The Funeral of Papje

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IT WAS LESS than two hours before Papje's funeral. The rain came slanting in green transparency against the window panes, making sound like small birds scratching when it drilled through the top branches of the lindens. It was an adverse day for certain, and actually just another one of Dirk's days off, but it seemed almost as if the severity of this mid-summer weather tried for the nonce to make a heady excuse for the unemployment which had beset him for several weeks. It rained angrily, steadily, and even with finality.

At the moment, however, up here on their third floor, the rain seemed to be insisting that Papje had died at the age of eighty-two. A ripe age, it was true, but . . .

"I think it's proper that it's raining on the people that are burying him," Dirk said casually, to hide how intensely he felt about the funeral.

Anneke looked up from her sewing, held it aloft for private inspection, and after several minutes answered: "You really would like to go, wouldn't you, Dirk?"

He shook his head. "It's pouring, but I'm afraid I'm worrying about Papje's goats. Even though he died, they're still his goats, and substantially they must be as independent as he."

Both remained silent for a while, listening to the drumming rain and remembering Papje's last visit, two months ago. Papje always came kind of clandestinely, without any warning, always smiling with the joy — he made it seem a forbidden joy — of his unexpected call. He'd stand there solidly on his yellow painted, city-going wooden shoes, wiping the shiny visor of his black cap vigorously on his sleeve, and unbuttoning the two brass buttons
nearest his throat, before he would say: "Well, children, here I am again. Almost a year since the last time, but it takes mijnheer the doctor to summon me to the city at all."

The next minute he would be sitting grinning in the chair near the window, and Anneke would pour him a cup of tea, and he'd say gently: "So it's this way still, Dirk, you're home in the middle of the day still," even while Dirk went rummaging through the cupboard for that crock of jenever which they always brought out for the occasion, the same crock for four years now. A moment later, however, Papje would be talking about his goats, but never about his grievous and grim daughters, not even about the oldest one, with whom he was suffered to live in his own house. "Well now, sweethearts," he'd say later in parting, "off to the doctor, and he'll smell the jenever and say I drink too much, but what's the use telling him I drink just once a year with you young ones. I'll tell my goats all about you, for sure, you here in this narrow coop of a steep house where you don't belong, but they'll understand. Because you must maintain an honest and lively spirit, no matter."

"It's an hour's bus ride to the funeral," Anneke said now. "But as you say, it's raining."

He looked at her furtively, because she understood how he felt about Papje's goats. "I could catch the next bus and just make the funeral," he said.

"Of course, you could, and I'm coming with you." She put her sewing aside, brushed her lap, and walked to the closet to put on a raincoat. "But I'm coming along only to keep you from going to Papje's house afterwards, where they've been hatching out his death for years. The vultures."

"It's too horrible a day to go all the way to Noordbergum just the same," he argued, grabbing his own raincoat. "You could be sitting here cozy, while I..." but he didn't finish, because they were on their way down the three narrow flights of stairs from their flat, and she was running.
It was an hour later that he said: "Yes, you are right, vultures! Even if Papje himself never said it."

They were now standing in the brink of the village, where the bus had dropped them less than ten minutes ago. The rain slanted angrily down upon them, and the water shook from the elms and lindens as with personal malice. "Vultures, but fat ones," he said again, while she clutched his arm more tightly, and they watched the black bell of Noordbergum's ancient, pineapple shaped tower — the eleventh oldest in all of Holland; a preposterous ranking, he thought — go into motion. It took two or three complete somersaults before any sound came, and first a small army of rooks and magpies went flappingraggedly away on bitter spurts of rain and wind. Only after that did the bell clang plangentlly, and at the same moment the funeral cortège came around the corner out of the town square and started crossing the tree studded brink toward the church.

They were the only spectators. They huddled closer together in their loneliness, in an irrevocably recalled loss and bereavement which they hadn't wanted to feel, and which they started contesting with the desperate hope that their presence here was not primarily dictated by anger, but by their homage toward old Papje. It was difficult to disentangle emotions honestly from this bitter rain and from this old home town of theirs which they had rejected, in spite of their first happy years there. "Of course, we still have loads of friends here," Anneke had said a bit stridently a few minutes earlier. "But none of them are Papje's relatives, of course."

