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*FIRST BRIDE

James Calvin Schaap

By Dutch standards, the house is not old—at best, at very best, one hundred years. Fortress-like, red brick, hip-roofed in long, thick thatch, it stands 200 meters back from a country lane meandering up and out from the Veluwe, a woody area of the Netherlands we might call a national forest. The area is very provincial; most Dutch people would call it backward. I once met a man from Ermelo who told me people consider the whole region twenty years behind the times; he jerked the visor of his cap, hurrumphed a bit, and told me he wished it were 25.

Nothing about the house distinguishes it. Surrounded by a few trees and a wooden fence covered with something like chicken wire, the place is quintessentially Dutch, from its steep roofs to the small barn that is not out back of the house, but is the house's own spacious back room. A few trees line its brick lane, and unused wooden lawn furniture sits in a square patch of yard created where the front wall of what used to be the barn suddenly juts out from the line of the house and looks over that corner with the eye of a new and broad picture window.

On that trip to the Netherlands, my third, I took a small tape recorder, and as I traveled I told it things I didn't want to forget. Not until I stopped the car behind the house did I remember that although that recorder was in my hand and running, I'd been saying nothing.

Exactly what I wanted to tell this woman I didn't know. I didn't resent her; I had no reason to, never having met her, never having even known of her until the day before I pulled up at her back door. If I hadn't stumbled on her name beside my father's on his emigration records, I would have never known she existed. The thought of simply turning around never crossed my mind. Nervous, yes—but as I remember that moment, I was not reluctant, perhaps because I wondered whether the two of us had known completely different men. I wanted her to acquaint me with the father I'd never met.

It was late spring, and the sun had appeared for what seemed to have been the first time since I'd come to the Netherlands four days before. Out back, in the grass north of the house, sheets and pillow cases lay spread over the ground. Even though I'd never seen that done before, I knew—how? by DNA?—that the bedding was being whitened in the old way, bleached by the sun. It was not a kind of de je vu—I felt no flashing echos. But the thought of my father, years before, standing there himself, out back of this house, at the same exact place, at a time in his life when he was head-over-heels in love, was overwhelming. The war was over. A young woman who lived there would be his bride. I wondered how often he stood right there kissing her passionately. How often, just a few minutes later, did he walk down the lane from this back door, dreaming of the full course of this woman's love, a woman not my mother?

He never once spoke of a first marriage, never hinted at this huge story in his life. Nothing in his demeanor or his frequent sermons to me had ever suggested he'd suffered—the war, yes; I'd heard dozens of stories about the war. But nothing about a first bride. I had no idea there'd been anyone other than my mother. I would never have dared guess, really—and I'm a historian. My father is not secretive or reclusive; with no hesitation, I'd describe him as joyful and jovial. Even on the most forsakenly frigid South Dakota mornings, with the wind tugging at our barn's every shingle and slat, the milking parlor could be as warm as the

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house, filled as it was with cows, gospel music from the Motorola, and my father's lilting tenor. He was not secretive, not brooding, not dark or silenced. I would have never guessed he could hold the secret of a first marriage so firmly.

But there had been a first wife. Why didn't he tell me? Was it out of some deference to my mother? Or was the whole story that painful—even half a century after it ended? What had he done? Was it my father's sin, or was it simply my father's pain? Either way, how and why could he cover it so completely?

I make my living on the past. I trade on details. I unearth secrets wherever and whenever I can, trying to make sense of time and place long past. History is my method of putting together a puzzle from pieces scattered hither and yon in a quantity never quite sufficient to complete the whole. But the truth is that I felt somewhat sordid as I stood there behind that Dutch house, digging through my father's past. Back home, he was dying of cancer, and here I was scooping a story for some trashy family tabloid my brothers and sisters would likely be the only ones to read. Who else would care? No one. What difference did it make that he'd married before my mother? But I am a historian. Berendina Janssens, a woman I'd never met, was his first wife. I had to know.

