*, Winner of the
International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award

June

Gerbrand Bakker

Contents

Piccaninny
Gravel
Ledge
Radio
Straw
Walking Stick
Oh Happy Day
Walking Stick
Chestnut
Straw
Chestnut
Gravel
Nature Reserve
Shit
Barn
Straw
Fish
Straw
Toasting
Dinner
Shit
Bedtime
Digging
Calling
Sitting
Flirting
Swearing
Jumping

About the Book

On a hot summer's day in June 1969 everyone is gathered to welcome Queen Juliana.

The young boys and girls wave their flags enthusiastically. But just as the monarch is getting into her car to leave, little Hanne Kaan and her mother arrive late – the Queen strokes the little girl's cheek and regally offers Anna Kaan her hand.

It would have been an unforgettable day of celebration if only the baker hadn't been running late with his deliveries and knocked down Hanne, playing on the roadside, with his brand-new VW van.

Years later, Jan Kaan arrives on a hot day in June in order to tidy his sister's grave, and is overcome again with grief and silent fury. Isn't it finally time to get to the bottom of things? Should the permit for the grave be extended? And why won't anyone explain to his little niece Dieke why grandma has been lying up in the hayloft for a day and a half, nursing a bottle of Advocaat and refusing to see anyone?

June traces in spellbinding, tender detail how the ripples from one tragic incident spread through a community, a family and down the generations.

About the Author

Gerbrand Bakker worked as a subtitler for nature films before becoming a gardener. His debut novel *The Twin* won the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. In 2013 his novel, *The Detour*, won the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize.

Also by Gerbrand Bakker

The Twin
The Detour

June

Gerbrand Bakker

Translated from the Dutch
by
David Colmer

Harvill *Secker*
LONDON

Headline Material

‘WE’RE ALMOST IN Slootdorp,’ the driver says. ‘That’s where the next mayor takes over.’

She looks out. Fields stretching away in broad bands on either side. Squat farmhouses with red-tiled roofs. Thank goodness it’s not raining. Her view to the right is partly blocked by C. E. B. Röell, who is reading papers presumably related to their next destination. She takes off her gloves, lays them on her lap and flicks open the ashtray. Röell starts to huff. Ignore it. They’re not even halfway yet, but it already feels like they’ve been on the road for most of the day. Once she’s lit her cigarette and is drawing on it deeply, she sees the driver’s eyes shining in the rear-view mirror. She knows that he would love to light up too, and if Röell weren’t in the car, he would.

After a fairly early start in Soestdijk, the morning had been dedicated to the former island of Wieringen, where they made the unforgivable misjudgement of starting her itinerary by presenting her with a table covered with shrimp. At half past ten in the morning. Although the inappropriateness had actually begun even earlier, when the mayor had his own daughters present the flowers while his wife pretended she couldn’t see the little children standing on the dyke around the harbour. After that, more schoolchildren and old-age pensioners – the inevitable schoolchildren and old-age pensioners. Still, it’s just a Tuesday, a normal working day. In the town hall, a special council meeting was held in her honour. Most of the mayor’s speech passed her by, thinking ahead as she was to this evening and the *Piet Hein*, and when she took a distracted

sip of her coffee it tasted more or less like the mayor's words. The woman who had been commissioned to make a bronze bust of her was there too.

'What was that nun's name again?' she asks.

'Jezuolda Kwanten. Not a nun, a sister.' Röell doesn't look up, sticking doggedly to her reading. A brief summary will follow shortly.

Jezuolda Kwanten – of Tilburg – who had stared at her keenly for almost half an hour, occasionally sketching something on a large sheet of yellowish paper, thus making it even more difficult to follow the mayor's lecture. She's in the car behind hers, with Beelaerts van Blokland and Van der Hoeven. Couldn't they have arranged that differently? she wonders. Röell in the second car and Van der Hoeven in hers? He's a fellow smoker. Jezuolda Kwanten is going to be present at all of the festivities, the whole day long: looking at her, measuring her up, sketching her. Not just today, but tomorrow too. When even being photographed is something she detests. And all for the sake of 'art', which will turn her into a 'bust'.

