

Dutch Kangaroo

-A tale of actions and reactions-

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Katja Bongers

*If two bodies exert forces on each other, these forces
have the same magnitude but opposite directions.
(Sir Isaac Newton's third law of motion)*

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1 Action & reaction

2 February 1986 – Wibautstraat police station

The policeman looked at me contemptuously. 'So?'
Yuck. 'When you put it like that, no,' I said.

'Then there's nothing we can do for you. We're not going to take your statement and nothing will be put on file, not a word, let's be clear about that. There is no criminal offence here, there is no perpetrator and you are not a victim. By the way, your mother can come to us herself if she feels the need. Goodbye.'

He half stood up, straightened his uniform jacket, leaned over the cluttered desk and extended his hand. I shook it before I knew what was happening. The word 'victim' echoed in my brain and I tasted it in my mind like a foul morsel that made me nauseous.

'Geert, you can't do this,' the female officer whispered to her colleague. 'This isn't about you or what you might think or feel about what she's told us. This girl needs our help. She walked with him to the door.'

'Damn it, don't interfere, you bitch. She's been here so many times, I'm sick of it. Just go away. Get on with your real work, that's what I'm doing. Get rid of her right now. IMMEDIATELY!'

He made no attempt to speak quietly, he almost shouted. After all, he was within his rights and I – and everyone else, for that matter – should know it.

Geert stormed out of the room and slammed the door behind him, jerking it so hard it banged. You could hear him stomping angrily down the corridor, doors opening and closing and surprised voices.

The female officer raised her eyebrows in annoyance, told me to wait a moment and ran after him. It seemed an eternity before she returned. I just sat there, overwhelmed and undecided. I can't remember what I had actually expected but it certainly wasn't this.

After a few minutes, the officer came back into the room. Her face was red and she was clearly struggling to breathe. She sat down next to me in the other chair – the one with the peeling paint and faint stains on the seat that had looked so dirty I had sat in the other one. That one had seemed a fraction cleaner but it had no armrests.

I picked at stains on my trousers. They had been splashed with mud on the way to the station when a big truck had driven through a deep puddle on the road next to me. I tried to concentrate on that moment, to be angry about something that had nothing to do with the here and now.

After a long silence, the officer put her hand on mine and I couldn't ignore her any longer. She looked at me questioningly. 'Can you manage to cycle home alone, my dear? Or do you want to wait? I'm on duty until ten. I could cycle home with you. Would you like that?'

I swallowed hard, wiped my sleeve over my face and shook my head. I didn't know what difference it would make. What was the point of an officer cycling with me? I'm sure she meant well but that wasn't what I had come to the station for.

'Thank you, ma'am,' I whispered, 'that won't be necessary.'

'You don't have to call me madam, my name is Ria.' She patted my knee gently and handed me another tissue. Then she handed me a cup of water and we sat for a while without saying anything. When she got up in silence, I followed her to reception. I said nothing either. Everything had been said.

Two minutes later I was in the passage next to the police station, fiddling with my bike. The lock was not working and it was taking too long. The passage stank of piss. I was hot, sweat was stinging under my armpits and I was becoming increasingly nauseous. Retching, I just managed to open the lock and ride away without breaking my neck. I took deep breaths and tried to breathe in the fresh air as quickly as possible. A little further on I had to stop. I threw my bike on the ground, staggered towards the kerb and sat down. I stared blankly ahead.

I don't remember how long I sat there but the Amsterdam night was pitch dark. The streetlights had been on for a long time and there were few people on the streets. The cold had crept up my legs and I stood up stiffly. Carefully, I bent my arms and legs a few times. My bike was still on the cycle path ahead of me. Other cyclists had cycled neatly around it, as if it were perfectly normal to have a bike in the middle of the path.

I walked over to my bike, stood it upright, pressed the light button and got on. At a reasonable speed I cycled down Wibautstraat towards the Amstel train station, past the *Volkscrant* newspaper building on my right, then left towards the student flat where I had been living for a few months. My front light flashed in time with the slipping bike dynamo.

Back home, I put the bike in the basement and sneaked into my room unseen. Thank God I didn't have to talk to anyone.

