

LANDING



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## Her

He died while we were landing.

During take-off I had noticed how his hands were riveted to his knees and how the veins beneath his skin seemed to be thickening. I hoped he wasn't in pain. As soon as we were airborne, he relaxed. The cabin lights shone brightly. Although I normally wouldn't, I talked to him. I asked him if he was afraid of flying. He said that he hadn't flown in ten years.

He was on his way to visit his eldest son.

"My Dutch son," he said under his breath.

His speech was broken, as he searched for words in an invisible dictionary that seemed like it hadn't been cracked in years. His sentences unspooled like snippets of a poem with an unusual rhythm. Although all three of his sons had been born in the Netherlands, he said with pride, only the eldest was truly Dutch. It was as though the latter two had received more Spanish genes than the first, Arjen. Perhaps the choice of his name had influenced his future from the very start. If they had named him Simon or Robert, like the other two, he never would have had to spell out his name in Spain, and he would have felt much more at home in his father's country. But no. They named him Arjen and now,

forty-four years later, his home was in Amsterdam, whereas his brothers lived in Barcelona.

He spoke to me as if we had known each other a long time. There was a familiarity about his demeanor, which was both appealing and discomfiting. Without my prompting him, he offered that he'd been born in a town somewhere in the heart of Spain. In the sixties he'd emigrated to Holland for work. Initially it wasn't easy for him to pick up Dutch, but then he met a remarkable woman; he knew he wanted to marry her, and that he'd have to learn her language.

He paused briefly, savoring the memory for a moment.

The cabin crew passed by with the bar cart. He opened his tray-table and asked what there was to eat. I told him that airplane food was no longer free, and he looked at me incredulously. I showed him the menu, and he realized he didn't want anything after all. He whispered that he would just be eating to keep himself busy; he said that I was also keeping him busy by listening to his stories, and he continued his tale.

For ten years he had been the happiest man in the world, he said. Holland was a good place to live and the summers in Spain were hot, a time to focus on family. Until his wife became ill. At first they didn't know what was wrong. Eventually the doctors said that a warmer climate would help. The boys were between the ages of six and eleven when, in the seventies, they filled the car with their belongings and moved to a town north of Barcelona.

He was silent for a moment, gazing at me. I looked at him: those eyes that had once been dark brown were now light gray, brimming with experience. I realized I almost never spoke with old people, and that I almost never sat

next to them. I couldn't recall the last time I had looked at, and admired, an elderly person.

He said that it had been so long since he'd been to Holland that his Dutch had gotten rusty. He said this as though I wouldn't have noticed. I told him that he spoke Dutch very well, and he swelled with pride.

He had put a wooden box down on the seat between us. He had brought it to show his eldest son.

Then I plugged in my iPod and went to sleep. When I woke up, the pilot was announcing that we had begun our descent. I turned off the music. My seatmate became agitated again. His hands clutched his knees, as they had during takeoff. I looked at him once more, he smiled at me, and I silently wished him a happy landing before looking out the window at the landscape slipping past.

When the wheels touched down on the asphalt I felt an angel sigh in my ear.

The vehicle came to a halt and everyone on the plane began preparing to get up, putting on jackets, reaching for their luggage. His body remained in the same position, his hands glued to his knees and his head leaning slightly forward. I looked at his face, touched his shoulder, and felt my heart shrink.

We were united in silence, people bustling all around us. I knew that everyone had arrived home safely, except him, and I felt alone. Much more alone than usual. We were in row twenty-two. Soon there was no one left on the plane and a stewardess began to check the seats. She did it with confidence that the plane was empty. I wasn't sure whether I wanted her attention, or if I wanted more time to say good-bye. To make myself invisible I shrank down in my seat. I looked at the man and tried to remember everything

he had told me. Maybe there was a son, a daughter-in-law, and some grandchildren waiting for him in the arrivals hall. I was overcome with guilt: I had become the person who had heard the last words of their father and grandfather.

The stewardess was startled when she saw us. She asked me why we had not left the aircraft.

“He’s not moving.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think he’s dead.”

The stewardess moved her hand toward the man’s head, but an unseen force prevented her from touching his body. Instead, she moved her hand above his head, toward the panel beneath the overhead luggage compartment. She pressed the red button over and over again nervously.

“How long has he been dead?”

“I think he died while we were landing.”

The stewardess kept staring down the aisle.

“I’m going to get some help. Would you stay here a moment?” she asked, wavering. I nodded.

She walked away and I suddenly felt like I needed air. I got up, leaned forward, and tried to get out of my seat. I pressed the button on his armrest and pushed the back of his chair. That gave me a little more space to climb over his legs. I grabbed my bag and the newspaper I had bought at the airport in Barcelona and lifted one leg over him. I leaned momentarily against the seat back of the chair in front until the toes of my right foot touched the floor of the aisle. I quickly lifted my left leg and shifted all my weight with a little hop. I nearly fell into the seats on the other side of the aisle, but at least I hadn’t had to move the man, and I hadn’t bumped him accidentally, which is what I had been most afraid of.