They drive into a village that is made up entirely of new houses. There are remarkably few people out on the streets and virtually no flags being waved.

'Slootdorp,' the driver says.

'What's his name?' she asks.

'Omta,' says Röell.

A group of people are standing in front of a hotel called the Lely. A very small group. No schoolchildren and pensioners here, no flowers, pennants or shrimp. She gets out of the car and the man wearing the chain of office holds out his hand. 'Welcome to Wieringermeer,' he says.

'Good morning, Mr Omta,' she says.

'You're not stopping here at all,' he says.

'What a shame,' she says.

'I'll drive ahead of you to the district boundary. This, by the way, is my wife.'

She shakes the mayoress’s hand and climbs back into the car. Now, that’s her kind of man. No moaning, no dawdling, no look in the eyes as if to say, ‘Why aren’t you spending hours here with us?’ Did he actually call her ‘Your Majesty’? Or even ‘Ma’am’? The mayoress hadn’t wasted any words either, she’d simply curtseyed. In any case, from what she’s seen of Wieringermeer so far, she’s glad she won’t have to spend hours here. If that’s even possible. Omta has climbed into a blue car and driven off slowly in front of her, leaving his wife behind, looking somewhat lost outside the hotel. The gusty June wind plays havoc with her hair while a flag flutters overhead.

‘… sixteen ten,’ Röell reads aloud. ‘The Polder House, where we have our lunch appointment, dates from sixteen twelve. Cattle breeding in particular is highly developed here. Pedigree cattle. Mention should be made of the well-known herd of Miss A. G. Groneman, whose late uncle – it said father, but that’s been crossed out and replaced with uncle – was made a Knight of the Order of Orange-Nassau for his many contributions in this field.’

‘Will she be at the lunch?’

Röell picks up another document and mumbles quietly. A wisp of grey hair peeks out from under her yellow pillbox hat. ‘Yes,’ she says, after a while.

‘That’s sure to be entertaining. Miss. Never married, in other words.’

Röell gives her a short sharp look.

‘Have a glass yourself sometime,’ she says. ‘Instead of looking at me like that.’ Outside there are still long bands of fields and squat farmhouses, each identical to the next. The sun is shining, it must be about twenty-two degrees. Perfect weather for getting in and out of cars without a coat. Not too hot, not too cold. ‘Besides,’ she adds, ‘I’m a great cow-lover.’

It will look like this here for months to come. Of course, the crops will grow and be harvested, but still. Early spring

was and remains the most beautiful of the seasons. With different kinds of flowers coming up one after another in the palace gardens. Snowdrops around the beech trees, narcissus along the drive, snake's head in the small round border near the goods entrance. And a little later, of course, the first sweet peas in the greenhouse. The moment the leaves appear on the trees it starts to get rather boring, especially now the girls aren't running around on the lawn any more. Once the Parade has been and gone there isn't much to it. Unmitigated tedium until the first shades of autumn. 'Anything else of note?'

'This almost entirely agricultural district has entered a difficult phase recently, especially economically.'

'And why is that?'

'Not only because of the poor climatic conditions of recent years, but also due to the fact that prices and wages have increased, while the yield from their produce has not risen proportionally.'

'Oh, yes: prices, wages and yields. But everyone round here will still be out in their Sunday best when we arrive.'

'It also says that approximately ninety per cent of local businessmen have renovated or modernised their premises. The population has come to realise that to mark time is to fall behind and that progress is essential. And it goes without saying that forward thinking is the key to good government.'

'Absolutely. But they still said it.'

'Ah … council officials.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Nothing.'

'I'm quite curious as to what they will be serving for lunch.'

'Yes.'