In the hot shower I scrubbed my whole body with the nail brush and lathered my hair three times before rinsing off and getting into bed with clean clothes on. I was careful not to touch the bruise on my ribs. Nor did I look in the mirror above the sink. In fact, I hadn't done that for several weeks.

As for what happened last week, the week before or even longer ago, we are not going to pay attention to that now. If you don't need hospital treatment, then you haven't been abused. If you weren't penetrated ('with a cock, a finger or anything else in your cunt, ass or mouth,' Officer Geert had snarled), then you have not been raped. So then there is no offence.

Here I was, brought up to believe that in the Netherlands we had such a fine rule of law, that we were so beautifully emancipated and that women had the same rights as men. The police were your best friend. I curled up under the covers and tried to sleep or at least to get warm again. Only my nose was sticking out of the covers.

I woke up with a jolt. The alarm clock said it was three o'clock but it felt like morning. This was probably due to the enormous thirst and hunger I was now beginning to feel. I had eaten and drunk very little for days.

Greedily, I drank three glasses of water, filling the glass for my toothbrush at the sink. It tasted metallic but my thirst was gone. The hunger was not. Would I dare to go into the kitchen? I could look in the cupboards there to see if there was anything edible. Usually, the cupboard doors were

unlocked and fellow students would have something there that I could quickly put in my pocket and eat in my room. I had nothing edible myself. I did have two tea bags and some ground coffee but no filter. Or would there still be something somewhere so I didn't have to venture into the kitchen? I decided I'd better have a good look around my own room first.

Crouching down, I found a boiled sweet in the back of my desk drawer. A bit old and dusty but still quite edible. I picked the candy from its white wrapper and popped it into my mouth. Slowly I let it melt on my tongue. Delicious.

In my jacket pocket I found the two lumps of sugar that Officer Geert had given me with my cup of coffee. I ate those too, standing up. That was it, except for a tin of tuna and a tin of tomato paste. I couldn't open them because I didn't have a tin opener in my room. I put the two tins on the edge of my desk. What could I do now? Go to the kitchen? Cautiously, I opened my room door and looked out to see if anyone was in the hallway. On stockinged feet, I crept towards the kitchen, hoping not to meet anyone.

'Hehe, look who we have here, our little sunshine,' Wieger said as I opened the fridge door. I was startled and hit my head on a cupboard as I shot upright. The light from inside the fridge illuminated the room a little and I saw that he was sitting in the dark corner by the window. On the table in front of him he had a bottle of cheap gin and a bowl of crisps.

'Aaaaaah, poooooor you, bumping your little head like that. Would our shy pussycat like a drink of this for the pain?' he asked, holding up the bottle. 'Then why don't you

come and sit on Uncle Wieger's lap? I'll stroke that lump on your forehead gently. Or any other bump, hehehe'.

I thought he was an idiot so I tried to ignore him. But now I couldn't search the kitchen cupboards for anything edible. Wieger's crisps looked delicious to me and it looked like the bowl was still half full. He could keep the gin but maybe...

'Oh no, you're a teetotaler, I'd almost forgotten,' said Wieger. With a wicked look he poured the last of the gin into his mouth, wiped it clean, let out a popping belch, then left the kitchen without so much as a glance at me. He had left the bowl of crisps on the table. I grabbed it as I heard his door slam and took it to my room.

May 1963 – About men

Men are all lechers and they only want one thing. When she was a young girl, Mum was regularly warned by her mother. It must have made an impression because she never had a boyfriend before she met him. She was a nurse from a Roman Catholic family in the south of the country.

When she was fourteen, her mother took her to the nuns at the hospital in Roermond to scrub the floors as a maid for a pittance. She was only allowed to go home every other weekend.

Despite her homesickness, she managed to stand out from the other maids there and the nuns saw that she had more to offer. Through the nuns' intercession, and at the parish's expense, she was trained as a 'sister', as nurses were still called in the Netherlands. She lived in a large boarding

house with all the other sisters. They were all apparently sexless women who chastely clenched their knees when men were present.

At the age of twenty-two she moved to Deventer, where she began working in the neurology department of the local hospital. It was there that she saw her first naked man – a patient she had to help wash. Years later, she could still describe the shock with horror.

She met him (an apparently shy metal worker) by chance at a nurses' dance. With her soft, sing-song southern accent and her nurse's uniform, she was very attractive to him. Jealously, he kept a close eye on all the other men who were ogling her.

