

PARADISE AMSTERDAM

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Barry Cussel

**PARADISE
AMSTERDAM**



BARRYDOOR
UITGEVERIJ

This novel is dedicated to my beloved wife Teddy, who gave me our wonderful daughter Nina – a daughter of whom I am endlessly proud.

Barry Cussel

FOREWORD

Sometimes a story begins with a small idea but blossoms into a complete world.

"Paradise Amsterdam" is the third and final book in the trilogy "The Mystery of the Lost Ring". After everything the characters have experienced in the previous two books, this story takes them to an even more distant world – a world where the boundaries between past and future, man and machine, reality and the impossible slowly begin to blur.

This novel is about adventure, but also about choices. About what remains of a person when everything familiar around them collapses. About friendship, love, sacrifice, and the hope that even after the darkest times, there is still a place to call home.

In this book, Amsterdam is not just a city. It is a symbol. A symbol of the human will to survive, to preserve one's freedom, and to start anew.

The novel contains science fiction, mystery, humor, unusual creatures, other dimensions, and many seemingly impossible situations. But behind all this lies a simple question:

What would we do if the world as we know it ceased to exist?

I leave the answer to the reader.

With the writing of "Paradise Amsterdam", I complete the story that began with "The Mystery of the Lost Ring". For me, this is not just the end of a trilogy. This is the end of a long imaginary journey, in which the characters gradually became more than just names.

And now it is time for them to go their own way – into the reader's world. A pleasant experience.

Part 1

Amsterdam, 2020.

The ten-euro note he had won for the first time at the Holland Casino was one of Gerald Hulshof's favorite tangible memories. He had recently retired as a banker after having worked for many years as a department manager, and not just anywhere, but at the largest bank in the country. He had been a respected employee of the National Bank of the Netherlands, but few people knew about his weakness: gambling in casinos.

Gerald had been staring for several minutes at the bluish banknote on his desk by the window. Memories came flooding back, pleasant memories from the recent past. That ten euros had been his first bet on roulette and his first quick win of three hundred and sixty euros. He had bet on twenty, and it had landed exactly on 20. His joy had been boundless, because he had just graduated in finance and did not have a cent to his name. Only that ten-euro note.

From that moment on, everything went his way. They hired him as an intern at the bank, and his bosses were very pleased with his work. He was an excellent mathematician, and many of his colleagues envied him for this talent. At the casino, he often won because he made full use of his skills. He always played on the edge of risk, and that made him a winner most of the time.

That was where he met his future wife, Denise. She was, like him, resourceful in her choice of strategy and often won huge amounts thanks to her developed sixth sense.

After a year of secret meetings at the casino, they got married, had a child, and lived on the tenth floor of an

enormous, luxurious apartment building in the center of Amsterdam.

And so everything went like clockwork until the present day. Their child grew up, went their own way, and they only saw each other during the holidays.

Now that they had no more obligations, they went to the casino for years. It was like their second home. They had a fantastic time. Money was no problem for them. They won almost every time they went there, and when they lost, Gerald's pension, which he had begun receiving, more than made up for it, because it was substantial as well.

Until the coronavirus crisis struck.

Everything came to a standstill in Amsterdam.

And because they belonged to the high-risk group, they had to stay indoors. The food they ordered was delivered to their apartment by couriers, who kept at least one and a half meters away, while his wife Denise paid with her mobile phone.

Their problem, however, was the garbage. Someone had to throw the garbage bags into the container across the street. And that meant they had to leave their apartment, which was risky for them.

"Darling, don't look at that note!" Denise began the conversation and continued in a condescending tone: "You know we don't have a choice. We simply have to put the garbage bags outside our apartment door and put that ten euros in one of the bags with a note attached."

"And what are we going to write on it: 'Please take our garbage away because we're afraid of catching corona'?" Gerald replied in a gloomy voice.

"Yes, exactly! That's what we'll write. But we can also add: 'We're cowards, so forgive us.'"

"And aren't we?"

"No, we're not, because we belong to the high-risk group. Don't you understand that?" His wife became angry. "Do you know how many people have died in hospitals? More than a thousand just yesterday. And about half of them are around our age."

"Don't we have at least one other banknote besides my favorite one from the casino?!"

"You know we haven't used cash for years. Only internet payments and our mobile phones."