No, she thinks, I definitely don't want to suffer this again. This time I'll say something. The Government Information Service doesn't need to be present in the vehicle in the form

of Röell. What on earth made them think I would prefer to travel in the same car as Röell rather than with Van der Hoeven? And perhaps Pappie would like to join me on a work trip again sometime soon.

Omta's blue car slows down and pulls over to stop behind a car parked on the roadside. The mayors get out simultaneously and shake hands. As the new mayor – 'Hartman,' Röell whispers – walks up to her car, the driver opens her door.

'Good afternoon, Your Majesty. Welcome to our district. Which, by the way, starts there.' He gestures at a bridge with white railings further down the road.

'Good afternoon, Mayor Hartman,' she says, doing her best to sound cheerful. 'I am delighted to be here for this – regrettably brief – visit.'

'Shall I lead the way?'

'Please.' As she gets back into the car, not forgetting to look at the driver, who invariably turns it into some kind of amateur theatrical performance, she notices her leather gloves lying on the back seat. She's already shaken two mayors' hands with hers bare. High time for a cigarette. Röell can scowl all she likes.

Balancing on the bridge railing are two boys in swimming trunks. One a redhead, the other brown-haired, both with their arms spread wide, fat drops of water falling from their elbows onto the freshly painted rail. When the car drives over the bridge, they jump, as if they've been waiting for that very moment. Grins on their faces. Apparently a royal visit doesn't interest them. Even if they did both look at the car before making the leap.

'Stone of help.'

'What?'

'Stone of help.'

'You've lost me.'

'That farm there. Eben-Ezer.'

The atmosphere here is very different. The countryside's older. The farms are more varied, the gardens more mature, the trees taller, the ditches full of water. Fewer crops, more cows. Ah, there's a shiny new van with the words *Blom's Breadery* on the side. The van is parked at an angle in front of a gleaming shop window bearing the same name. Apparently the baker is one of the ninety per cent of businessmen who have renovated and modernised. 'Breadery' is amusing. Modern too. She searches for shops that fall into the other ten per cent, but can't see any. Then she hears cheering and sees the crowd. She takes a deep breath and pulls on her gloves. Until lunch she won't shake a single hand with hers bare.

The driver opens the door. 'Your destination,' he says.

'Without any accidents,' she answers. She never addresses him by his Christian name.

Then everyone surrounds her again. Röell, of course, who has got out of the car unaided as the driver can't be everywhere at once. Van der Hoeven, Beelaerts van Blokland, Commissioner Kranenburg. Where's that nun got to? Is she still in the car? They won't lead her to tables full of shrimp or fish here; it's not a fishing village. Here, they're going to dance. She passes her handbag to Röell; she'll need to keep her hands free. The Polder House is a large farmhouse: whitewashed, with espaliered lindens out the front. She certainly can't get lost, there's only one possible route, right through a double line of children and mothers. Ah, there are two little ones with a bunch of flowers. The mayor tells her their names and she catches something about the butcher and the baker. These must be their children.

'Oh, thank you very much,' she says. 'What beautiful flowers, and so cleverly arranged. Did you do that yourselves?'

They stare at her as though she's speaking German.

‘Of course not,’ she says to make up for it. ‘The florist put it together, didn’t he?’

The girl nods bashfully, and she touches her gently on the cheek with a leather finger. The boy doesn’t look at her and the relieved children slip back into the crowd.

Aren’t these the very same children who were standing on the dyke this morning? The same heads of blond hair, the same bare knees and knitted cardigans. The very same children? An icy silence is hanging over them, as if they’ve all been struck dumb by pure awe. Awe or nerves. After introducing the children, the mayor hasn’t said another word. She shakes her head. Röell takes her by the elbow. She pulls her arm free without looking at her private secretary and walks on slowly.

