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## To Jan Greshoff

I listen to his hoarse voice pant,  
I keep my mouth, I hear him rant,  
While he confounds, in a minor key,  
The people's sheer banality.

I watch his crooked mouth, ajar,  
A half-healed gash, an ugly scar,  
Expressing in a single smile  
The things he once with words reviled.

He has a wife and kids and friends  
And heaps of lovers he intends  
To thank for pleasures he has known,  
And yet Jan Greshoff stands alone.

Night in, night out, he looks around,  
And hopes and waits, then hears a sound;  
He sits up straight and heaves a sigh:  
He knows in Brussels he must die.

CHEESE

Come on, dear Jan, and get a grip,  
Thrash those bastards, use your whip!  
Obliterate that cattle, now,  
As long as your good heart lasts out.

## Names of Characters

*Frans Laarmans*, a clerk at the General Marine and Shipbuilding Company, then merchant, then clerk again.

*Laarmans's mother*, senile and moribund.

*Doctor Laarmans*, Frans's brother.

*Mr Van Schoonbeke*, a friend of the doctor's and to blame for everything.

*Hornstra*, a cheese wholesaler from Amsterdam.

*Fine*, Laarmans's wife.

*Jan and Ida*, their children.

*Madame Peeters*, a neighbour with gallstones.

*Anna van der Tak*, *Tuil*, *Erfurt*, *Bartherotte*, clerks at the General Marine and Shipbuilding Company.

*Boorman*, a counsellor for businessmen.

*Old Piet*, an engine driver at the General Marine and Shipbuilding Company.

*Van der Zijpen Jr*, who wants to be a silent partner.

*Van Schoonbeke's friends*.



## Elements

- *Cheese*: cheese dream, cheese film, cheese enterprise, cheese day, cheese campaign, cheese mine, cheese world, cheese ship, cheese trade, cheese profession, cheese novel, cheese eaters, cheese man, Edam cheese, cheese merchant, cheese trust, cheese dragon, cheese misery, cheese testament, cheese mania, cheese wall, cheese question, cheese cart, cheese ordeal, cheese tower, cheese wound.
- GAFPA, General Antwerp Feeding Products Association.
- *A Cellar at the Blue Hat Warehouse*.
- *Laarmans's Office*, complete with telephone, pedestal desk and typewriter.
- *A Backgammon Board*.
- *A Wicker Suitcase*.
- *A Large Cheese Shop*.
- *A Cemetery*.





*Cheese*



# I

**A**T LAST I AM WRITING TO YOU AGAIN, because great things are about to happen, and all thanks to Mr Van Schoonbeke.

You should know that my mother died.

An unpleasant business of course, not just for her but also for my sisters, who nearly killed themselves keeping vigil.

She was old, very old. Although I only have a rough idea about how old exactly. She wasn't really ill or anything, just utterly worn out.

My eldest sister, with whom she lived, was good to her. She soaked her bread, made sure she went to the toilet and gave her potatoes to peel to keep her busy. And she peeled and peeled, as if for an army. We all brought our potatoes to my sister's, and so did Madame from upstairs and a couple of neighbours too, because once my sister ran out and tried to make her re-peel a bucket of potatoes, but she noticed – would you believe it? – and said: “These have already been peeled.”

When she could no longer peel, because she could no longer coordinate her hands and eyes, my sister

gave her wool or kapok stuffing to fluff, as it had become lumpy from being slept on. This produced a lot of dust, and Mother ended up covered in fluff from head to toe.

On and on it went, day and night: nodding off, fluffing, nodding off, fluffing. And every now and again a smile passed her lips. God knows who she was smiling at.

My father had only been dead five years or so, but she didn't have the slightest recollection of him. He had never existed, despite the fact they'd had nine children together.

Whenever I came to visit her, I would occasionally bring him up in an effort to shake her out of her lethargy.

I would ask her if she truly had no memory of Krist, which had been his name.

She would make an immense effort to follow what I was saying. She appeared to understand that there was something she needed to grasp and, moving to the edge of her seat, she would look me in the eye, her face tense, with swollen veins on her temples: a dying lamp about to explode by way of farewell.

After a brief battle, the spark would die and she would produce that heart-rending smile again. If I insisted too much, she got scared.

No, the past no longer existed for her. No Krist, no children, nothing except fluffing kapok.