"If only you knew what memories this banknote brings back for me, dear Denise!"

"I know very well, but we have to. We have no choice."

The former banker got up from his desk and looked out of the window. He stared at the beautiful view that opened up before him. From the tenth floor, everything was visible as if it lay in the palm of his hand.

The city was bathed in light. Everything was so clean. There was no movement anywhere. Everything had come to a standstill. Only here and there did a courier wearing a protective mask ride a bicycle toward his last customer.

The apartment had two sides from which the city could be seen. The southern part of the building. One side looked out over the city center, while the northern side faced the salty River Street called the IJsselmeer. It connected the inland IJsselmeer with the North Sea. Both small cargo ships and large cruise ships sailed along it.

At that same moment, a large, super-luxurious cruise ship, the Princess Victoria, was moored in front of the building. It had thousands of wealthy passengers on board. Fortunately, no one was infected, and life on board continued as normal, just as it had before the crisis. The

cruise ship, carrying wealthy passengers from both Great Britain and America, had fled to escape the virus. To board this cruise ship, you needed millions in the bank. A ticket alone cost at least five hundred thousand pounds. The ship had enough food supplies to last at least a year. It was a kind of Noah's Ark.

It had made its final stop at a settlement to take on the last supplies and fuel. That settlement was Amsterdam.

The entrance to the apartment was on the northern side. Exactly where the ship was moored. One of Gerald and Denise's bedrooms was next to the door. From the window, they could see the passenger cabins. They were so close that they could even wave to the residents of the apartment building. The distance was no more than fifty meters. Passengers even had to close the curtains in their cabins so that no one could see them undressing or making love.

"When are we throwing the garbage bags outside?" Denise asked, already holding one end of the banknote.

"Well, now?" her husband replied, grabbing the other end of the banknote and continuing, "You write the note."

"It's already written and attached to one of the bags," Denise said, pulling harder and harder on the ten-euro note. "And let go of that damn banknote, man!"

"Okay! Take it!" He let go of the paper and leaned back in his chair, his head buried in his computer screen.

"We'll take them outside together. Come and help me!"

"But only as far as the door, here on the floor."

"Yes, that's why there's a note and this money, so that someone will dare to pick them up and throw them onto the street."

"I hope Esmeralda picks them up. She works as an anesthesiologist at the hospital, doesn't she?"

"Whoever picks them up, they should at least treat themselves to these ten euros."

"But they're my lucky charm," Gerald began to protest again and added in a whisper, "and my life. I owe them to you too!"

"Come on, enough nonsense!" Denise interrupted him, then smiled. "She was a real beauty, that's why I took you along, not because of the casino or the money. And certainly not because of this ten-euro note."

They attached the note with the message to the other note and carried the bags to the door, looking around to see if anyone would notice them. The building was deserted. Everyone had hidden inside their apartments, and no one went outside. Everyone was afraid of each other, afraid of catching the virus.

"Look, darling, the ship? What a crowd!" Gerald began as he looked out the window, but Denise quickly interrupted him:

"Come inside and don't play the hero. Okay! This is Noah's Ark. Don't you read the news? Super-rich, with supplies for more than a year, if not five! Get used to it!"

"I'm not poor!" her offended husband began to defend himself.

"You're not, but you're not as rich as they are. Come on, go inside. You don't want to bring a virus up from the lower floors, do you?"

"Look at that beautiful lady, across the ship, in the cabin next to the bridge," Gerald grinned.

"I'll give you a lady! Can't you see that this is an older woman with... someone next to her?" Denise did not finish her sentence, because there was indeed a young man standing next to her, wearing nothing but his underwear.

"Let's go inside."

They went into their apartment and locked the door with several recently installed extra locks.

Part 2

Esmeralda had to leave for her next shift at the hospital in Amsterdam-North. She had already been working there as an anesthesiologist for several years. Twenty years earlier, she had come to the Netherlands from Portugal. Her parents had been born in Mozambique, a former Portuguese colony. Like her, they had dark skin, but they were incredibly good people. They had been doctors in their home country and were happy with their profession. Esmeralda had also been born in that African country, but when she was five years old, her parents had left for Portugal because of a shortage of qualified doctors. They settled there, and just like her parents, their daughter devoted herself entirely to the medical profession. She graduated from medical school in Lisbon and was given the opportunity to do an internship in the Netherlands, in Amsterdam. After that, she stayed to live and work there.