And what about that, what kind of peevish face is that boy pulling? Red hair and freckles, his head hanging. He’s looking down at his feet, which are in new sandals. What does he have to look so indignant about? She almost takes a step towards him to ask what’s bothering him. Why his red, white and blue flag is down at his knees. And while she’s at it, she can ask the other boy, the bigger one – who has taken him by the hand and definitely isn’t his brother, because his hair is raven – why he’s looking at the little boy and not at her. It even makes her feel a little sad herself, that tummy thrust forward in anger and the transparently new Norwegian cardigan with its brass buttons, almost certainly knitted by his grandmother. Everything in the past few weeks building up to this one day, the kind of day that’s over before you know it, and then being cross into the bargain, so that almost everything goes by in a blur. All around her, photographs are being taken, she hears the cameras clicking and there are even flashes, although that’s hardly necessary in weather like this. She slows down a little, as if she can’t go on until the boy has looked up at

her, but the mayor has already walked ahead and she can feel the rest of the company jostling at her back.

She directs her gaze at a group of men and women in traditional costume a bit further along where there's a little more space. The children are holding little flags, but none are waving them. If not for the breeze, the flags would be hanging limply in the air. She hopes they'll have sherry in the Polder House. The skirts swish, the clogs of the black-suited men stamp on the asphalt. The bunch of flowers is annoyingly heavy. She wants her bag, she wants her cigarettes, she wants to sit down.

'This way please, Your Majesty. Luncheon is ready inside,' says the mayor.

Just say ma'am, she thinks. Ma'am and lunch.

In front of her, Jezuolda Kwanten slips inside, pencils and sketchbook at the ready.

'You can withdraw here for a moment if you would like to,' a woman says. 'With your lady-in-waiting. There's a toilet you can use if you so require.' She doesn't correct her.

Röell and Jezuolda Kwanten are sitting in the mayor's office, which, like this room, smells of fresh paint and wallpaper glue. All these lavatories, she thinks. All these lavatories everywhere, just for me. She has removed her gloves and raps a strangely shaped wall with a knuckle. It sounds hollow. Temporary, she concludes, and wonders where the men in the company have to go now the urinal's been walled off. She thinks of the lavatory at Amsterdam Central station: the motionless air, the unventilated rooms, the dusty curtains, the lavishly upholstered chairs that are almost never used. She feels the toilet paper: Edet, two-ply. A virginal bar of soap on the washbasin. I am sixty years old, she thinks. For more than twenty years I have been sitting in my official capacity on lavatories like this. How long can anyone bear it? She rises, washes her hands and flushes to keep up the pretence.

Bottles of apple and orange juice are arranged on the enormous French-polished table in the mayor’s office. And one bottle of sherry. Röell is drinking orange juice, the artist doesn’t have a drink. She pours two glasses of sherry and holds one out to Jezuolda Kwanten.

‘No, thank you. I don’t drink alcohol at all.’

‘But you’re an artist.’

The sister smiles, sits down on the most spacious seat and opens her large sketchbook.

The Queen smiles too. The glasses need emptying. It would be strange to leave the mayor’s office while there is still a full glass on the table. The bunch of cigarettes sticking up from a vase needs to be thinned out a little too, at the very least. Lucky Strikes. Röell screws up her eyes but offers her a light all the same. She strolls around the spacious room and ends up in front of a large mirror. She studies her reflection, toasts herself and blows smoke in her own face.

‘Miss Kwanten, could you perhaps clarify the actual distinction between a nun and a sister for me?’ she asks.

‘A nun takes solemn vows,’ says Kwanten.

‘And you haven’t?’

‘No. I am a member of the Order of the Sisters of Charity.’

Her glass is empty. She gestures at the full glass on the table. ‘If you’re not going to drink that, I will,’ she says.

‘I wouldn’t mind a drop of sherry after all,’ says Röell.

She looks askance at her secretary but has no choice other than to pass her the second glass. ‘Who commissioned you to make the bust?’

‘The city of Tilburg.’

‘That’s where you live as well?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘How do you find the countryside around here?’

‘Empty. Empty and cold.’