## CHAPTER I

There was only one thought that haunted her: namely a small mortgage on one of her houses that hadn't been paid off. Was she holding on just to scrape together that trifling sum?

In her presence, my dear old sister talked about her as if she weren't there.

"She ate well. She's been very difficult today."

When she could no longer fluff, she'd sit with her bony blue hands side by side in her lap or scratch her chair for hours on end, as though the urge to fluff were still in her fingers.

She could no longer tell yesterday from tomorrow. Both were reduced to meaning "not now".

Was it because her eyesight was getting poorer or was she plagued by demons all the time? At any rate, she no longer knew whether it was day or night, got up when she was supposed to lie down and fell asleep when she was expected to speak.

She was still able to move about a little, holding on to the walls and furniture. At night, when everyone was asleep, she'd get up, drag herself to her chair and begin fluffing kapok that wasn't there, or else rummage about until she'd found the coffee grinder, as if she planned to make coffee for some kindred spirit.

And always with that black hat on her grey head, even at night, as though ready to go out. Do you believe in witchcraft?

## CHEESE

At last she lay down, and when she allowed that hat to be taken off without protest I knew she would never get up again.

## II

**T**HAT EVENING I'D BEEN playing cards in the Three Kings until midnight and had had four pale ales, which meant I was in a perfect condition to sleep all through the night.

I tried to undress as quietly as possible, because my wife had been asleep for hours, and I can't bear her nagging.

But as I was balancing on one leg to pull off my first sock, I crashed into the bedside table. She woke up with a start.

"You should be ashamed!" is how it began.

Then the doorbell rang, resonating through our quiet house, making my wife sit up straight.

At night a doorbell is a solemn sound.

We both waited until the reverberations in the stairwell had died away, me with my heart racing and claspings my right foot.

"What could that be?" she whispered. "Why don't you look out of the window? You're only half undressed."

Normally it didn't end that way, but the bell had cut her short.



“If you’re not going to have a look right now, I’ll go myself,” she threatened.

But I knew what it was. What else could it be?

Outside I saw a shadowy figure who shouted out that his name was Oscar and insisted I come with him to Mother at once. Oscar is one of my brothers-in-law, an indispensable sort of chap in circumstances such as these.

I told my wife what it was about, put my clothes back on and went to open the door.

“It’s going to happen tonight,” my brother-in-law guaranteed. “She’s in the throes of death. And put a scarf on: it’s cold.”

I did as he told me and accompanied him.

Outside it was calm and clear. We walked briskly, as if we were on our way to work the night shift somewhere.

When we got to the house I automatically stretched out my hand to ring the bell, but Oscar stopped me, asked if I’d lost my mind and quietly rattled the letter-box cover.

My niece, one of Oscar’s daughters, let us in. Inaudibly she closed the door behind us and told me to just go upstairs, which I did, following behind Oscar. I’d taken my hat off, something I didn’t usually do in Mother’s house.

My brother, my three sisters and Madame from upstairs all sat together in the kitchen, next to the room where she was no doubt lying in bed. Where else was she going to be?

## CHAPTER II

An old nun, a cousin of ours, shuffled silently back and forth between the room in which my mother lay dying and the kitchen.

They all looked at me as if to reproach me for something, and one of them mumbled a word of welcome.

Should I stand up or sit down?

If I stood up, it would look as if I were ready to leave any minute. If I sat down, they'd think I'd resigned myself to the whole situation, including Mother's state. But since they were all sitting down, I grabbed a chair too and sat myself down at a little distance, away from the glare of the lamp.

There was an unusual tension. Maybe because they'd stopped the clock?

It was hellishly hot in the kitchen. And then those women with their swollen eyelids – as if they'd been peeling onions.

I didn't know what to say.

I couldn't ask how Mother was, since everyone knew she was slipping her moorings.

Crying would have been best, but how to go about it? Suddenly let out a sob? Or take my handkerchief and dab my eyes, wet or not?

That wretched pale ale was only now beginning to take effect – I suppose because of the heat in the tiny kitchen – and I was breaking into a sweat.

In order to do *something*, I stood up.

“Why don’t you go and have a look?” said my brother, who is a doctor.

His voice sounded normal, not too loud, but clear enough for me to know one thing for sure: my nocturnal outing wouldn’t be in vain.

