

Not an Afrikaner

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Huub erupted in laughter when he realised what the package contained. He would show it to his wife; she would enjoy the joke. Perhaps they could put it in the bedroom, somewhere unobtrusive, where it would not be seen, so they would not have to explain it. Huub's thoughts were of a man in a red suit and mitre, riding a horse, a little child handing him a piece of paper to sign. It was a childhood memory and it absorbed Huub's thoughts as he carried the little doll out of the room to meet his wife whom he had heard arriving.

It was, however, not his wife that he saw first. It was Ouma Katryn, imposing despite the wheelchair and her hunched back. *Dear God*, he thought, as he remembered that Chantelle's grandmother was coming, and there she was, the deadly scowl of a *boervrou*, of an Afrikaner woman, on her face. She could only have hated Huub more if he were English, rather than native Dutch.

"Naand Ouma," *good evening Grandmother*, Huub said, in his best Afrikaans. There was a time, shortly after he and Chantelle had moved to South Africa, that Ouma Katryn did not mind Huub speaking Dutch. She understood most of it after all. But that was before she learnt Huub was not the kind of Dutchman that had landed with Jan van Riebeeck at the Cape. Huub was not a hardened explorer, the kind of man that would become a hardened farmer and defy the British nation. Huub was a modern Dutch man with soft hands, who rarely ate meat, saw no need to rule the natives and was hardly able to stoke a fire for a *braai*.

"What is that evil-looking doll?" Ouma Katryn asked. Huub stuttered. The little black doll with thick red lips quite of proportion, garish cap and feather, and gold-trimmed blue outfit now needed explanation. It was a controversial caricature, even in the Netherlands. The doll's wide amiable grin was utterly without menace, and yet it still reminded Huub of Chucky.

"Is that a *Zwarte Piet*?" Chantelle asked. She was standing behind Ouma Katryn, pushing the wheelchair.

"My mother sent it," Huub assented.

"Wat is die ongoddelike ding?" *what is the ungodly thing?* Ouma Katryn asked, feeling she was being ignored.

"It's a part of Dutch Christmas tradition," Huub tried to explain. "Black Peter is Santa Clause's helper, like an elf, but not an elf."

"People dress up as Zwarte Piet and paint their faces black, giving candy to children and performing funny tricks and acrobatics," Chantelle added.

"What do you mean, white people dress up as black people?" Ouma Katryn asked indignantly.

"Yes," Chantelle nodded.

"And make fools of themselves?"

"It's just for fun, Ouma," Chantelle placated.

"No, that is not the way a white man is supposed to act. A white man is supposed to have more dignity. He can't just lower himself to the level of the volk, the natives. You, did you do this?" She gave Huub an accusatory look. She must have inferred a "yes" in his eyes as she then proceeded to say, "Chantelle, push me to my room. I want to go to my room." She would say no more.

Chantelle wheeled Ouma away and Katie, the maid who came a few times a week, showed up in the doorway.

"You dress up as black people and perform tricks for a white Father Christmas?" Katie asked. She had heard everything.

Huub nodded. "It's for the kids," he added.

"Dis nie reg nie," *that's not right*, she said and walked away to attend to her other duties.

Zwarte Piet, Black Peter, did not fit in South Africa. For Katie, with the hope of a new South Africa, it seemed racist, colonial. For Ouma Katryn, her mind still stuck in Apartheid, it seemed to ridicule the white supremacy she took for granted. To Huub, however, it was a harmless and misunderstood family tradition, one that brought him joy as a child and that his children may never experience. He put the doll back in its box and placed it under his bed.

Give this land a bright summer Christmas the congregation sang, mostly out of tune, to an almost deafening organ accompaniment. It was a popular Afrikaans Christmas song and it definitely reflected the weather. It was sweltering hot in the church building, but Ouma Katryn seemed to listen attentively to the slow marcato of the *dominee* at the raised pulpit. Huub and Chantelle had had to find a Reformed Church in the Northern Suburbs specifically for Ouma Katryn who would not attend any other service. Chantelle preferred to go to a more modern service in a school hall near their home and Huub, only mildly religious, sometimes joined her.