Their relationship until their marriage was very chaste; at most there was some kissing and holding hands but nothing else. After their wedding day, nothing exciting happened in the big bed. He had his rights, Mum submitted to her marital duties... or something like that. Something must have happened between them, though, otherwise they would not have had children.

Much later, her daughter nearly choked on a tuna canape when a friend announced at a dinner party that her parents had not had the best sex life. She articulated this by saying of her parents: 'Aaaah, he turned her over every now and then and had his way with her.' The girl's boyfriend took another bite of macaroni and said cheerfully, 'Gosh, you'd kill for that, wouldn't you?'

3 February 1986 – Mistress of my own money

Sometime around mid-morning, after the usual noisy morning ritual of breakfast and the departure of the other residents, everything was quiet again. After listening with one ear to the door for a few minutes to see if the coast was clear, I ventured back into the kitchen. Fortunately, no one was there now so I could inspect all the cupboards without getting caught.

My booty consisted of a slice of bread, a limp cracker, and some jam, which I spread on the bread and cracker straight from the jar I had found in Fenna's cupboard. With one of my remaining tea bags and some sugar from the communal pot on the dining table, I also made a large cup of tea. Unfortunately, there was no milk in the fridge, except for an open carton with a distinctly sour smell. Wieger's note ('KEEP YOUR FUCKING HANDS OFF MY MILK!') had worked.

Breakfast gave me new energy. In my room I checked how much money I had left. Two guilders, a quarter, two dimes and a penny. I knew I could buy food with that but for how many days? On Mondays, Jac Hermans' supermarket didn't open until one o'clock, which was hours away. And what would I do when it was all gone? There was nothing left in my bank account either. He'd made it crystal clear: if I didn't come home, I wouldn't get any money. I had to think of a way to get some.

I was at the door just as the temp agency opened, freshly washed, and combed and dressed to the nines. It was quite windy out there in Heiligeweg and I hoped my hair would stay tidy enough to make a good first impression.

I told the placement officer (I'd never heard of the job before) that I was a good typist, that I was a student looking for a part-time job because my parents didn't give me enough money to get by and that I wanted to be independent. She looked me up and down with a pinched mouth, to which she had applied bright red lipstick as I spoke. From my slightly windswept but clean hair, to my simple but neat clothes, to my well-polished shoes, she looked at everything carefully and without embarrassment. Apparently I had passed her test because now I could see a small smile on those stern, thin lips. I was sure she saw a provincial girl; ordinary but neat.

I could do a typing test straight away. The woman looked over my shoulder to see how I was doing and I think she also inspected my nails to make sure they were clean. Fortunately, I managed to hit the minimum number of keystrokes required on the rickety office machine to be hired as an administrative assistant.

'When can you start?' she asked.

'Today, ma'am but preferably in the afternoons or at weekends so I don't miss any lectures.'

Pondering, she looked at me, picked up the phone and dialled a number, then chatted a little to the person on the other end. She sounded artificially cheerful but apparently she was successful.

After a short conversation she hung up. 'OK. Here's the deal,' she said. 'You can start next week as an administrative assistant in the Municipal Insurance Department. Every working day from three to six. We'll pay you three guilders and eighty-five cents an hour, including tax. If you're late or don't do a good job, you'll be fired. At

the end of each week you must hand in your signed work sheets. Do you understand?'

'Yes, thank you, ma'am.' I didn't know what she meant by these work sheets but I didn't dare ask. I would find out later.

Excited, I cycled home. It was a shame, though, that I would not get my first pay until next week. That worried me a bit. How was I going to get by in the meantime? I cycled past the police station in Wibautstraat towards Jac Hermans' supermarket. There I waited in front of the doors for them to open, crowded together with other people who were already standing around.

Once inside, I managed to get a loaf of bread, a packet of margarine, a big bag of macaroni, a packet of tea, two tomatoes, an onion ('Well, well, we're having a shopping spree today,' said the boy in the vegetable department sarcastically) and a litre of yoghurt, all within my budget of two guilders and fifty cents. I even got two cents in change. I stuffed my own receipt and all the others I could find at the checkout into my shopping bag.