I was in the Netherlands for a conference on Dutch-American immigration, where I had been riffling through data on display—someone's research project newly computerized—when I punched in my father's name, simply to see how the program worked. From the time I was a child I knew the month and year he'd left Holland, where he'd come from, and where and when he'd arrived in Canada. As a boy, I visited the Ontario farm where he worked his first six months. Ten years ago, I met the old man who'd sponsored him, a man who, like my father, had never said a word about a first marriage, even though we'd talked for an hour or more. Had there been a conspiracy? And did my mother know? Maybe she didn't. Maybe that's why my father never spoke of Berendina Janssens.

During a break between conference sessions, on a whim I typed in my father's name on that computer; the CD-ROM light glowed, and the screen kicked out the whole bill of goods: the date he'd left, the name of the ship that had carried him to Canada, and the name—Berendina Jannsens-Versteeg. My first impulse was to hide the screen from people milling around me. I stooped over the screen as if I'd forgotten my glasses, read the name again and again.

I had only a day to find out something about this woman, so I left the conference that afternoon and drove out to the Veluwe.

The house has a front door, but I don't remember it. All the comings and goings happen by way of the back, where the driveway leads. Behind the house—behind what once was the barn—stands a real barn, small by North American standards, but obviously still something of a dairy. Spread out in back of the place were a few acres of fenced pasture with Jerseys, a picture that could have passed for a Wisconsin tourist poster. It was a bright, clear Saturday morning, not warm but beautiful, the air, like so much of rural Holland, redolent with manure.

The door was barely bigger than a closet door and painted in no distinguishing way. There was a doorbell. I pushed it, quickly, as I remember, because the time that had passed since I'd come up the drive couldn't have been long and I already felt like a trespasser. A woman stood in shrouded darkness before me almost immediately—small, far too small for my father, who always stooped in the basement of our farm home.

At that moment, I believe I had to fight not to show my nervousness. I deliberately used English. "Berendina Janssens," I said, "is that right?"

She nodded. She seemed younger than my father, significantly younger, a wisp of a woman. That's what I thought. "My name is Gerald Versteeg," I said. "I'm from the U.S. I was at this conference in Utrecht–"

"You may come in," she said, unlatched the door, and stepped aside, looking away with

deference not uncharacteristic of older Dutch women.

Something between them had broken, humpty-dumptied forever. He left her—or she him. I was born in '49, and I am, very much, by physical resemblance, my mother's child. That left only two years for my father to start all over again after whatever it was that broke up the brand new marriage he'd come to Canada with. Maybe she was the real reason he'd left for the States.

"My brother me warned me you were coming," she said, her English hardly broken. "He called."

I should have said that my even being there was something of a miracle. I'd met her brother at the Vrijgemaakte church in Heerde, the place to which I'd been directed by a woman at the travelers' center. She'd said there were many Janssens still in town, but two of them of my father's generation would be at her church, working. I lied to that woman; in my halting Dutch I told her I was looking for my mother's family, assuming like the small-towner I am that, even fifty years later and the Nazis long gone, the real story might still be a scandal.

Berendina Janssens' brother was one of a dozen retirees dressed in traditional garb and standing around a little museum and store just behind the church, a place run for the cause of missions in Zaire. I couldn't lie to this man, and once he had squared away who I was, he told me the most astounding new—that this woman who'd been married to my father had, years ago, returned to the Netherlands alone and presently lived here, just outside of town, in the family house. Not for a moment did he hesitate. "You must, of course, see her," he told me, reaching for a pencil from the pocket of his collarless shirt. "It is not a far distance from here, and she is at home." He must have called her just after I left.

"I'm sorry for walking in on you like this—I mean, out of nowhere," I told her as she closed the outside door behind us.

"Don't be," she said. "So many years ago it was that I hardly remember your father so good."

It was dark in the old barn. I couldn't make out her face clearly, but she pointed me toward the back door of the home. I'd heard enough stories about attached barns to fill the place with incidents from the war—men hiding from the Nazis, at least a dozen earthy stories about people relieving themselves back there and getting caught off guard.

"My Dutch isn't as good as it should be," I told her as we walked over the freshly swept cement. "I'm glad you speak English well."

