

WEIRD HISTORY OF A LONELY SHORT STORY

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Roman

Uitgeverij Kwaliteit

Colophon

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For DBC Pierre

Wer sich über die Wirklichkeit nicht hinauswagt,
Der wird die die Wahrheit erobern.

Friedrich Schiller

The editor, bookshop owner and literary reviewer are in their judgement
always right!

Anonymous

FOREWORD PIERRE BOKMA

Had some trouble with my phone! Never really got used to it. Phew! Gonna read them all and see if I can throw up a few 'Snappy sentences'! Send it on. Always interested!

When is the Deadline?

Your trip, the day of our 'reunion' did that turn out right? I doubt there is a single restaurant in the Netherlands that can compete with Welling, unless it is on 'Schier' Van De Werf.

Well that means the decline has set in, if my name doesn't even make a splash at Starbucks!

Tomorrow I have the premiere of 'Door de Bank Genomen 2.0', ten years later and since the day before yesterday we have been overtaken by current events, which means that last minute adjustments have to be made, always a source of stress for those concerned. Tom has lost thirty kilos, had himself rebuilt and is now called Linde van de Heuvel. The tall Leopold has been restored by a plastic surgeon and has returned in a much improved version under the name Adam Jisequell.

Therefore, send a follow-up to this message around the weekend! I hope that you will not be defamatory at all!

Clever, then one Novel can tell you how to write the other. One Novel can be the director of the other and ultimately each other's 'spectators'. Chapeau! Noble!

But I would really like to make an appointment a little earlier about something so interesting. I really regret it, but without running a great risk of having to default, I unfortunately cannot approve and contribute with a preface.

Next time, please!

Greetings Pierre

PART 1

BOOKSHOP CITY



1.

For quite some time now, whenever he jolted awake and rose from the shelves of a condemned bookcase--which served as his terraced house in Bookshop City--one question relentlessly plagued him and wouldn't leave his mind; deep in his sewn-in heart, Short Story--who was a pocket-sized edition, pale and grey among neighboring books, as if shaded in by a child with a colored pencil--yearned to grow in the number of his pages. He had formed a relationship with the laminated cover of a discarded copy of One Thousand and One Nights, found in the street, whose author and owner were both unknown. Gazing at his reflection in that cover each morning, he would often say to himself:

"Oh, how I'd love to be a Novel, or perhaps a Film Script, or even a Screenplay for a popular TV series. Just something from another genre. A form with more social standing in Bookshop City than myself."

But whenever he got going with such drowsy daydreams upon waking, the reflection in that so-called mirror would not show his own cover, but instead, a fogged-up glimpse of his mother--a Detective--would emerge, and she would say:

"Must you? Quit it. If you want to develop into a meaningful book someday, you're lacking far too much, missing the essential structure that books your age have long since acquired. What a flimsy attitude. You're just like your father, who left the moment you were born and was nothing more than a toolbox manual. And from what I hear, nothing ever came of him either."

Those kinds of days usually ended with him crawling right back into bed. And so, minute after minute, the limited life cycle of him as a book ticked away, day after day flew by, with barely anything happening--his existence remained modest in size. There it was, he realized, shivering on that spring morning: the vicious circle in which he was stuck.

This quiet, almost rural kind of life was suddenly, and quite roughly, disturbed to such a degree that he would sometimes long for the calm hopelessness he had known before. The direct cause: a more or less accidental encounter with that annoying guy, the Gossip Column, the day before. Despite his slick design and glamorous cover, the Gossip Column was always quick and cutting in conversation. Many books from the dustier and more densely packed inner neighborhoods of Bookshop City avoided him--not least to keep from becoming the subject of his acidic banter. He had been in top form yesterday, unfortunately, sitting at a terrace tucked under an awning to stay in the shade--and to wreak his usual havoc unseen.

“Hey, Short Story. Over here. Quick!”

That was the annoying thing about summer approaching: all the outdoor cafés made it impossible to avoid someone on the street. Short Story had no choice but to go to him.