The virus had been raging in Amsterdam for several weeks, and she was on the front line. She worked overtime and was constantly available. Before the crisis, she had gained a lot of weight and had lived a life of luxury. Now she weighed only half as much. The stress, both mental and physical, had taken its toll. Her dark skin had lost its healthy glow, and despite her young age, she had dark circles under her eyes.

She had been feeling unwell for several days, knowing that she had contracted the virus from her patients. Her test results were due to arrive that day.

She was a neighbor of Gerald and Denise Hulshof, a few apartments down the street. Whenever she walked past

their apartment, she always greeted them and was exceptionally kind to them. Esmeralda was, by nature, a gentle and kind-hearted person. Perhaps she owed that to her weight or her African heritage.

That day, she had been called by the doctor on duty and had left immediately. She had told him that she had felt unwell the day before, but he had told her that no one was available and that she was needed in the middle of the crisis. She had no right to be sick. That was why she had left that day.

She walked past Gerald's door and saw several garbage bags standing there. There was a note attached to the bags, along with a ten-euro note. Curious, she leaned forward to read what was written.

She understood that the retired banker and his wife were afraid to take the garbage to the container outside. She laughed at the note. She took it off the bags and unfolded it. At that moment, Esmeralda had a coughing fit and involuntarily sneezed into her hand. Tiny droplets sprayed onto it. She did not realize that this could be dangerous. Then she looked at the note and told herself that she could take the garbage bags out even without the reward. She found it humiliating to accept those ten euros for simply taking out the garbage. She folded the note in half and slid it under the family's door. Then she dragged the garbage bags downstairs. She was glad that she had done something good. And she thought she would be rewarded with a negative test result.

Unfortunately, that was not the case. She had contracted the virus. Gerald heard a rustling outside the door and walked over to see who the kind person was who had come

to take his bags away. He had just reached the door when he saw his banknote lying beside it.

He was so happy that he almost shouted, "Denise, a miracle has happened! The ten euros are back!"

At that moment, his wife had opened the south-facing window overlooking the center of Amsterdam. From there, she could also see who was coming out of the building and crossing the street. She was about to tell Gerald that their neighbor Esmeralda was taking out their garbage bags when she heard him shout with joy.

He was on his way to pick up his banknote when a draft came through. Through the open window and the crack under the door, the banknote began to move and was already halfway across the floor when Gerald opened the door. The banknote fluttered violently and rolled outside. Then it began to fall from the tenth floor. The wind was so strong that it carried the ten-euro note toward the ship Princess Victoria. Within seconds, it reached the ship and slipped through one of the open cabin windows. It was the same cabin where the older lady was staying with the young man beside her.

The banknote fell softly onto the lady's nightstand, right next to the watch she had given the young man.

Part 3

The captain of the cruise ship was named Ivan Petrovich Jackson. He was a third-generation American with Russian roots.

His grandfather had once been one of the nobles of Tsarist Russia. As chief advisor to Tsar Nicholas II, he was known for always giving accurate and sound advice to the rulers. It was even said that his wife was a prophetess and that, as he himself claimed, he therefore always "predicted" the future flawlessly.

The Tsar valued him highly, which was why he was always at the palace. He only left his estate to "discuss" the kingdom's problems with his wife. He always came up with the right answers, and thus the kingdom was always on the rise. Until, in the sixteenth year of the twentieth century, his wife fell ill and died in bed after many months.

Before she left this world, however, she told her husband that he had to flee the palace and Russia as soon as possible because his life was in danger. She also told him a number of other things about the future. They had no children, and that proved to be the deciding factor.

Ivan's grandfather told the Tsar that he intended to undertake a so-called diplomatic trip to America. That was what his wife had told him to do, and the Tsar agreed. He gave him a ship full of riches and gifts for the Americans, hoping to establish good relations with them. Ivan seemed to him to be the perfect man for this mission.

And so it happened.

Upon arriving in Florida, his grandfather settled there, sold both the ship and its riches, and became an honorary citizen of America.

He married a beautiful and very wealthy Cuban woman, and they had a son, whom they named Peter.