I looked at his face from the other side. He looked like a different person. I didn't even know his name. I only knew the name of his dead wife, Willemien. And those of his sons, Arjen, Simon, and Robert.

I noticed the box again, still lying on the middle seat. I grabbed it. Then I removed my small suitcase from the luggage compartment and put the box inside it.

In the other compartment I found the man's jacket and a suitcase. I left his luggage on the seat in front of him. I resisted the impulse to touch his shoulder once more, I promised him that I would take good care of his box, and I left. On the gangway I ran into the stewardess, who was approaching the plane with two uniformed men. I told them I didn't know the passenger and that I was in a hurry.

"I think you need to stay until the police arrive," the younger of the two men stammered, while his eyes appealed to his colleague for support.

"Why?" I asked. Apparently it was a difficult question. The men looked at each other until the older one said:

"Know what? Give us your phone number and if the police have any questions they can call you."

I gave them Ana Mei Balau's business card and left. I took the train home. Outside everything was dark and silent, flat and orderly. Inside it was full of people who had been to work and were returning home on a regular old Monday. I found an empty seat in front of two girls who were chatting. I always tried to sit next to loved-up couples or chatty girls. I was silent all the way home, no one tried to engage me in conversation. That day I also decided that from then on I'd always sit near young people. I didn't want to experience someone dying next to me ever again.

In Centraal Station it took me a while to find my bicycle in the crowded bike parking area. I tied my suitcase to the luggage rack and pedaled down Haarlemmerdijk. I stopped in front of The Movies, bought a ticket for a Japanese film, and entered the cinema.

That night I got home earlier than usual, it wasn't even midnight. I left my suitcase outside my room and got in bed, hoping the fatigue from the flight would help me fall asleep.

At six the alarm went off. Life was as dark and distant as ever, and in the street people were scraping ice off their windshields. After a freezing journey on my bicycle, at seven I was seated at my desk in the headquarters of the Dutch Tax Authority in Amsterdam.

## Him

I don't like flying, I've never liked it, but choosing a new life in a foreign country makes it a necessity. Not just once, but every time you want to shorten the distance between past and present.

The days kept getting longer, full of silences and memories from other places. Willemien died just when I had gotten used to living without the boys, to being two instead of five, four, or three. All of a sudden I was one. The same year that Robert moved to Barcelona to work, Willemien died, and my reasons to remain in Figueres seemed to vanish. In the vacuum of Willemien's absence I began to discover little things around me. The nooks and crannies of the house, the organization of drawers of clothes, and sounds from the street began to intrude upon my consciousness with unfamiliar intensity. I realized that everything around me was irrevocably linked to Willemien. I hadn't heard the sounds from the street, or the upstairs neighbors' pipes, it was Willemien who had heard them, and who had made me sharpen my ears to hear them with her. I didn't know whether the walls of the hallway in our home were white or cream, it was Willemien who, when

we were visiting friends, had pointed out that the walls in our hallway were darker than theirs.

Realizing this was what hurt the most. Reminded of her absence just by the sound of a truck unloading gas cylinders in the street, I kept withdrawing until finally I had to do something drastic.

I packed up the house. I put everything in one of the rooms that had a lock in order to be able to rent our place in Figueres without having to sell our things or take them with me. All my things.

That was when I came across the box I hadn't seen for so many years. It was locked, and though I searched high and low I couldn't find the key for its little iron lock. So, without opening it, I decided to take the box with me to my hometown, along with a small suitcase with some clothes and two books.

In the train, on the way home, I imagined that the box was full of sand from the beach Willemien and I had visited the first day we had gone to look at the sea. The day when I told her she was the most beautiful girl in Scheveningen and she began to laugh, because she never did know how to handle a compliment, or because I had mispronounced the name of the most famous beach in The Hague.

When I arrived in Holland I was confronted with one of the coldest winters in the country's history. People said such low temperatures hadn't been recorded in the past fifty years. It wasn't out of the ordinary for canals and lakes to completely freeze over, and to see the Dutch skating across them. But that year's winter was much harder, that year even the pipes froze, leaving us without running water. It was February 1963 and I had arrived to work

for one year, after which I'd return home with the money, knowledge, and experience that living abroad gives you. That was my initial plan. A plan that had been a long time in the making.

Everything began in October 1962. I had spent the day working on the farm, beneath a satanic sun. My father and my brother had returned to the village earlier to stop at the blacksmith's house and fix some tools. Which is to say, that day I walked all the way home alone. When I was nearly there, I ran into the manager of the union office, who showed me a notice recently received from Madrid. It was from the Department of Labor, and it was about foreign businesses looking for workers. He asked me if I'd like to go to some faraway land to earn a lot of money fast, and I answered, without giving it a second thought, that I wasn't interested.

