

The Legatee

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Prologue

He had lived to the ripe old age of ninety-one. It was only two weeks since he had died.

My mobile had beeped and a message had come in with the heading 'Letter to the legatee'. I had printed it out downstairs. I took a deep breath and started to read.

Driebergen, 27 February 2023

Subject: B. van der Meer estate

Reference: 1866fgy/2023

Dear Mr van der Meer,

You hereby receive information about the estate of your father, Mr Benjamin van der Meer.

First of all, let me express my condolences on the death of your father.

You are receiving this letter following (telephone) discussions I had with your sister, Laura Bakker-van der Meer. She was – as you probably know – his trustee during his life under a power of attorney granted to her by your father in a life will drawn up on 30 September 2018 by Master De Boer, then a solicitor in Utrecht.

Strangely, the email I had sent to solicitor De Jong had been ignored, I saw.

I read on.

Your sister Laura was appointed executor by your father in his will.

Oh really, she who knows only how to spend money! Wait, she should now handle an inheritance? It was ridiculous.

She has asked me to draw up a certificate of inheritance (or 'declaration of execution of a will'). A certificate of inheritance is a declaration by a civil law notary, stating that someone has died, who under the law or a will are the heirs and/or who can act as executor on behalf of the joint heirs towards third parties. Such a statement is often requested by banks or other institutions.

I impatiently skipped a bit and read on.

Inspection of the Dutch Central Wills Register has shown that your father last had a will drawn up by the late solicitor Master De Jong of our office in Utrecht, which he signed on 23 November 2019. Attached is a copy of the aforementioned will in appendix 1.

Right, so solicitor De Jong was dead. That would explain a lot. He probably never got my email. Or he had simply lost it somehow... or even thrown it away hoping that no one would be the wiser... But no, a solicitor wouldn't do such a thing, even if my sisters had pretended to know nothing or had never told him anything that didn't suit them.

I also understood the following: – Your father has not laid down wishes regarding his estate in a codicil (handwritten document) and he did not have a will drawn up abroad. Should you have information to the contrary, I would like to hear from you.

This was followed by a long legal text, the ramifications of which eluded me. I impatiently flipped to the last page.

Your father has named as his heirs in the aforementioned will: his children Laura, Annet and Tako, together, for equal shares. You are not named as an heir (and therefore have no say in probate).

There it was in black and white! I had been disinherited in this will.

A bequest has been included in the will for your benefit as a legatee, described as followed:

'I bequeath, not free of duties and costs, and without adding calculated interest, to my eldest son Wouter Frederik van der Meer, born in Middelburg on the third of March nineteen hundred and sixty-one (03-03-1961), an amount in cash of € 28,500 (twenty-eight thousand five hundred euros).'

Simply put, this means that you will receive a cash amount of € 28,500; this amount will be payable no sooner than six months after your father's death.

This means that your sisters and brother will each be entitled to 1/3 of your father's estate after the aforementioned bequest has been paid to you.

I lowered the letter onto my lap and closed my hand around the mug of coffee, which was on the table in front of me. Only after half an hour did I read the last bit of the letter.

Please inform me whether you wish to accept this bequest, and if so, to which bank account in due course (as soon as possible, but this may take some time) the amount due to you can be transferred. You may indicate your reaction by signing a copy of this letter and having your signature legalised either by a solicitor of your choice or at our office.

Kind regards,

Margriet de Lange, solicitor & civil law notary

They must have thought that I would accept the bequest and refrain from claiming my rightful share as an heir. What disgusting people your family can be!

Fortunately, the contents of this will were not particularly important. Laura and Annet were in for a nasty surprise.

I got up with a deep sigh. I took the business card my father had given me out of my wallet. I placed it on the table in front of me, next to the letter from the solicitor.

Watching the sun rise bright red behind the Tower Hill Memorial, I drank my coffee slowly. Then I sprang into action. First, I made a quick phone call to the lobby, then I packed my small travel case.

1. Father

My father was the youngest child in a large Catholic family in Westervoort. My grandparents called him Benjamin. The family lived in a modest terraced house near the bridge over the river IJssel. They rented the house from my grandfather's employer, Rijkswaterstaat (the Directorate-General for Public Works and Water Management). His job, together with a team of men, was to check the Eastern IJssel dike every day for possible leaks.

Standing on the dike, you had a wonderful view of the river, the bridge that spanned it, and the boats coming and going. As a small boy, my father would often stand on the dike, holding hands with either his father or his mother.

In May 1940, when the bridge was blown up by the Dutch army in an attempt to stop the German invasion, the shock was felt by all those who lived near the bridge, like my father's family. Although their house had not been damaged by the explosives and the bridge was repaired within six months, as the war progressed no one could be sure that things would remain as they were.