Peter became a general in the American Navy. He participated in the Second World War and received many medals for it. Naturally, Ivan, his son, had not fallen far from the tree and became a captain of a warship. After that, he was captain of super-luxury cruise ships for many years.

And so, in modern times, he ended up on the "Princess Victoria".

He passed all the rigorous tests for the position of the most capable and reliable captain with flying colors and was also his father's greatest pride.

Ivan was married to Louisa Jackson, an influential lady in Florida society. However, after their marriage, he adopted Jackson as his third name. His father was not pleased with this and disinherited him.

Consequently, they quarreled and did not speak to each other for years, until, one day before New Year's 2020, his father visited him and told him about the virus. He told him what his grandmother had predicted back then.

In 2020, a virus would arrive that would take the world in its grip and not let go for years, after which it would mutate and wipe everyone out.

His father had read in the newspaper about a similar virus that had already spread in China and was reminded of his mother, the prophetess. He had gone to his son immediately, first asking for forgiveness, then telling him about his grandmother and asking him to accept an offer from a friend in the secret society of the "Blednitsi", of

which he himself was a member, to become captain of the "Noah's Ark". That was what they called the cruise ship "Princess Victoria". Their conversation lasted a long time, during which Ivan refused to believe his father's predictions and fabrications.

Eventually, Ivan agreed because of the enormous salary his father had mentioned. He also brought his wife on board, the beautiful but aging Louisa Jackson.

Ivan was around sixty, and his potency was already at an end. Unlike him, his wife Louisa was insatiable in this regard.

This was also her weakness, which she could not resist, no matter how much she wanted to. Even as a young girl, she was consumed by desire at the thought of a man.

She remembered nothing special about her virginity, because she had been raped, or rather, she had raped her two older cousins on her father's side. At the time, it was a game for her, one she enjoyed immensely.

At university, Louisa could barely restrain herself from throwing herself into the arms of the professors. They, in turn, kept it hidden from her so that their families would not suffer. But that was difficult to achieve, for Louisa's father was none other than the governor of the state.

He was a powerful man who ruled with an iron fist over all aspects of public life, including the university where he had enrolled his daughter. He knew of her problem but tried to conceal it by every means possible, from threats to secret agreements with fellow professors who complained to his administration.

Thus, Louisa only escaped this "God's" punishment when she met Ivan, the handsome captain of the US Navy. Her father knew Peter, Ivan's father, from the secret club called

"The Miserables". Both had blood type A with a negative Rh factor, and both were followers of the teachings of MacEwan, their Scottish mentor. This was one of the conditions for becoming a member of this secret club.

After they had been introduced to each other, Louisa and Ivan married hastily, which more or less allayed the governor's concerns. He was only afraid that Ivan would discover her lustful past and that her "blackshirts" would be exposed. Years passed, and Ivan never found out about his wife's past.

He traveled on cruise ships while she stayed at home, always looking for suitable gardeners to maintain "her garden". The years passed unnoticed, and now she, the beautiful Louisa, had to be with him, perhaps forever, on this "Noah's Ark".

The ship was docked in the center of Amsterdam, and the captain had ordered everyone to keep their cabin doors and windows closed. All this was to prevent the virus from somehow flying in from the nearby buildings, which were just as tall as the ship. There were countless passengers in the cabins, keeping their eyes fixed on the ships. The only exception was his impetuous wife, who could not do without fresh air.

At that moment, Luisa had woken up from a short nap caused by a passionate encounter with Armando, a forty-year-old owner of a large internet company in Florida.

They had met here on the ship during the captain's first lunch with the passengers. He had told her that he had never seen such a mature and beautiful woman and that he was even willing to divorce his wife, an elegant model for Chanel.

Today, they had met for the first time in Luisa's cabin and had become intimate. Armando, however, was more cautious and had slipped out before she woke up. He had closed the door so softly that even a woman with very sensitive hearing would not have heard him, and his fifty-year-old mistress had barely noticed him leaving.

"Armando, where are you?" Luisa was startled, looked around, and rubbed her eyes with her hands.

She heard no answer and straightened up on her elbows. She leaned against the pillow. She remembered the lovely afternoon with him and called out, "Armando, are you in the bathroom?"

The silence that had fallen over the room frightened her.

Then Luisa looked at the locker, where she saw something she had not seen in years. It was a ten-euro note.