They were approaching now— Papje's relatives. The entire procession was on foot, except the coffin on its very low, black cloth-draped dray. The black plumed horses bobbed in front of it, quivering black tassels and black ribbons, the way Papje had always approved of them.

"Only horses understand pomp and ceremony rightly," he had argued. "They even understand the sentiments, such as they are.
The right animals always do. Nothing understands humor like a goat. But people!"

He would have felt bemused that the people came drearily on foot through the rain. "His goats ought to be here, prancing and properly garlanded," Dirk said. "I wonder what they've done with them. I really wonder."

Because the procession was about to pass them, Anneke didn't answer. She wanted to take his mind off those goats, so that she started showing excessive respect for the fat, stiff-corsetted daughters of Papje with their black bordered handkerchiefs at their mouths, and their eyes violent with overt grief, or chagrin at the stinging rain. Their black coated men followed, all the sons-in-law chewing tobacco, peppermints or cinnamon bark, so that the confused odors lay stratified upon the air between rain and wind flurries.

Only the behavior of the horses was impeccable. The plumes on their grave heads danced a solemn ballet as in travesty to the cortege following. "How horribly proper," Anneke said, hugging her husband's arm for succor. "But you didn't take your hat off, Dirk."

"Too wet," he answered. "And it would make Papje laugh."

"Naturally — so why not make him laugh?"

"That's confusing issues," he argued a little louder, now that most of the procession had scuffled past them and there remained only the muffled and baffled children, making up the tail end, wearing their frugally patched Sunday second-bests, clattering along on their black Sunday wooden shoes. "There were fifty-seven," Anneke counted. "Each and all of them practically descended from him. Such an awful waste of good spirits."

Dirk said: "The next bus back to the city will be here in five minutes."

"Still, we ought to let them march into church first," she answered, peering for the bus down the wind-swept road that funneled into the brink. The outskirts of the brink were now
dotted with cautious spectators, who seemed intent on keeping themselves half hidden behind the thick boles of the trees, as if theirs was some sort of childhood game transmuted uncomfortably into adult behavior. A few nodded distantly in recognition, because there were the austere amenities of the funeral to be kept first.

"Have you figured out just exactly why we came?" Dirk asked her unexpectedly.

"Let's not," she answered hurriedly. "It'll all add up to remembering, and what's the use. Apart from our respect for Papje, of course."

The last of the procession had straggled into the church, and the bell ended its tolling on a truncated wail. Already the rooks started flying back to the belfry. Then the bus came in sight, but Dirk said: "We're not going to take that bus. Now that they're all in church, let's walk to his house and see what they've done with the goats. We'll take the next bus."

"But that's just exactly what we shouldn't do if you know. And we'll have to walk past all those people who remember us," she protested, as if that really mattered. "And it's raining terribly, and my feet are soaked, and there's sure to be somebody at his house to watch us."

"We'll just see if his goats are there," he said implacably.

"I know, but we shouldn't," she said cautiously, skirting and hopping puddles, holding on to his arm. "There with our own house next door. The way we built it to be married in. There now, I'm saying it."

All the time she was greeting the villagers dutifully, with that slightly mocking inflection of hers that would mark her to them as a city woman. They were barely remembered acquaintances after all, yet very likely acquaintances of their loss and rejection only.

"They all seem so complacent and gleaming with curiosity," he grumbled, "but you go lilting fancy greetings at them."
"But that's better than your fretting about those goats," she answered casually, nodding her head at a woman standing on her stoop, with the inevitable broom, a woman now rolling her apron around her bare arms, not so much to protect them against the rain as to be able to spy and calculate better. And she'd be saying to herself: "Well, well, I haven't seen them here for a long time. I wonder why they've come here now — for that funeral? They seem all right, in appearance, but I know he's been out of work for weeks and months, and they living there — three flights up in the city, while they could have their house here, if..."

Anneke made herself listen to Dirk, instead of imagining further what that woman might be surmising. She clung a little harder, walked a little closer to him. "Of course, the goats will be old and tough, or they would have eaten them," he was mumbling. "They would have had them for their after-funeral feast. They'll be even too old to give milk, you can depend on that. But they'll be full of the old Papje, and wondering what became of him. He would have let them live forever, or as long as goats can live."

