

The Auction



By Harry Jivenmukta

Ingrid de Koning, who had lived in the end house of a small suburban street in Vlaardingen, had died peacefully in her sleep, or so everyone liked to believe. This old woman, a good life, and a quiet dignified death, sounded right. She might have died in pain though, because no-one really knew. She had lived alone for the last sixteen years after the death of her husband, and her only child, a son, Japp, lived in Schenkel, at the other end of Rotterdam with his wife Renate. They called on her at festival times and when their only child, her grandson, had been born. But with the pace of life, no-one had the time to criss-cross Rotterdam to visit an old woman. And why should they? Times had changed and the old woman like so much peripheral waste was left to drown in her memories until one day, she was found dead in her bed. And only then because of the unpaid bills and gathering post, forming a small hillock inside her front door, as the showers of the postman's letters grew.

Japp was naturally upset, for at least the regulation days, until the cremation. Cremations are cheaper and do not require maintenance like a grave would. And then Japp, together with Renate, inhaled a swig of the cold late autumn air, and went to the house to see what could be done about clearing it out and hopefully getting a good price on its sale, to relieve them of their debts and pay for a holiday in the sun.

Dear Johannes

I will join you soon

Wherever you are.

You were always selfish

And even died

Selfishly

To leave me behind

On my own.

Ingrid's husband, Johannes, had been a sailor, and worked the ships that left from Rotterdam. He had travelled far and wide and Ingrid was the typical sailor's wife, always waiting for him to return. But he was a good provider.

Is this a way to behave?
Leaving me alone for months
Of cold and unforgiving
Winter?
And then, when
You did hang up your
Oilskins for good
And promised to fulfil all
Those things we had
Never done,
You died on me,
Without even saying
Goodbye.

Now I treasure your gifts
Strange and exotic
In memory of you.
The Indian occasional table
And the Chinese vase on top
Where I always
Kept the fresh flowers
But never rested
My cup of tea on
In case it left a stain.

Renate, a practical no nonsense woman, sat down heavily on her mother in law's settee. Let's just get someone in and clear the house in one go, she said.

We should at least look through the stuff, in case there is something worth keeping, Japp suggested, as he put his newly made cup of coffee on the Indian table next to the empty vase. Anyway, we have plenty of time. There is no rush, is there?

Renate simply sniffed through her nose, but said nothing. Wearily, she scanned the living room trying to think what might be worth keeping. Some paintings on the walls, mainly seascapes and harbours, the Indian table, a few bits of pottery, and lots of embroidered squares everywhere; on the settee to protect the tops of the cushions, on the sideboard to prevent scratches from the small photo frames; and she was getting bored by it all.

I never complained
To anyone about my loneliness.
My friend said I should
Have a television
But I didn't know
What to get or if
I wanted one.
I did miss the radio
When it stopped working
And the silence was heavy.
But I remembered the
Days of my life and
Was grateful for my son
And my grandson.
And the neighbour who
Did my shopping.

There was a knock at the door and Japp was grateful for the intrusion. He opened the door to the assessor, sent by the estate agency. He had an electronic damp meter in one hand and a notebook and pen. On entering he went into 'assessor mode', and started measuring and estimating, hardly acknowledging Japp or Renate.

Living room; 5 metres by 4.

Dining area, off the kitchen, 3 by 3.

Kitchen, 3 by 3. Very poor condition. Recommend replacement.

Upstairs:

Two bedrooms, damp. Remedial work required.

Bathroom. ~~Not fit for a dog.~~ Recommend replacement.

Overall condition; in need of substantial remedial work before sale. Immediate sale recommended only if in an auction at trade prices.

The assessor always had his own thoughts and kept them to himself. He visited a place like this at least once a fortnight. He saw the same half concerned greedy relatives, their eyes glowing with warmth when they remembered the windfall coming their way. He always wondered how they could let their old people live in such squalor. How they could sleep at night knowing that their new bed had been bought from the proceeds of someone else's desolation. He was thick skinned by all the misery he had to see and often felt that the dead were better off rather than suffer the indignities of this kind of life.

He nodded to the couple and left, mumbling that they would get a report in the post. He had no time for these scum. In some ways, he thought, he had to carry the pain with him, and it wasn't even his family!

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I've had an idea, Japp declared.

Renate was a bit void of drive in life and often looked at matters as if they were a burden. Japp had learned that she was much better if he gave her clear goals and incentives. He continued: the sale of this place will pay off the mortgage on our house, and all the other debts. But then there won't be much money, if any at all, left over.

Renate was indifferent until Japp concluded: so I thought that whatever we make from the sale of the contents here, we should spend on ourselves, you know, treat ourselves. He felt Renate react ever so slightly. And, he ended with the last nail drummed into the deal; why don't you come up with ideas for the treat?

With that, he wandered out of the room, to inspect upstairs in more detail, and to give Renate the chance to digest the offer. He knew he had succeeded in awakening her interest and had used similar strategies in the past. He didn't mind her lack of enthusiasm in most things going on around her, because it let him take charge. But when he needed her labour, he knew how to get her interested.

Vague images began appearing in the mind of Renate; sails, blowing in an ocean breeze, sandy beaches, and a diamond ring. After about ten minutes the juices were certainly beginning to flow and Renate looked at the Indian table and the Chinese vase in a new light. Even the paintings began to look interesting as they were being transformed into currency. She found a notepad and pen and started making a list of the things that might be worth something.

Japp was most interested in the renovation projects and thought that he could have a new bathroom and kitchen fitted; nothing fancy, but enough to tempt a buyer.