By early 1944 the situation had become untenable. The accidental bombing in the early hours of 22 February, when American bombers were diverted by bad weather over Germany, reduced large parts of the city of Nijmegen, as well as Arnhem, Deventer and Enschede, to ashes. Westervoort was miraculously spared.

Secret messages were exchanged between neighbours about an imminent liberation from the Germans. However, open resistance was increasingly suppressed, and it seemed that it would be some time before the war was brought to a successful conclusion.

Perhaps the bridge at Westervoort would be bombed again. That would be dangerous, especially for a small child. Suddenly, to make matters worse, two German sergeants were billeted with my grandparents. They tried to figure out how to keep their little Benjamin out of harm's way.

By asking around among their fellow parishioners, they managed to find a place for him with people who had a farm to the west of Elst. Sobbing, he was taken there in June 1944, aged just 12, on the back of his father's bicycle. His parents hoped that he could spend the summer months safely on the farm and that the war would soon be over so that he could return home safely.

In the end, my father stayed on the farm until the summer of 1946. Going home earlier was not an option, as everything in Arnhem and the surrounding area had been thoroughly destroyed during Operation Market Garden in September 1944. His parents' house had also been damaged. Due to a lack of building materials, it took some time before it was habitable again.

According to my father, there was little excitement on the farm where he was staying. When it was safe to do so, he worked with the farmer and his six sons in the fields and simply joined them in the kitchen, where hearty meals were served, usually with plenty of vegetables fresh from the fields. No one went to bed on an empty stomach.

Because of their contribution to the local food supply, the four eldest sons of the farmer were exempted from *Arbeitseinsatz* and had to work hard to ensure a good harvest. So, the extra helping hands of the two youngest farmer's sons and my father were more than welcome on the farm.

Soon my father was able to keep up with the farmer's sons in harvesting the potatoes, bringing in the hay, hoeing the French beans, shelling the peas and whatever else needed to be done. With all this arduous work, he didn't have much time to think about missing his father and mother.

The farmer's wife tried to be nice to him, patting him on the head from time to time. The farmer didn't say very much, but always hummed contentedly when my father had done his work. A gruff 'good boy' and a firm pat on the shoulder were also given from time to time. He often played games with the farmer's sons after work.

On Sundays they would go to church together in Elst, or, if it was too dangerous to go there, they would read a passage from the Bible together at the kitchen table. At lunchtime they ate soup with big chunks of meat, which was on the menu especially on that one day a week.

The Germans didn't have much to do on the farms. So, it was usually quiet. At most, they'd drop in now and then to buy food or just to commandeer it ('Now there's a fancy word for stealing,' the farmer had growled angrily). On those occasions, my father and the two youngest sons would hide in the haystack. They were quite intimidated by the shouting men in their strange uniforms.

When he was finally able to return home, he was overjoyed to see his parents again, especially his mother. It was also an uneasy reunion. They had had little contact for too long and were completely estranged from each other. His older siblings had left home years before. Sometimes he saw some of them at weekends. If he had met them on the street, he would probably not have recognised them. Unlike on the farm, there was not enough food on the table.

After the war he had a huge learning deficit, like all the other boys and girls of his age. They made up for it in a hurry. Very different from what had been planned, he completed HBS¹ in four years instead of the vocational school that boys like him from working-class families had attended as a matter of course before the war.

After graduating from HBS, he was awarded a small government scholarship to attend the University of Delft. He was quietly relieved to be away from the house with the two strangers who were his parents. He chose to study architecture because he wanted to help repair the war damage to houses, roads, and government buildings in the best and most aesthetically pleasing way possible.

He was the first in his family to go to university. His family were very proud of him, although they did not understand exactly what he was going to do in the big city. What was architecture anyway? My father tried to explain, only to find that his family did not really understand the difference between a foreman and an architect.

Had there been no war, I am sure he would have stuck out like a sore thumb in Delft. As far as he could tell, he was the only one in his year from a modest background, but almost everyone had been impoverished by the war and food was still rationed. Like him, many people were emaciated and wore old clothes, often mended several times. Because he also spoke standard Dutch, without any trace of a rural accent, or at least no conspicuous dialect, and did all his homework diligently, he - a boy from a working-class family - did not stand out. He was an average student.

¹ *Hogere-burgerschool*, roughly equalling grammar school.

He was already used to living away from home, so he was not homesick and was on good terms with his landlady. She was happy for him to have an occasional student friend over for a cup of tea. She even allowed the occasional friends to join them at the kitchen table after handing over a few stubs from their ration book and a coin or two. Visits from women were, of course, forbidden. In fact, during his all-male university education, he hardly ever met any.