I followed his advice, as I was afraid I was going to be sick, what with the beer, the heat and the atmosphere in the kitchen. They might have blamed my nausea on my emotional state, but just imagine if I’d actually started to throw up.

It was cooler in there and almost entirely dark, which was a relief.

On her bedside table a lonely candle burned, but it didn’t shine on Mother, high up in her bed, which meant I didn’t have to face her death struggle. Our cousin, the nun, sat there and prayed.

After I’d been standing there for a while, my brother came in, took the candle and held it aloft, as though in a torchlight procession, lighting up Mother.

He must have seen something, because he went to the kitchen door and asked everyone to come into the bedroom.

I heard chairs move – and in they trooped.

A little later, my eldest sister said it was all over, but the nun contradicted her, saying that she hadn’t shed her two tears yet. Did Mother have to produce those two tears?

## CHAPTER II

It lasted more than an hour – me still with all that beer in me – but at last she was pronounced dead.

And they were right, because no matter how hard I tried in my head to command her to sit up and dispel that whole crowd with her fearsome smile, it was to no avail. She was lying stock-still, the way only dead people can.

It had all happened rather quickly in the end, and I'd very nearly missed it.

A great chill came over me when the chorus of women began to weep and I couldn't join them.

Where did they get all those tears from? They weren't the first ones – I could tell by their faces. Fortunately my brother didn't cry either. But he's a doctor, and they all know he's used to witnessing such scenes, so I felt embarrassed after all.

I tried to make up for everything by embracing the women and giving them firm handshakes. It seemed incredible: only just before, she'd been alive, and now she was dead.

And suddenly my sisters stopped weeping, fetched water, soap and towels and began to wash her.

The effect of the beer had completely worn off now, which proves I was at least as moved as the rest of them.

I returned to the kitchen and sat down until they'd finished preparing her, and then we were called to her bedside again.

They'd done a lot of work in a short space of time, and the corpse of our beloved mother actually looked better than when she'd been alive and smiling to herself while peeling or fluffing.

"Auntie looks truly beautiful," said our cousin the nun, looking at the bed and Mother with satisfaction.

And she ought to know, being a Black Sister from Lier, the kind who from their early youth to the end of their days are sent from one sickbed to the next, thus finding themselves sitting next to corpses all the time.

After that, my little niece made us some coffee, which the women thoroughly deserved, and Oscar was granted permission to let the funeral be arranged by one of his friends who, according to him, would do it at least as well and as cheaply as the next undertaker. "All right, all right, Oscar," said my eldest sister with a tired gesture, as though she weren't remotely interested in the cost.

I could see our gathering was coming to an end, but didn't want to be the first to leave, seeing as I'd been the last to arrive.

One of my sisters yawned, shed a few more tears, and then my brother put on his hat, shook hands with everyone once again and left.

"I think I'll go with Karel," I said.

Those were, I believe, the first words to come out of my mouth. They might give the impression that I went after

him for his benefit. After all, even a doctor sometimes needs comforting, doesn't he?

And that's how I made my escape.

It was three o'clock when I was back in our bedroom, once again holding on to my foot and pulling off my first sock.

I was exhausted and, to avoid having to tell my wife everything, I just said the situation hadn't changed.

As for the funeral, there's not much to say. It went as expected, and I wouldn't mention it – nor the whole business of Mother's death – were it not for the fact that that's how I met Mr Van Schoonbeke.

As is the custom, my brother, my brothers-in-law, four cousins and I formed a semicircle around the coffin before it was taken away. Then the more distant relatives, friends and acquaintances entered and went round shaking hands with each of us, whispering their condolences or looking us gravely in the eye. There were many people – far too many, I felt, because it lasted for ever.

My wife had put a band of black crêpe around my arm, because I'd agreed with my brother that we wouldn't have a mourning suit made – it's of so little use once the funeral is over. But that wretched armband must have been too loose, because it kept on slipping down. After every third or fourth handshake I had to pull it back up.

## CHEESE

That's when Mr Van Schoonbeke, a friend and also a patient of my brother's, made his appearance. He did what everyone else had done, but with more style and modesty. A man of the world, that much was clear to me.

He accompanied us to the church and the cemetery, and when it was all over he entered one of the carriages with me and my brother. That's where I was introduced to him, and he invited me to pay him a visit. And that's what I did.