With the macaroni, the tomatoes and the onion, the tins of tuna and tomato puree, half a packet of margarine, and some spices I stole from Wieger's cupboard, I made a big pan of food, from which I ate a plate every day. I spread the bread with the rest of the margarine and jam from my fellow students' cupboards, and I ate the yoghurt in small portions with sugar from the communal pot.

The food was boring and bland. After three days I was really fed up with macaroni. I longed for a good meal and even the sauerkraut mash that Wieger heated up on Wednesday night smelled delicious. So did the smoked

sausage he had with it. Unfortunately, he ate it all himself. Only the two small pieces of meat on the string of the smoked sausage, which he had cut off and left on the kitchen counter, I was able to appropriate unseen.

On Thursday morning the rubbish was collected and I got up early to put out our rubbish bag. I took all the glass jars and bottles that my housemates had carelessly thrown away to the supermarket and bought two apples and a tin of tomato soup with the deposit. All in all, I wasn't really hungry but I craved a big pile of tasty, fresh food.

I had to go home once more this coming weekend to make sure I had enough money for the next week. He would pick me up on Friday afternoon and I would go home with him. Whatever I had spent in the previous week, he would pay me back as household money. ('Say thank you first, of course, don't forget, you ungrateful bitch...') I examined the receipts carefully. I put the one with the largest amount in my purse, which only held the two cents I had received in change.

Friday afternoon, punctually at four o'clock, he was at my door. I had already packed my bag so I didn't have to let him into my room.

'Bye,' Fenna called to me in the corridor. 'Have a nice weekend!'

Stupid cow, I thought. 'Yeah, you too.'

'Nice girl,' he said.

When I got home, my mum was delighted to see me. She immediately sat me down at the kitchen table with a big slice of home-made apple pie. I tried to eat neatly but devoured it like a hungry wolf. She was a wonderful cook and I was hungry, starving. We chatted enthusiastically

about this and that while I ate the second slice of pie she had placed on my plate, more slowly this time. As usual, I watched her and she watched me, without openly asking how things were going. It wasn't necessary. We just knew, without wasting words on the subject.

I also did justice to dinner and all the other meals that weekend. My mum was delighted that I liked everything and she put several trays and packets of food in the fridge for me to pick up on Monday morning in the bag with my clean clothes. We had a good time without him and we both tried to avoid him as much as possible.

On Sunday evening we had to 'settle up'. I had to ask him for money myself. Humbly, of course.

'Have you got the receipts?' he asked.

I handed him the only one I had in my purse. Standing at his desk, I had to wait for him to check everything thoroughly.

He peered at the receipt for a while, then opened his eyes in surprise. 'Nappies?' he asked, shoving the receipt under my nose and pointing at something.

Indeed, the name of a well-known brand was on the receipt. My heart skipped a beat. I had only looked at the total and had not noticed that Jac Hermans' supermarket had revamped its checkout system. The receipt was itemised and showed not only the amounts but also what had been bought.

Rushing to think of an excuse, I said, 'Er, yes. I'm sure there's been a mistake; these must be the sanitary pads I bought. These new receipts aren't always correct yet.' With that I trumped him sufficiently because he was as squeamish as they come. Sanitary pads and even

mentioning menstruation horrified him and he turned a deep red.

He recovered quickly. With a grand gesture, he handed me my money. He even rounded up the amount on the receipt by a quarter.

'Thank you,' I said. Thankfully, humbly enough this time, he didn't want a kiss.

I quickly put the money into my handbag. I did the maths in my head. Would it be enough to pay for my food for a week? Probably, with all the food my mum had in the fridge.

I had already put a tube of toothpaste, a bottle of shampoo and a roll of toilet paper from the pantry in my bag. My mum had caught me and said nothing. She had just given me a sympathetic look and handed me a jar of applesauce and a tin of peas.

On Monday morning at seven o'clock, with a well-filled bag and enough money in my purse, I joined him in the car on the way back to Amsterdam. He always contrived to give me a lift on his way to one of his customers. Not because it was convenient or because he really needed to get to the customer but because it saved him the cost of a train ticket. After all, he could claim travel expenses on the way to the customer.

We did not speak on the way. Not me because I was afraid of saying the wrong thing. And neither did he because... well, I don't really know why.