Three-year-old Peter was not nearly as enraptured as Ouma Katryn. The minister paused every time little Peter made a sound and gave Chantelle a look that said: *why didn't you go to the sound-insulated mother's room?* After the service Ouma Katryn wanted to be wheeled over to Dominee De Jager. The minister graciously came to meet them, allowing them to avoid having to wait in the line of other congregants.

"Dankie, dominee, vir die baie mooi preek," *thank you for the great sermon*, Ouma began after they had introduced themselves. "You're absolutely right that we need to turn to the Lord every day and guard against the temptations of the heathen world. But you know I am very worried about my granddaughter. She married a heathen and now she has forgotten about the God of her forefathers."

Dominee De Jager was taken aback. Huub nearly blurted, *that's not true, she just doesn't want to come to an outdated and irrelevant church*. The task of translating this into Afrikaans was too much, however, and Chantelle spoke first.

"Ouma, that's not true." She turned to the minister, face still red. "We go to another church in the area. Ouma doesn't like it though."

"Not even an Afrikaans church?" Ouma murmured.

"Daughter, you do not need to explain yourself to me," the minister assuaged. "Mrs Nienaber," he continued, addressing Ouma Katryn, "Your granddaughter is still a child of the Lord. She has shown it by coming here today. It does not matter if she usually goes to another church. The Lord is not limited to one church."

After Dominee De Jager gave them his contact details and assured them they were always welcome, Huub wheeled Ouma Katryn out, down the wheelchair ramp and to the car with unnecessary haste. He was furious.

"Waarom, Ouma?" *why grandma?* was all he managed to say. Then he got into the car and left it to his wife to help Ouma Katryn in.

In the following week the house swelled like a pregnant belly. Chantelle's parents, her brother and his wife and children had arrived and filled every available space.

Summer had only increased in intensity. Through a haze of sweat and dizziness Huub navigated the muggy house, which smelled of sweat and beer. It was the day before Christmas and Huub was trying to avoid the kitchen where the women were making enough food to feed a hungry *boer* army. Huub thought wistfully of biking through the snow in his former life, of the warm welcomes he had always received at the end of his journey. He remembered the time he was courting Chantelle in the Netherlands; her smile had warmed him up instantly as he came in out of the snow.

Huub joined his father- and brother-in-law with cold Castles, and a Heineken for himself. Huub did not condemn the taste of his in-laws, but if asked, he would freely give his opinion of the locally brewed beers.

"Huub!" Chantelle called from the kitchen. Her voice sounded ominously like her mother's and Huub had a premonition of her in thirty years that he prayed would not come true. He ambled to the kitchen where Ouma Katryn was directing the team of chefs. She could only stand for short periods of time herself and her chair was too low for her to reach the counter. Thus she cooked by proxy. Chantelle and Hermien, her mother, were accomplished cooks in their own right, but they had learnt everything they knew either directly or indirectly from Ouma Katryn and so they did not quarrel. Mostly they did not quarrel, that is. When Huub entered Ouma Katryn was explaining to Hermien how one makes a marinade, but Hermien was resolved to ruin the whole dinner to get her way, or so it seemed to Ouma. Huub was quickly put to work chopping carrots, then chopping onions and doing other grunt work.

"Tell me more about this *Sinterklaas* and his *Swart Piete*," Hermien asked. Ouma Katryn had informed the whole family of the unholy doll that Huub had and how he ran around pretending to be black. Thankfully, though, the others merely found the doll amusing and Hermien had taken a real interest in the strange Dutch tradition. Huub really did not mind the topic, in fact he enjoyed the attention, but with Ouma Katryn in the vicinity he preferred to steer the conversation elsewhere.