"I lived for ten years in Canada ," she said. "But I knew English already before I left—before we did."

"We," I said, "meaning my father?"

"Of course," she said. I followed her silhouette through the semi-darkness, the only light coming through that picture window on the far end of the room. She wasn't at all what I had imagined—heavy and square-built, no dikke vrouw. She wasn't thick shouldered, wasn't dressed in a smock. She wore slacks, and she wore them so well that my father's interest in her, fifty years ago, was obvious—she would have been a looker.

"So," she said as we came into the kitchen, "who are you?"

"I thought you knew," I told her. "You said your brother called—"

"I mean, who are you?" Typical Dutch aggression. She didn't turn as she spoke, simply marched me into the kitchen, pulled a chair out from the table for me, then walked to the counter for coffee. "What kind of son might I have had if I stayed with your father?"

"I can't get over your English," I told her. "Do you use it often?"

"In Holland many people speak English—but not of my generation," she said. Two black cups, thick porcelain, she swiped from a tree of cups at the far end of the table, set them down before us, and filled them. "We're not fascists, like the French," she said. "And there is that, of course—" she pointed at the television at the far end of the table.

Berendina Janssens's hair was stylishly short, parted at the side, and cut straight, a wave

in her bangs. The lines around her mouth and eyes wouldn't allow falsehood about age, and her fingers, as she poured the coffee, seemed craggy and probably rheumatoid. But when she leaned back from the table and drew her hair away from her face, she made it difficult for me think of her as an old woman. Something undefeated flashed in her eyes, something which a half century ago might well have made my father the hymn singer consider the deep reaches of his desire downright sinful.

She took a chair, sat back with her cup in her hand, twisted herself out from the table slightly, just far enough to cross her legs before her, holding her chin so high as to be defiant. "What do you do?" she said, and then tucked her left arm beneath the one with steaming coffee and looked straight into my eyes. "What brings you to Holland?"

"I'm a professor," I said.

She nodded, as if that passed muster.

In the States, I would have told her I taught in college. "I teach history," I told her. "I'm an Americanist. I teach American history actually."

She nodded again.

I honestly believe that inside me, my father's own genes reached for her. She was that attractive. The way she addressed me was forthright, fully engaged, direct and alive. Those first five minutes she never moved from her chair, but her energy filled the room. Had she been my mother, my life would have been different—I knew it almost immediately.

"Historians," she said, smiling, "are keepers of the facts." She advanced her cup as it were a weapon. "What you people know is the truth."

"Can anyone claim that, really?" I said.

She snuck a peak at my face and winked. "If you think that way, then you must have left your father's church behind," she said. "There, everyone knows all of the truth."

Quick mind. Engaged cynic. "You find my leaving that church a good thing?" I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Are you happy?" she said.

Typically Dutch. Cut-to-the-chase questions.

"Is anyone?" I said.

"Some fortunate few, I think," she said. And then, "What must I call you, 'Professor Versteeg?—"

"Tony," I said.

Under her breath she repeated my name, and then, in Dutch, "Anton," she corrected. "We were saying, some people are happy—and you are one of them?"

"More than some," I said, "less than others."

"And smarter than some, too," she said, quickly. Another wink.

She wore a navy sweater, cotton, crew neck, very traditionally cut, no blouse peeking out at the collar. There were no rings on her hands, nothing to make clear whether or not she had married again. The way she looked at me—when she wasn't speaking, when she wasn't probing—was maternal at times, her eyes measuring in a way I would have found uncomfortable if she were not the woman who'd once married my father. She was doing research, I suppose, using her own methods.

"I am your first husband's son," I said. "What would you like to know?"

She adjusted her glasses with the back of her hand, then took a deep breath, the first sign I read of any reluctance at all. "What did your father tell you?"

At that moment, for a reason I don't know myself, I wanted to protect him. I didn't want her to know that she was a personal secret he'd either hoarded or hated or both. "What must I call you?" I asked.

"Dena," she said, a familiarity I wouldn't have expected.