"God have mercy on us," she implored gently, against all this world of rain, sore memories, half remembered old neighbors, bedeviled goats and Dirk's fretfulness, which could be her own so easily if she allowed her old sorrows to get the upper hand. "I suppose it would have been better to have stayed at home. Here we're back to be badgered and so soon after Papje's funeral."

"It's still his funeral," he said hugging her arm compassionately against his ribs. It now seemed to her that they must both be aching simultaneously, with an almost physical pain. And actually he was thinking: There's pain all through me. But it must be the weather. I can't afford another reason for myself in this old town, and no work for weeks.

The village ended beyond the towering mill with its slack, rain-dripping wings, and then the road narrowed itself between
dark yew hedges and glooming trees which were tossing as with a personal passion. They could see the two houses now, where the road forked. She could tell that he didn't want to look at the two houses, because he said with irrational gaiety: "I'm happy we came after all."

"I'm happy too, dear," she answered.

They reached the newer of the two houses first, the clear yellow brick one with its purple trimmings and its three jovial looking dormers, still jovial even if there were a stranger's red curtains at them now. They couldn't pretend they were ignoring the house. But they were not going to talk about it. They had built it according to their own plans and designs before the war, when he had had his own business here. Now it belonged to a lost dispensation. That's why, Anneke thought, it should have been conclusive enough to have watched the funeral procession only. Yet if Dirk felt that there was something incomplete, it was right that she had come with him, and hadn't insisted on taking the first bus back to the city.

They were now opposite the older house, Papje's house. It looked flattened and black beneath the too heavy, rain soaked thatched roof. In back of it the goatshed leaned awry, as if it had already decided on its own not to buffet even one more autumn storm. "And this is July," Dirk reminded her, to show that he bad been thinking about autumn too. From the chimney of the old house came wisps of smoke and the acrid smells of peat. The smoke also came billowing across the open half door near the rear.

Then they saw a woman with a black cap fringing a red face, irritated by smoke or weeping, staring at them across the half door before she opened it and shooed a cat out and flapped her apron at the smoke. She was one of Papje's lesser relatives, they seemed to remember, and as if to corroborate it, the woman shouted: "Yes, but where have I seen you two folks before? I just hope you're not back from the funeral, because I haven't
got things half ready yet, and me here alone doing everything. But you’re as wet as frogs. Won’t you come in and dry off?”

Dirk shook his head, but Anneke said with her politest lilt: “No thank you, dear. We just came around for old times sake.”

“Oh, you’re the couple that lost the house,” the woman shouted, puckering her face with curiosity, and peering next at the yellow brick, purple trimmed house across the hedge. “Well now, what do you know!” and with that she summed up her abhorrence at their having committed the cardinal sin of losing their material possessions.

“Where are Papje’s goats?” Dirk asked. “We came to have a look at the goats.”

“The old goats?” the woman asked with righteous contempt, both for them and the goats, now that she had placed them and their loss properly. She pointed disdainfully at five wise goat heads jutting through a broken window of the shed. “You can take them away. They’re no good. They’re old and tough. But in the city you wouldn’t mind that, I suppose,” she added with a taunt. “Well, you can see I’m busy,” and she ducked back into the smoky house, where they could hear her start clattering kettles.

They walked toward the goat shed. All five of the goats started nuzzling them in their special wayward fashion. They were obviously Papje’s goats still. Their shattered-amber eyes were filled with capriciousness, mischief and what might be mockery of sorrow. “You can tell they’re Papje’s goats. They have his spirit and nobody can kill that,” Dirk said. “So what are we going to do with them? She told us to take them away, didn’t she?”

“We can’t do that, Dirk.”

“We have her official permission. Right from beneath that black fringed cap of hers. She even dared us to.”

She looked back at the house; more clatter and more smoke came issuing from it. “She’s only a poor relative. Besides, she’ll be coming out any minute, or choke in that smoke.”
"We'll set her free, too," he argued, and started twisting at the length of rusty wire that secured the door of the shed. "She wasn't good enough to go to the funeral. They must have something on her, so they blackmailed her to stay behind and do all the work." He had straightened the wire, but before he opened the door he said bitterly, "they haven't been fed all day, I can tell."