When we arrived at the student flat I was in, he wanted to go in with me but I managed to avoid that. 'Sorry but I have a lecture at nine so I have to leave right away.' He gave me

a piercing, mocking look, said goodbye, got into his car and drove off.

I fell onto my bed with a thud. What a wonderful feeling it was to be alone, with a big bag full of food, enough money in my purse for the first few days, and a job with my own income in the offing. Lying on my bed, I ate the leftover apple pie my mother had given me, straight out of the foil she had wrapped it in, without using a fork. Then I licked my fingers and took a wonderful nap under the covers. I didn't have a lecture until eleven.

I did not go home the following weekend. ('Heavens, what has that child of yours come up with now? She'll find out soon enough that she has to come home when she needs money again,' I heard from my mother later).

The following Monday afternoon I cycled to Overtoom, where the Municipal Insurance Department had its offices. At the typing pool, I typed up notes in which the department indicated whether or not someone could claim compensation for damage. Damages were usually the result of burglaries in the large housing estates in the south-eastern suburb of Bijlmer. It was really boring work but not tiring and in a wonderfully heated room where coffee and tea were free and good.

Financially, I had my independence. I counted on him not daring to stop paying the rent for my room (he always paid it directly). He was a terrible miser but no one was allowed to know.

October 1963 - Household expenses

From her first day as a married woman, Mum received money to run the household from him. Although she was a working woman who earned her own income, except for a few years when she had babies, she had to wait every Saturday morning for him to give her some money. Her children, when old enough, were expected to watch obediently from a distance so that they could learn how to handle money.

Married women in the Netherlands were no longer legally incompetent after 1956 but they were still incompetent according to prevailing mores. In the early years of their marriage, she had to give him her salary, which was still paid in cash in a pay bag, on Friday evenings. Throughout their marriage, she never had a bank account of her own. Mum didn't agree with all this but she didn't want to argue with him about it. However, it was too much for her to keep a household account book so that he could monitor everything she spent.

No words were wasted. As a punishment, he simply gave her too little money to run the household. Again, nothing was ever said about this. Apparently, for a long time he was convinced that she would soon come to her senses and show him all her expenses before he would give her a penny more. She never did.

When she had to, she just ate sugar on her toast to make ends meet (he got the last bit of sausage, of course) and every now and then she stole some change from his wallet when he was in the shower. Not all at once, of course but just enough that it wouldn't be noticed. Her little son, who

caught her once, immediately demanded two quarters for himself to buy an ice cream.

When their daughter moved to Amsterdam, he shifted his tactics to her. In those days, there were no scholarships that were independent of the parents' income so it soon became clear that she was the next in line to humbly ask him for money. It was for her own good, he said.

Every weekend she was expected to come home and show him her supermarket receipts. Household expenses were set off against a modest advance. Of course, by 'household expenses' he only meant food and drink and such. He paid for textbooks and rent directly to the bookshop and the landlord. He relied on Mum to buy clothes for her daughter from time to time. Expenses for participating in student life were not reimbursable, he had sternly declared. Imagine HIS daughter attending bawdy student parties! It would only delay her studies and 'God knows what other dangers' these parties would lead to (he was not religious). No matter how much she pleaded with him, he stuck to his guns.

She wouldn't have been a good daughter to her mother if she hadn't found a solution. After every trip to the supermarket, she would simply pick up a receipt from the floor of the shop that had a few guilders more on it than her own. She gave it to him instead. This left her with some money to participate in student life, albeit on a very modest scale.

She was not allowed to have a part-time job. She was only allowed to study so that she could graduate in the nominal time of four years that he said she would need, statistically speaking. According to him, he was well aware of the

statistics on the length of study – and of every other possible statistic, for that matter.

All in all, daughter dearest was able to just make ends meet without having to turn down invitations to parties all the time. She was also able to invite someone to dinner every now and then and she was able to bring a present to a birthday party once that was not food. She also managed to hide her embarrassment about her financial situation from her fellow students.

12 February 1986 – Luck

I had completed my first days of work and I was proud, immensely proud of my achievement. I had done it! Just a little longer and I would get my first salary. It was a wonderful feeling.