“How many people are we feeding?” he asked jocularly, pretending not to have heard. It was Afrikaans tradition, it seemed, to cook for four times as many people as were present. They would have a large dinner tonight and eat left-overs for the next two days. They were like squirrels storing nuts for the winter or bears fattening up for hibernation. On the one hand today’s frenetic *skarrel* seemed like the insanity of Martha, but tomorrow they would enjoy the peace of Mary.

Huub looked around at the dishes in various states of completion. Everything seemed to contain meat and fat. For some dishes they would add extra fat because the meat did not come off the animal with enough fat for their taste. Chicken was relegated to serving the role of vegetable. To be fair, there were also actual vegetables, smothered in creamy and cheesy sauces or wrapped in bacon. There were rice and potatoes in abundance, the staple Afrikaner starches, with gravy and sauces from the meat dishes to give them flavour. Springbok hind, pumpkin cakes, *mielies* drenched with butter, potato salad, mutton stew, *bobotie* (a traditional Cape dish) with Mrs Balls Chutney: these were just the dishes Huub saw before him. None of it would be wasted, however. Every scrap of food would find a stomach, eventually.

Huub and Hermien’s conversation was interrupted, by degrees, as Ouma started to cough, first softly then louder. The cough had been a problem for some years. Allergies and, sometimes, heartburn were the culprits. Still, it reminded everyone of just how old and frail Ouma Katryn was, that her hands were arthritic and covered in thick blue veins; that her skin would stay pinched; that she belonged to a different, an older, world, and that the time had almost come for this young new world to shuck her off its back like moult.

Frik, Chantelle’s brother, was a minister and he naturally offered (rather, insisted) to lead a time of bible reading and prayer before the meal. A large Dutch Bible from the eighteenth or nineteenth century had been passed along through the family and Frik was now its keeper. In Huub’s honour he had brought it along and asked Huub to read from it. He would not allow anyone else to handle the precious tome and even Huub could really just stare at the assigned passage without handling the pages. The Dutch was old, awkwardly old, and hard to read, even for Huub, but the meaning was mostly clear. Frik repeated the main reading in the Afrikaans translation, Isaiah 9 verse 6

“Vir ons is ’n Seun gebore, aan ons is ’n Seun gegee; Hy sal heers, en
Hy sal genoem word: Wonderbare Raadsman, Magtige God, Ewige Vader,
Vredevoers.”

Frik prayed in the manner typical of Afrikaans Dominees, which is to say that he prayed slowly, emphasising almost every word, and for a long time. The prayer was comprehensive but heartfelt. It was a prayer of marked solemnity, during which the attention of the children wandered unwillingly, but even the most raucous reveller would have stay silenced and try to perceive the flow of those words to the Being they honoured.

And then it was time to feast. Wine was poured – not expensive wine, but a very good vintage nonetheless, the grapes grown and bottled just a few kilometres away. Huub’s reading of the old Dutch Bible seemed to have made an impression on Ouma Katryn, brought him a little closer to those early Dutch pioneers, because she asked him to cut the venison (She took it for granted that she had the right to bestow this honour).

They ate and with distended bellies announced there was room for malva pudding yet. Sweet wine and coffee were enjoyed under the stars.

Tomorrow there would be family feuds: Frik and Chantelle would have a row that they had repeated year after year, each time with a seemingly different cause; this year it would be Chantelle's choice of Church. They would make up though and part with a semi-truce. The family would remember – the media would remind them – they lived in a broken, divided country, and they would feel guilty for having had so much to gorge on while others had so little. They would forget their guilt as they returned to work and became busy and they would forget to call each other as they had promised. There would be another birth, and another miscarriage. Ouma Katryn would have a stroke, suddenly, one from which she would not recover and the family would be plunged in grief. But for now, for Christmas, and in their memories of Christmas and of each other, they were together, satisfied, and the New Year seemed still to be in the distant, almost avoidable, future.