"You're really going to let them go," she said uneasily, yet stepping dutifully aside to let the goats go prancing and cantering past her, even with a wistfully approving smile on her face. When Dirk went in pursuit of the goats through the back yard, she closed the shed door carefully before she followed.

The goats went gamboling and capering toward the dark looming pinewoods, occasionally looking back with rapt and conspiratory glances. But no one stirred from the house.

Now that they had entered the pinewoods and heard the rain sizzling on the trees, they started going faster, all the time carefully along the narrow goat paths they themselves had previously made with Papje leading them. They kept skittering across the rain-glossed pine needles, amused at the two human beings that came running after them, in a game they evidently approved of.

Dirk and Anneke kept running after the goats, but now it was a joke on pursuit, a goatish game and they themselves were unmercifully involved. When the goats came to a sudden stop and started nibbling capriciously, they too stopped, and stood listening to the rustling pinewood silences. A crow flew over, a disconsolate bird with a possessed and haunted sounding caw.

Remember, Anneke wanted to ask Dirk, remember when the Germans first invaded and we had to run into these woods and hide here, and Papje had already tethered the goats here? And we could see the Nazis stop at our house and we could hear them shout noisy German questions into it, but all the while the goats kept so silent? Remember, Dirk? And how much they actually helped us, doomed as we were, so that for the time being we
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could stand it, because the goats were so wise and derisive about it all?

All that she actually said aloud was, "Remember, Dirk?" while they stood there waiting for the nibbling goats. He nodded.

Then the goats started capering again, with a flurry of swift wilfulness. Now their pace was so fast and devious that in less than five minutes they were completely out of sight. "We'll never catch them again," Dirk said comfortably. "Nobody will. They might even go scampering across the border into Germany, to play Papje tricks on them there, but nobody will be able to catch them."

She nodded solemnly. "I'm glad you made us do it," she said, and in the dark drizzling woods she embraced him. "Because now we've buried Papje properly. Do you remember, Dirk, how he used to misdirect the Germans and they'd go circling back across their own border? And the time they shot at him three times and missed each time, because he was just like his goats. Even in the Bible goats are cursed and perverse."

He shook his head gently over her and kissed her. The rain spattered around them and over them. He wanted to say: Thanks so much, Anneke. Thanks so much for keeping me from talking about our lost house and my lost business. Because saying it would be cruel and superfluous. Yet he had to say: "Remember when they put Papje in prison for resisting? Resisting in that comical way they couldn't swallow? And he stayed in prison, rather than be bailed out by his daughters and the collaborating husbands, who were worse than the Germans. Remember how they hated us for siding with him, because we were playing the game stupidly, and before they'd always thought we were smarter than they? And ruining my little business, and then us not wanting our house back later, when it was all over, and we could have come back to Noordbergum, but . . ." He said that much, holding her close, making an ellipsis of the real loss. It was Papje's daughters who had been really responsible, and Papje knew, but
could only nod silently and sympathetically over his once yearly jenever, but not remind them otherwise. "And they thought us extra super-fools for not wanting to live here again in our own house, even if we were then poor and plundered, because we saw no real mercy? No savor surely for coming back here?"

He was silent. He nuzzled his mouth in her hair, while she waited, because he hadn't said all of it yet. "But we had to come back here, much later, and we had to look at it this way, and act about it in this way, didn't we, Anneke?"

"Yes, and give Papje his real funeral," she said.

Then they started walking once more, arms around each other's waists, allowing themselves to be eight years younger, and so much more innocent and forgiving. Even allowing themselves to emerge from the pinewood onto the road, with the surprise they had felt the first time they had done so, a surprise of discovery and now remembrance.

On the edge of the windswept road they started waiting for the next bus. Suddenly a sour, lemon colored sun pushed through the clouds and seemed to put a peremptory halt to the rain. "It would be foolish anyway to have it rain longer," she said. "We're completely drenched. It's all over now, isn't it, Dirk?"

"Yes, dear," he said and took her arm formally, because the bus was in sight. With a capricious and even goatish display he lifted her into the bus, with a fine French flurry in this stolid corner of the country. The passengers and the busdriver giggled. They sat quietly smiling in the bus, very wet. She told him they would have some of Papje's jenever when they got back to their narrow and cheap flat. "Yes, Mevrouw," he said.