‘Cold?’ The Queen smiles. ‘You’re having a hard time of it today, then. Have you ever been to the island of Texel?’

‘No, ma’am.’

‘Tomorrow will be more to your taste.’

‘Oh, I already think it’s tremendous. I have the privilege of accompanying you for two days.’ The sister’s pencil scratches over the page.

The Queen pats her hair into place. ‘Are you sure you won’t take a small glass of sherry?’

‘No, thank you, ma’am, really not.’

‘Then I’ll have another half a glass for you.’

Röell sighs and sips her sherry with a sour expression.

During lunch she is next to Van der Hoeven. The unmarried pedigree-cattle breeder has been seated diagonally opposite. Otherwise, the usual guests are sitting at the long, impeccably set table. The chairwomen of the countrywomen’s association and the women’s branch of the employers’ federation, polder-board members, dyke reeves, councillors. But not the GP and not the notary. Kwanten isn’t here either, she’ll be having lunch somewhere else in the Polder House, probably in the company of the driver, amongst others. She’s pleased to see that someone has thought of putting out sweet peas in a number of small vases. The inevitable oxtail soup – presumably the reasoning is that if one eats a certain soup at Christmas it must be appropriate on other festive occasions as well – is spicy. Milk and buttermilk are the drinks at the table. Or would Your Majesty prefer a dry white wine with her soup? She would, after a brief hesitation. Van der Hoeven and the mayoress join her and, on the other side of the table, the pedigree-cattle breeder has also accepted a glass. Her second private secretary’s warm young voice is a calm counterweight to the nervous, somewhat high-pitched voice of the mayor.

She herself doesn’t say much. She eats and drinks. The bread is fresh, the cheeses and sliced meats various and abundant. That Blom fellow bakes delicious bread, she thinks. Bright light enters the room through the tall windows

and only now does she hear excited voices outside, even though the children seem to have gone. The cattle breeder is sitting just a little too far away for her to strike up a conversation. She nods almost imperceptibly at the handsome woman and raises her wine glass slightly. The woman nods and raises hers in reply, as if she's understood that the Queen would love to talk to her about the whys and wherefores of stud bulls, the weather, or anything else that might come up, if only they were that little bit closer. Then one of the women in the company stands up and is introduced by the mayoress as Mrs Backer-Breed, elocutionist.

During the performance, which is delivered partly in the local dialect, her thoughts drift again. She thinks about Pappie. Wondering if he'll be on the *Piet Hein* this evening. The man is impossible, of course, but he feels at home on the yacht. In just under a fortnight it will be his birthday and now, approaching sixty, he surely won't get up to any more foolishness. She sips a second glass of wine, evidently chosen by someone who knows what he's doing. When the company begins to applaud, she joins in. Then large dishes of fresh strawberries are brought out to the table with bowls of whipped cream. The coffee that concludes the lunch is strong. There's a soft crunching underfoot. They've scattered sand on the wooden floor of the council chamber.

She was right: the schoolchildren have disappeared. But there are still plenty of people about. Several newspaper photographers are hanging around too. The visit has already been officially concluded inside, now it's just a question of walking to the car and driving to the next village. The village that was named after her great-grandmother. Will the people who live there realise how strange that is? In contrast to the two previous mayors, this mayor will not lead the way. Röell has taken her bag off her hands again; she herself is walking towards the road with the flowers. The coffee has tempered the effect of the sherry and the white

wine, but she still has a pleasantly light-headed feeling. Van der Hoeven is walking beside her, bumping gently against her arm every now and then.

Out of the thinned and now disordered line of people, a large man in immaculate overalls steps forward onto the path. Lengths of cord in both hands and on the cords are two little goats. ‘Ma’am,’ he says.

‘Yes?’ she asks.

‘I would like to offer you these two pygmy goats.’

‘Oh,’ she says. ‘On behalf of whom?’

‘On behalf of myself.’

‘And you are?’

‘Blauwboer.’