He was absorbed in his studies and enjoyed the occasional debate with his fellow students. He also read all the books in the library in his spare time and liked to go to the student pub for a game of chess or pool and a drink. Slowly but surely, he developed his own tastes and preferences and was able to make his own choices.

Returning home by train on Saturday afternoons, he became increasingly estranged from his parents. Eventually he stopped visiting them regularly. Contact was mainly limited to letters back and forth and, later, to short telephone calls.

Despite his increasingly critical mind, he always obediently went to Mass on Sundays, sometimes several times a day. He hated it when the congregation sang the psalms, but when the choir sang, he closed his eyes and enjoyed the music in silence. He took it for granted that the liturgy was in Latin, even though he understood little of it.

The statues of saints, the Way of the Cross and the stained-glass windows gave him something to hold on to, and he looked up to the parish priest with reverence, especially on the days when he went to the confessional. Going to church on Sundays was routine, but it gave him a sense of identity and a certain amount of *gezelligheid* (Dutch

conviviality) on what was otherwise a quiet, obligatory day of rest.

Once, as he was walking back to his room after High Mass, the local Reformed church was just opening its doors. He watched with interest from the other side of the street as people dressed in black with devout faces left their small, bare church. So, this was what the heretics looked like, he thought. Their faith, or at least their version of it, seemed to weigh heavily on their minds. He tried to imagine what it would be like to be a heretic like them.

Suddenly he caught the eye of a girl across the street. She was smiling at him from under her frivolously crooked hat. He blushed with embarrassment and did not even dare to smile back. With a jerk, he turned and walked away.

For the next few weeks, he tried to catch a glimpse of the girl as he walked back from the church, but he did not see her. Finally, he gave up and went straight to his room without waiting at the Reformed Church.

One Sunday, when he had almost forgotten her, he was startled by the sound of her voice behind him on the pavement.

‘Say, just a moment, did you lose this?’

He turned and stared from her face to her hand, which she held out in front of her. There was a folded piece of paper between her fingers. He took it, too stunned to say anything before she turned and crossed the street towards a group of people dressed in black who were waiting for her.

At home, he unfolded the paper. It contained a brief message:

Tomorrow night, seven o'clock, Het Baken café.

For the first time since he moved to Delft, he could not sleep. He tossed and turned restlessly in his narrow bed all night. The next day, exhausted, he sat half asleep in the lecture hall and almost botched an assignment during a practical exam.

Nervously, he stood at the bar of *Het Baken*, scrubbed clean and dressed in his tidiest clothes, waiting for her just before seven.

She came through the door on time, with a bright smile on her face. As if she had known him for years, she walked up to him, said hello, kissed him on the cheek and led him by the sleeve to a table in the corner. She looked at the man behind the counter and ordered two cups of coffee for herself and 'her fiancé'.

Under the table, his knees trembled with shock. He almost dared not look at her. The kiss still glowed on his cheek. That this wonderful creature should be interested in him was incredible. He desperately wanted to be her fiancé. Of course, he had no idea how to go about it.

He carefully tried to elicit details of the honourable estate of marriage from his landlady. She loved to talk to him about marriage, but especially about the mutual infatuation that should, if possible, precede it. Her eyes lit up when she told him that the time, she had been in love with her late husband had been the best time of her life.

She also gave him tips on how best to interact with the opposite sex: be polite, show interest and occasionally bring a small gift. Physical contact should be avoided as much as possible until after the wedding. Holding hands and a kiss on the cheek to say hello or goodbye were recommended, however. He would certainly enjoy that, the landlady said. Of course, if possible, he should always hold

doors open for his beloved and offer her an arm to help her walk briskly down the street. Of course, he was not allowed to look at other women.

My father took everything seriously and immediately put into practice as much of his landlady's advice as possible. He was pleased to see my mother's delighted looks when he brought her a bouquet of flowers, he had picked himself, or when he offered her his arm. He did not even dare to look at other women, so he only had eyes for my mother.

He would tell the landlady about his encounters with my mother, and together they would make plans to charm her even more.

After a few meetings he could think of nothing else but what he called 'the girl'. He dared not even say her name aloud, out of reverence. She was to be his wife; he was sure of it.

When her uncle Jan and aunt Lida objected to him as a Catholic suitor, he felt so dejected that he briefly considered abandoning his plan to marry my mother altogether. But only for a moment because he was actually quite determined.

In the end, he used the story she told him about her inheritance to make his dream come true. He himself did not think that what he was doing had anything to do with blackmail. He simply arranged everything with Uncle Jan, as men do. The wedding day was a personal triumph for him, the best day of his life so far.

Happy and cheerful, he and his bride drove to Middelburg in a borrowed car, where a house was waiting for them. It came with his new job as assistant to the city architect. This important official oversaw rebuilding the city centre, which