On working days I would sit upright at the typewriter, take a sheet of data from the left-hand box marked 'in', type a note according to the instructions on a large poster on the wall and then put it, along with the sheet from the left-hand box, in the right-hand box marked 'out'. It wasn't difficult and I was able to watch my colleagues at work.

Everyone was friendly there and I soon realised and there was always a happy atmosphere among us colleagues: Freek had floppy ears and the flattest Amsterdam accent I had ever heard, Jolanda was undoubtedly the biggest Ajax fan I had ever met, Marco was always smiling and Edgar, my boss, was just a nice guy.

Often there was also cake from someone who had been treated to it in honour of their birthday because Ajax had

won a match or because eating cake was just something we all craved. In short, I had a great time there.

From the conversations I had, I understood that I owed my job to Diny, a colleague who had gone on maternity leave. In fact, they had only hired me as a temp for a few months. After only two days of working there, they heard that Diny was planning to stop coming altogether. She wanted to stay at home with her baby. No matter how much they pushed her, she stuck to her decision. In the end, she didn't even pick up the phone. Her former colleagues couldn't understand what was going on.

I didn't understand either. In fact, I thought she was unemancipated. Surely you could work if you had a child? There were things like crèches or maybe there were babysitters! I didn't really want to understand. As long as I could keep my job, it was fine with me.

Edgar had asked me that morning if I wanted to stay a bit longer. Well, gladly. Now I would have to see him less often and preferably never again. But it gnawed at me that I wouldn't see my mother as much either.

8 November 1963 – Connections are severed

In 1963, the distribution throughout the country of natural gas from Slochteren had begun and the government coffers were slowly filling up. The Dutch labour market soon became tight but the tradition of building a better life in a foreign country, which had started right after the war, had not disappeared by the early 1960s. In fact, young couples were encouraged by the government to emigrate.

Emigration was a very big step at that time, though. Information about the destination country was scarce and was mainly disseminated through cosy information evenings for newlyweds. They got the scanty information from recruitment posters and leaflets, printed in dribs and drabs on stencil machines. Many went to Canada. Australia was also in demand.

The information evenings were organised by the embassy staff of that country in cooperation with officials from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Sometimes Foreign Minister Luns allowed officials of the Minister of Social Affairs, Mrs (!) Schouwenaar-Franssen, to take part in the information evenings.

The great financial advantages of emigration were emphasised, especially for those who had the right professions and that's exactly what these newlyweds had. He was a metalworker and Mum was a nurse. In short, they signed up for the long boat trip to Australia, even though they didn't speak any English and all they knew was that life was good there, you drove on the wrong side of the road, the weather was hot, and there were kangaroos.

In retrospect, they considered themselves very naive to have gone to the other side of the world virtually unprepared, although he never admitted it openly. Mum did.

On 8 November 1963, his eldest brother took them to Rotterdam, from where they were to be taken to Australia on board the Aurelia in six weeks' time. His parents had come along for the occasion. The closer they got to Rotterdam, the quieter everyone became.

On the quay, it was a chaotic mob of emigrants giving a last quick hug to their loved ones they were about to leave behind in the freezing cold. There was a lot of crying, although everyone tried to pretend it was a party by throwing streamers and waving large white handkerchiefs. The ship's horn was deafening when the mooring lines were cast off and it went on for a long time. His mother wept and moaned: 'I'll never see him again.' Hardly anyone heard her over all the noise.

That she would never see her son again was not such a crazy thought. There was no intercontinental air travel in those days, and flying was prohibitively expensive anyway. A boat trip took six weeks one way and was only free for emigrants under certain conditions. Family visits were therefore impossible. Telephony was an unheard-of luxury and almost impossible for someone abroad. The post took six weeks, unless you used airmail; then it took two weeks and if you were lucky a week but that was much more expensive than a normal letter. In short, the farewell on the quay in Rotterdam was basically final.

But the better life beckoned. For Mum, it meant that she could continue to work. In the Netherlands, she had been sacked immediately after her wedding day. This was a common practice in those days and it kept most married women inexorably tied to their kitchen counters. In Australia, it was perfectly normal, even a requirement, for her to work. For him, the better life he longed for meant, above all, property. He dreamed of owning a house and a car, things that seemed unattainable in the Netherlands. It was a pity, he thought, that they did not have their own cabin on board. Men and women slept separately. The