One of the goats starts to nibble at a bunch of Sweet William a woman is holding a little too close by. She hands Van der Hoeven her flowers and kneels down. The other goat sniffs at her leather glove with its soft nose. The animals are brown with a black blaze. And so small she could easily pick them up. She does just that and feels their tight round bellies against the palms of her hands. The farmer pays out a little cord.

‘I have three grandsons,’ she says.

‘I know that, ma’am.’

‘They’ll be very pleased with this gift.’ She feels the goats’ little hearts racing in their chests.

‘That was my idea,’ the farmer says.

Photographers push forward, a policeman steps between them. *Queen ignores protocol to play with pygmy goats.* She can see tomorrow’s headline already. When she bends to put the goats back down on the ground, she is overcome by a slight dizziness. Van der Hoeven takes hold of her elbow as she rises. One of the goats starts to bleat loudly.

‘We can’t take them with us now,’ says her second private secretary.

‘I realise that,’ the farmer says.

She thanks the man warmly and walks on, leaving Van der Hoeven behind to arrange things. She has her hands free again. No handbag, no bouquet, no goats. Wiry brown hairs are stuck to her gloves. A goat for Willem-Alexander and a goat for Maurits. Someone from the stables will come to pick up the animals in the next few days. And they'll think of something else for Johan Friso.

The driver is standing beside the open door.

'How are we for time?' Röell asks.

'Nicely on schedule,' he replies. 'Nothing to worry about.'

Before getting into the car, she looks around. Flags are flying on almost all of the houses, and on the other side of the waterway that divides the village in two she sees the gleaming van again. Only now does she ask herself why the baker isn't out doing his rounds. Or is the area he covers so small that he can get it all done in the morning? People are walking away from the Polder House, still turning to look back, but not crowding around the car. They're returning to the order of the day, the children might be back in the classrooms already. No, they'll have the afternoon off, it's a holiday. Perhaps there's a village swimming pool they can go to. Then she sees a young woman coming towards her against the flow of the dissipating crowd, holding a child on her hip and trying to wheel a bicycle with her other hand. Someone running late and hurrying to catch a glimpse of the Queen. She gestures to the driver and walks towards the woman, seeing Röell start off after her out of the corner of her eye.

'What are you doing?' her private secretary asks.

Without replying, she waits for the woman to reach her.

'The time,' Röell says. 'We have to watch the time.'

Then the woman is standing opposite her, a little short of breath from hurrying.

'Were you too late leaving home?' she asks.

'Yes, I …'

'What an adorable little girl you have. What's your name?'

The child, two at most, looks at her with big blue eyes.

‘Will you tell me? What your name is?’

‘An-ne,’ the child whispers.

‘Hanne,’ her mother says.

She pulls off her right glove to stroke the child’s cheek. ‘The “h” isn’t easy.’ The girl shrinks away, pressing her face against her mother’s neck. ‘And you are?’

‘Anna Kaan, ma’am.’

Ah, this woman knows how things should be done. ‘Did the time run away with you this morning?’

The woman looks at her, her startled expression making way for a smile. She doesn’t answer. The bicycle, leaning against the woman’s hip, slowly slides down and clatters onto the asphalt.

The Queen instinctively reaches out with both hands.

‘It’s fine,’ the woman says.

‘We have to go,’ says Röell, standing somewhere behind her.

It’s turned into a photo session after all. She doesn’t see it, she hears it. Annoyingly close by. *Queen takes impromptu stroll.* A second potential headline for tomorrow’s newspaper. ‘There you have it,’ she tells the woman. ‘We have to go. Bye, Hanne.’

‘Goodbye, ma’am,’ says the woman. ‘Thank you very much.’

‘What for?’

‘Taking the trouble to …’

‘It’s nothing,’ she says. When she turns, it’s not Röell but Jezuolda Kwanten standing behind her. Right behind her. She feels her warm breath on her face. It’s as if she’s trying to soak up every pore and imperfection in her model’s skin so that she can make her bronze bust as lifelike as possible. The sister from the Order of the Sisters of Charity takes a step aside and follows her to the cars, one pace behind.