“There's just been an attack. A Crime Novel has gone totally off the rails,” panted the Gossip Column. “A serialized one even, with many parts and all kinds of nastiness. A full-on settling of scores in the underworld of Bookshop City and the crime fiction scene. They say the screaming could be heard miles away.”

Short Story hesitated to respond. The Column eyed him suspiciously and said:

“You're not brushing me off, are you?”

“No, Mr. Gossip Column. Wouldn't dare.”

“Good. Better not.”

The physical violence between books--the bodily kind, but also their inner turmoil--had been growing noticeably and alarmingly in recent years. Short Story couldn't understand why. Being kind was surely more pleasant. Especially for a romance novel, sweetness was a must--and commercially essential, wasn't it? He could have asked a group of old Greek Translations at the edge of his neighborhood, who always seemed to have explanations for

everything. But yesterday, he hadn't felt like it. Those Classical Works tended to be even more long-winded than the Gossip Column, and he wouldn't have had time to get to his own meager content--which, after all, was the whole point.

The words of the Gossip Column buzzed in his mind like bees--busy bees--giving him a headache, as if he weren't held together by Chinese binding thread, but by half a dozen iron nails. And so it was without a word of goodbye and barely a nod that Short Story left the terrace. He conveniently forgot, for a moment, that books, in their deepest essence, were thoughts. And when those thoughts became obsessed with a disturbing subject, a precarious matter, or a hot theme, you could bet your last drop of the most toxic book glue on it--or set the clock in the writers' café to five minutes before six, frozen--and you'd still get caught up in it yourself.

That's how it went with books. And so it went for Short Story too.

After making the optimistic decision that morning to act more professionally and improve his habit of cutting corners, he first went for a cup of pure coffee with his most loyal friend: the Lexicon of Literary Terms. His kindhearted companion--whose very good nature made many suspect he battled deep depressions daily--was, of course, aware of this impression. And when he felt his mood dip, you'd hear him cheerfully exclaim: "Bien!" And if he spent hours hesitating, delaying important tasks while worrying about the outcome, he would say to Short Story: "This is going well, I'll get started in a second. No really, it's going well!"

In that sense, there wasn't a vulgar cloud in the sky. They simply had their boastful slurping session. To be precise, in the Writers' Café--recognizable by half a dozen round tables with Thonet chairs and a purplish marble bar behind a grand window on Bookshop Square. This time, their idle chatter was about story arcs.

When the juice had run out, around the beginning of the afternoon, Short

Story hurried off to the library in search of some depth. Overcome by a sudden craving, he stopped at a snack bar. If only he hadn't. If only he'd skipped it. After scarfing down a tray of pun-laden fries with mayo, and resuming his path toward the Public Library, he was soon overtaken not only by a nagging suspicion—paranoia served by the ladle, courtesy of his Detective mother, was nothing new to him—but by an undeniable sense that something odd was going on. On both sides of the canal street, a squad of curiously covered books had been shadowing him for a while.

To check whether this annoying feeling was real, he darted into a side alley. But he froze on the spot. Where the heck had he ended up? This dead-end alley, reeking of literary reviews flung like feces, was not a place he'd ever seen before.

Up ahead on the left, leaning against the fence of a second-hand construction yard—still shimmering with heat—stood the transport vehicle of a locally feared theater books club: an antique moving truck with a wide loading bed made of brown timber beams, rising all the way above its red cab. On the wooden side panels, postmodern spidery lettering spelled out the club's pretentious name, thankfully so cryptic that any intended meaning flew right over Short Story's head.

Now, everyone in Bookshop City knew you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but when four shadows soon appeared at the alley's entrance—when his pursuers didn't dissolve into curling opium smoke—Short Story acted quickly. With gasoline fumes making him woozy, he decided to hide behind the stage transport. Between the broken-down fence and the truck cab. Using a step rail, he hopped up and clung, as best he could, to a bizarre kind of side mirror. In that mirror, he secretly flirted with himself and noticed—perhaps indulgently—that for a book in his stage of the life cycle, he didn't look half bad. And as if the universe wanted to slap him for that cheeky bit of vanity, to punish his smugness with a jolt of poetic justice, a cowardly thud sounded to his right, deep in the shadowy part of the alley. As if someone