This was the greatest insult she had had to endure in years.

This man had mocked her so cruelly.

Did he perhaps think she was a prostitute? Had he given her this note as a reward for her good deeds in bed and then run off like a thief in the night?

She would not simply accept that. She got dressed, took the note with her, and went to the Great Hall, where she hoped to find him and rub the note in his face.

However, Luisa did not know that this note belonged to Gerald Hulshof. She also did not know that the note had become infected with the virus when Esmeralda had accidentally sneezed on it.

She did not know that this note would change not only her life, but the entire ship, the "Princess Victoria".

Part 4

Scotland, 2066

After everyone who had escaped from Kasul's "Hell" had ended up in McEwan's laboratory, the souls of Berry, Rome, Rosadelia, and Peloponnesus did not know exactly what was happening to them.

The restoration of their physical bodies had to be carried out in stages using the latest technology. In the 21st century, such scientific wonders were taking place that even the greatest scientists would have called them "witchcraft."

Fortunately, McEwan possessed a sufficiently large database and DNA material from all four of them, who had lost their bodies in "Hell." He instructed his staff to enter the data and start the restoration machine.

Berry "woke up" first and was amazed to see his first hand movement describing a semicircle. He watched with unconcealed joy as his hand materialized. He could feel every muscle, both in his biceps and in his fingers. He knew that for years he had been merely a ghost, wandering through the circles of "Hell." Slowly but surely, he began to remember what had happened to him.

He remembered how he and his wife Theodora had been at the Holland Casino. He remembered how they had met a certain Flekki there and "robbed" the casino of one hundred thousand euros. Afterwards, the three of them went to another hall of the casino, where the magicians Robin and Emile were performing. He remembered how Rosadelia, the daughter of the Spanish ambassador to the Netherlands, had joined them there.

All these images began to appear clearly in his mind.

Then the events followed.

The magicians seated them at table number thirteen, and subsequently they all found themselves—Fleki, a young man with a spot on his face, the beautiful Rosadelia, and he and his wife—under a "dome" unknown to them. This dome was also the cause of their physical death. The dome traveled to Hell, and Robin and Emile were servants of Kasul, the creator of the underworld, called "Hell" by the people on Earth.

Berry remembered how his Theodora had said goodbye to her physical body and flown out of the dome, but her soul had rushed upwards, to another world.

Those who remained behind in the dome, however, hurried to the gates of Hell.

Berry remembered what his stay there had been like. How he had had another body there, made of different matter. He remembered how Kasul's world was constructed. He remembered the more than forty years he had spent there, in one cube with Rosadelia. Those decades, however, had passed like the blink of an eye for him.

Berry also remembered how, after being freed from his "Theodora", who was in reality Nicky, with the reincarnated soul of his wife, they had all rushed to Earth and, more precisely, to the laboratory of his great-grandfather McEwan.

"So we already have a body?" he heard a pleasant but unfamiliar woman's voice.

"Who are you?" Berry stood up halfway and continued, "I know you from somewhere, but I can't immediately remember where."

"I am Nicky," said the beautiful girl with long blonde hair that reached almost to her knees, with a smile on her lips.

"I am Berry, right?" he began to say questioningly, but then confirmed, "Right! I am sure that I am Berry."

"Yes, that's right, sweetheart!" She leaned over him and kissed him softly on his forehead.

"Honey?" The man was startled, knowing that he was quite old to be addressed like that by a young girl. "I am almost your grandfather. I must be a hundred, maybe. What do I look like? I don't have a mirror."

"Come on, come on," she said, laughing enthusiastically. "Look at your hands, wise man."

Berry had already seen them and wondered how it was possible that there were no wrinkles on them. They were the hands of a young or at least middle-aged man, not those of an old centenarian.

"Apparently my grandfather renewed my body," he laughed. "And how do I look? I don't dare look at myself. Tell me, Nicky? Wasn't that your name?"

"You can call me Theodora. And stop calling me 'you'."

"Theodora?" He looked at her enthusiastically. "So she left when we were in Robin and Emile's dome. She went 'up'. I went 'down'."

"I know, fool!" said the beauty and continued, "And that is why I am going to tell you about myself now, and that is why I can call myself your 'Theodora' again."

"Okay, all right then!" He confirmed her wish, but then added in a testing tone, "But despite everything, tell me something personal from our life with Theodora. Only then will I truly believe you. Start with that."