She gives one last wave in the direction of the Polder House gates, where the mayor and his wife are waiting

politely. Then all the car doors bang shut. Even before they drive off, Röell has gathered up all kinds of documents and started to ruffle through them. The Queen lights a cigarette. The car turns and drives through the village extremely slowly. When she looks to the right she sees a graveyard, just behind the Polder House. Something she neither noticed nor heard mentioned before. They pass a water tower and a pumping station. At the very edge of the village, at the foot of a dyke, there is a windmill.

‘Those goats,’ Röell says.

‘What about them?’

‘That’s really not done.’

‘Why not?’

‘With all due respect … goats!’

‘So?’

‘Who’s going to take them to Soestdijk?’

‘Van der Hoeven has arranged all that.’

‘And that woman with that child.’

‘She was late. That could happen to anyone.’

‘You can just leave things like that to run their course.’

‘I don’t *want* things like that to run their course. It’s just nice. For her and for that little girl. They’ll remember it for the rest of their lives, this beautiful sunny day in June.’ She draws on her cigarette. ‘Not to say that’s why I do it, of course.’

Röell purses her lips and looks through her papers.

‘Try to put yourself in those people’s shoes for once. What difference does a couple of minutes make?’

Röell doesn’t respond. ‘Eighteen forty-six,’ she says. ‘The polder is named after the consort of King Willem II.’

‘You don’t need to read that to me. What’s this one called?’

‘Warners.’

‘What’s on the programme?’

‘A waterskiing demonstration. At two thirty in the afternoon on the Oude Veer.’

‘Really?’

‘The fourth event is barefoot waterskiing.’

The Queen stubs out her cigarette, pulls her right glove back on and goes back to staring out the window. This area is again slightly different from the previous district. Different roads and farmhouses, less grass. If only that waterskiing was already over. They’ll have old-age pensioners there as well. If only Den Helder was over too. She’s looking forward to the *Piet Hein*, it’s been months since she was on the yacht. The polished pear wood, the green upholstered Rietveld armchairs, the bunks. Pappie, possibly, in the top bunk. And otherwise a quiet conversation – the drinks cabinet open – with Van der Hoeven. Tomorrow morning she might take the helm for a while, or at least stand at the captain’s shoulder. Two months from now she’ll be spending another few days on board for the naval review during the Harlingen fishing festival. ‘Barefoot skiing,’ she says. ‘What *will* they think of next?’

Straw

I'LL NEVER CELEBRATE anything again. Ever. What for? Celebrating your fiftieth wedding anniversary with only sons to show for it, what was I thinking? Never again. Straw's nowhere near as hard as you'd think. If you want to sit or lie down on straw you have to know how. You have to rub against it like a cow or a sheep and keep rubbing until all the sharp stiff bits have turned away. I'm an expert: three-quarters of a lifetime's experience with straw. It's not just a couple of bales, there are hundreds of them. What's all this straw still doing here anyway? What's it for?

She's lying on her back and staring up at the spot where a few roof tiles have slid down. It would have been different with a daughter. She wouldn't have just sat there drinking and stuffing her face. She wouldn't have made any snide remarks about the zoo where they spent the afternoon. She would have made a scrapbook with photos and stories; she would have written a song 'to the tune of', a funny song that rhymed and would have been sung by a lot more grandchildren than just that one, who made things even worse by sulking and answering back. A daughter would have squatted down next to her, next to her chair, to ask quietly if she was enjoying herself. Those horrible boys just drank and roared with laughter even though there was nothing to laugh about and all Zeeger did was join in, even if he didn't drink. Zeeger never drank.

Through the hole above her, a ray of dusty sunlight shines into the barn at an angle. An angle that tells her that it must be late in the afternoon. Friday afternoon.