But the story didn't end there. He'd planted a seed, and day after day that adventure into the unknown, full of possibilities, beckoned. I'd leave for another country, where I'd earn loads of money in no time, I'd help my family without having to work the farm, and then I'd come home and build a house. And I'd be far from Mariana, the distance that was necessary to begin a new life. The past would be behind me.

Then I had a dream. I was in another country, working in a giant ship, with incredibly high ceilings and round skylights. I was building giant light bulbs out of pieces of thick glass, which fit together like the pieces of a puzzle and magically soldered themselves together. When I was finished, I had built an enormous light bulb, perfect and transparent. I stood there a moment looking at it and I realized I only needed to polish it for it to shine like the sun. So I did.

I was surrounded by light bulbs like mine, each one attended by a man. Each of us was looking after his light bulb the same way my father looked after the tools he used to work the land he rented for the farm. I remember being incredibly happy in the dream, a feeling of belonging like I felt at home, the same feeling I sometimes felt excluded from when I watched my father and my brother working side by side.

When I awoke I knew I had to leave.

I knew my father wouldn't like the idea. He had been upset when I had announced that I was going to work as a busboy at La Moraleja del Peral, in the Café de los Señores. But we all knew that work on the farm wasn't for me, that I wasn't suited to work on the farm. Ever since I can remember I've known that I'm a disappointment to my father. He had prepared me to be his successor, but I had slowly handed back the title he had looked after so carefully for me. Fortunately my brother Pedro was ready and willing to accept the position. And along with this position, he won my father's admiration as well.

I kept helping with the farm, but we all knew there was a clear line between helping and working. And then, when Mariana began to show up, bringing us lunch, I began to show up less and less. That's why I found the job at the Café de los Señores. And that's how Pedro won. He won it all, despite the fact that he never competed for a thing.

Despite the fact I was only helping on the farm, I still worried that they wouldn't be able to get on without me, because six hands are better than four. The girls, as we called my sisters back then, were much younger than us and still couldn't lend a hand.

I didn't say anything to anyone, but I went to the union office. They talked to me about Holland, they said I could work at Philips. It reminded me of the radio at the Café de los Señores, of the shining letters I read every day as "pilix." I imagined they built or polished these radios—which were still made of wood back then—and other futuristic devices, and added my name to the list, which already had four young men from the town.

The following day my father learned my name was on the list. He searched for me all over the village, found me in the bar, and asked me to step outside. Out on the main street, as we crossed the five meters that separated the door of the bar from the shade on the other side of the street, I prepared myself to receive a few heavy blows and the news that he had removed my name from the list.

But when we got to the other side of the street, when we were under cover from the harsh afternoon sun, he said I had his blessing. That it would be good for me to find work I was better suited to, and on which I could earn a living.

I was speechless. He went on to say that I should return when I had saved up enough money, and that I should write often, especially to my mother and the girls, who would miss me terribly. And so the unexpected came to pass.

Families can be unfathomable.

A few days later word arrived from the Spanish Institute of Emigration that I had to go to Cáceres for a medical exam. I went and I passed. In November I signed the contract and learned my first Dutch word: *Gloeilampenfabriek*. A word with twenty letters! A few months passed before I learned that my first Dutch word was actually three words:

*gloei, lampen, and fabriek*. Factory of incandescent lamps, light bulb factory.

In theory the group was supposed to leave for Holland in December but everything was postponed until February on account of the weather—a cold snap had paralyzed northern Europe. It was as if the country had put on such a frigid winter to prevent us Extremadurans from coming. But Holland didn't know that we, in addition to being quite stubborn, needed work as badly as we needed our daily bread, and in our unheated homes in Extremadura we were unfazed by the idea of meters of snow and frozen lakes. We weren't fazed at all, mostly because we had never seen such things, and we couldn't even imagine such cold. We would get to Holland, sooner or later.

The two-month delay was difficult. When you see yourself in another place, another life, it takes a lot of energy to carry on in the life you so badly want to leave behind. And around me, my family was preparing to take over the space I was going to vacate.

“When he's gone we'll do this, when he's gone we'll do that,” my father said, day after day. It seemed that, instead of robbing them of my help on the farm, I was opening up a world of opportunities, which my brother and father would greatly enjoy.

The girls told me not to go, they'd miss me too much. My mother kept her silence, her eyes fixed on the horizon, and Pedro didn't say a word.

Sometimes, my worries about leaving turned into doubts and I wanted to stay, especially when I saw Mariana. When I saw her alone, at the market, talking to the woman who sold vegetables, or with her friends, walking down the high street. I'd imagine that everything that had transpired



had not, and that I should stay and take her dancing the following Saturday.

But sometimes seeing her made me want to pack my bags and start walking to Cáceres, to wait there for whatever time was left, until the bus that would take me to the future arrived. Those were the days when I ran into her and she wasn't alone, when I saw her walking through the village hand in hand with Pedro. That was the sight that pained me most, because it was inexorable proof that all was lost.