The girl thought for a few seconds and tried to remember something from her previous life on Earth. Something must have remained in her subconscious. Something secret. Something no one knew. However, she needed an intense

"Guru" meditation to fulfill the wish of the still-doubting Berry. This type of meditation had been developed in the 1950s. It proved several theories from the teachings of Dr. Reidsema, namely that in a previous life you were in "Heaven" anyway, or at least that is what the place of life after death was called. This "Heaven" lay beyond the reach of Earth, and the Creator ruled there.

To be able to take a "glimpse" into your previous life, you had to master the meditation technique. Not everyone could do it, but Nicky had learned it well during the intensive courses taught by the descendants of the psychiatrist Reidsema.

The doctor herself had been at the height of her fame in the 1990s, when she had been able to prove the existence of past lives to a number of test subjects with her "machine". Afterward, she replaced the machine, which was to some extent dangerous to her clients' health, with "Guru" meditation.

This meditation involved connecting with the universe, where the world called "Paradise" was located, after uttering certain phrases, and drawing information from it. A part of everyone's soul always remained in the "archives" of Paradise and was preserved there forever. Anyone who could make contact with it could also "see" vague events from a past life.

"Berry, can you close your eyes for a moment? Then I will surprise you with something to prove to you that I am your 'Theodora'," asked Nicky, squinting her eyes slightly.

"Yes, of course, I have already told you, Nicky," he replied, and with the body of a man now fully formed, he closed his eyes and waited in disbelief.

The girl walked to the corner of the room and crossed her arms there, as she had been taught in the course, while whispering the Latin phrase, "Magna paradisi sinu mihi fenestra," and waited for contact.

Nicky felt light, and her soul was freed from her body for a second. In that one second, she traveled millions of kilometers at a speed that knew no dimension. She found herself at the door to "Heaven." Entry was impossible for any mortal, but with the key, which looked more like a "password", Nicky could gain access to the frames containing memories from her previous life. The event she was looking for revealed itself before her "eyes." She remembered it carefully and returned to Nicky's body. This happened before the second was over.

Nicky laughed and turned around.

Berry looked at her with glazed eyes. He hadn't even closed them. He admired the girl's beautiful body. He had also seen how she had nearly fallen to the ground. He was pleased when he saw her compose herself and stand up again with a smile on her face, sitting down at the foot of the bed.

"Well?" said Berry in a mocking tone, adding in a slightly different tone, "Know that I remember everything my wife and I have done. Just don't try to bring up cliché things that happen to every couple. Don't waste my time, girl!"

"Okay!" said Nicky. "I'll just tell you about that heavy TV that fell on my hands and literally crushed my finger. We had just had a fight with you!? Right? Does anyone know that, sir?"

Berry thought about it for a moment and was a little shocked by what she had said. Such an incident really had happened. Two doctors from the hospital had come to check

on Theodora's condition immediately after he had called the ambulance.

"But couldn't she have just retrieved that from the hospital records?" he wondered incredulously.

Then Berry asked in turn, without answering the girl's question, "Okay, you're right. That is correct, but I want to know what I said to my wife before I left her after that incident. Where was she?"

"I won't forget it, darling!" Nicky began to speak, but with tears in her eyes, she stared at the ceiling. "I was lying in bed when you came to say goodbye. And what did you say then? You said we would get back together! Was that true? Who could have known that?"

Berry was not himself. How was this possible? How could this girl know his secrets? This was truly the soul of his Theodora. Really. He got out of bed, untied all the cables attached to his body, and hugged the girl. Tears streamed down his cheeks and dripped onto Nicky's shoulder.

"This really is you, sweet Theodora! Nali, may I call you that? Don't worry, I use the name I'm used to, but... so..." he stammered.

"Well, at least you call me 'you'!" she laughed, and they hugged each other.

They were about to kiss, but at that moment, something like a half-human, half-robot entered the room and, when it saw what was happening, closed the door and ran outside.

Berry and the new Theodora heard a cry of joy: "He has recovered, Master McEwan! One hundred percent! He even has a boyfriend!"

"What a boyfriend, Rolones. So this is his wife! I'm coming to my grandson right away," a voice sounded, but it was unclear where it came from or who was speaking. "So