Earlier in the day, just before climbing up the ladder, she'd turned on the light. It's still light now, but tonight it will get dark. She anticipated that. She pulled the rickety ladder up behind her, leant it against the straw to climb further, then pulled the ladder up behind her again. Lying on a pricklier bale of straw next to her are a water bottle, a packet of Viennese biscuits, a bottle of advocaat and the parade sword that normally hangs from the bottom bookshelf. The rickety ladder is a little further away.

Even though the side doors and large rear doors are all open, the air in the barn is motionless, not the slightest hint of a breeze. She sits up and grabs the water bottle, one and a half litres. While drinking, she looks at the junk in the milking parlour attic diagonally opposite the straw loft. A washing basket, bulb trays, a rusty boiler, roof tiles, an old coat (light blue), zinc washtubs, a pedal car, a crate with sacks of wool. The three round windows with the wrought-iron frames – one up near the roof ridge, the other two a good bit lower down, above the doors at either end of the long corridor that runs the whole length of the barn – remind her of a church. Tiles have come loose all over the place and, despite the spare tiles she's just seen, they haven't been replaced. In those spots, stripes of sunlight shine in.

Beneath her she hears the bull shuffling and groaning. Dirk. A superfluous lump of meat. Otherwise it's quiet, as quiet as only a hot day in June can be. The swallows flying in and out are almost silent. She screws the cap back on the bottle, holds it up to see how much water is left, then lays it back down next to her. When the straw stops rustling, she hears footsteps. Very quick footsteps. 'Dirk!' she hears. Dieke. The child doesn't know her grandmother is up above her. A little later, when the footsteps have almost reached the barn doors, the child shouts, 'Uncle Jan!' Dirk starts to snort. Dieke says something else, but she can't make it out. Soon after, it falls quiet again. She leans back carefully and, once she's rubbed against it for a while, the straw is

reasonably comfortable again. Inasmuch as anything other than a soft mattress can be reasonably comfortable when you’re the wrong side of seventy. She gives her belly a slow and thorough scratch, then rubs her face with both hands.

What’s that bull still doing here? Why doesn’t Klaas sell that enormous beast? She stares at the outside world through the hole in the roof. A very small, rectangular outside world. For now, that’s plenty. I’ll never celebrate anything again. Ever. We’re not cut out for celebrating. We always say exactly the wrong thing. The long faces of those boys as they tramped around the zoo. A daughter would have taken photos or said things like, ‘Look, a baboon. My first ever baboon!’

Somewhere in the barn something creaks. It’s a dull dry creaking, loud too. The timbers? The boards of the hayloft? The big doors?

Dust

THERE ARE SIX windows in the living room. Dieke looks out through the one with the crack. She's staring at the lawn that extends from the front of the house all the way to the road. In the middle stands an enormous red beech. The leaves of the tree aren't moving. The blades of grass in the unmown lawn are completely still too.

The crack bothers her. It has for a long time now. She's scared that the glass might fall out of the window frame, maybe while she's looking through it. Dieke sighs and walks out of the living room, across the hall and into the kitchen. Her mother is sitting at the kitchen table smoking a cigarette. 'What are you sighing about?' she asks.

Dieke doesn't answer. She goes over to the window and uses both hands to wave at her grandfather, who she can see on the other side of the yard, past the wide ditch and her grandmother's vegetable garden, standing at his own kitchen window. If there were sheets on the clothes line, or towels and trousers, she wouldn't be able to see him. He doesn't wave back. The sun's almost reached the kitchen. Her grandfather walks away from his window.

'Where's Uncle Jan?' she asks.

'Is Jan here?'

'Uh-huh,' says Dieke. 'He just came over the bridge.'

'I don't know, Dieke. Somewhere out the back, I guess.'

'What time is it?'

'Six o'clock.'

'Is it almost teatime?'

Her mother turns her head to look at the stove, which doesn't have any pans on it. 'Yes,' she says. 'Go and look for