"And your last name?"

"Janssens" she said, "my family name."

Maybe it was myself I wanted to protect, the historian who'd, ironically, known nothing about his own family record. "Was the marriage annulled?" I asked.

"What did he tell you?" she said again.

I brought the cup up to my lips and took a sip of the strong coffee, then lied. "That it ended," I said.

"That's all?"

My imagination created a conversation in which my father told all. We're in our barn, the milking done, and we're standing alongside the stanchions. He would have told me with a moral imperative, in the same way he told me almost everything. I can see him pointing his finger. And then I told Mrs. Janssens, "He told me it didn't matter what happened. What he'd learned was that you have to pick up the pieces and go on." I hunched my shoulders quickly, as he might have. "'Bad things happen,' he said, 'but the point is not to let them ruin your life.'" And then I smiled my father's consecrated smile. "'Suffering can make you strong'—that's what he said. 'The thing is to grow from adversity.'" I was sounding like Robert Schuller.

At that point, I'm not sure she'd even heard what I'd said. She held up a hand, uncrossed her legs, put her cup on the table, and pointed to what may have been a trapdoor in the floor. "That's where he was, you know—that's where he stayed," she said. "For six months, the man lived with us—six months. I was seventeen and every able-bodied man around was off somewhere, hiding or gone."

"My father?" I said.

"I didn't even know your father then," she said. "Oh, maybe by family—maybe I could picture him—his walk, his thick hair, that high wave. I knew of him, you might say, but I didn't know him."

I had no idea who she was talking about, but I did understand that even though I had been in Dena Janssens' house for no more than five minutes, she'd already cut to the very heart of a story I hadn't heard in all of my years with my father.

"He lived here with us for almost six months at the very end of the war, and I loved him," she told me, her clenched lips enforcing the passion she remembered. "My mother would have killed me—she was one of you people."

I suspected what she meant by that was something religious, but I let her speak.

"It was dangerous really, for my parents to let them talk with us—with the children." She pointed again. then kicked back the rug. "Look, look at your feet."

There beneath me was enough of a square line to recognize that just below the kitchen table had been the hiding place, a cellar for whoever it was the Janssen family hid from the Nazis onderduikers, maybe Jews.

"It was frightfully stupid," she said. "I didn't know that then, but I've thought of it often since that time. It was one thing," she told me, "for my parents to hide them here, but it was another altogether for them to let us mingle with them—and the younger children." She swept both hands up in a gesture of silliness. "Who knows? One of my sisters may have picked up an English word or phrase and used it at church in front of someone who should not have known we were hiding Canadian pilots."

And that's when I knew the story. She'd fallen in love with a Canadian. She'd been in love with a Canadian pilot—but then why didn't she emigrate herself—a war bride? She must have used my father as a means to immigrate, then left him.

"My mother would have killed me if she knew. My father would have thrown me out of the house." She looked around her, at the stove and the laundry tree across the room, the tiles on the walls. "This house," she said, chuckling, "the one I live in now. He would have thrown me out, to be sure—a sinner because there was a baby—his baby. I needed your father."

As a pretext for getting to Canada, she'd married my father, used him as a means of find-

ing the pilot her family had harbored and she'd loved. She was very young; and in the middle of all that war mess, she'd fallen head over heels. This woman. She was pregnant.

"I'm like a rabbit, I suppose," she said. "Isn't it a rabbit that's supposed to move in circles—that's supposed to always return to it's hokken? Now, here I am."

"A rabbit," I said, "yes. And me too, I suppose. Because here we sit—you and me."

"This is not your home," she said coldly. "You're not coming back to anything. You have no blood here."

I retaliated in kind. "How can you say that? My father's blood is on the back step," I told her. "I felt it when I stood there before coming in." She must have lied to him, told him he was the father—and it had to be fast, everything had to be fast. She had to have taken my father very, very quickly, then used his righteousness. "And his love is spilled here somewhere too, isn't it?" I said. "It haunts the place—it must be here—"

"Not his," she said. "My Canadian hero's is here," she said bitterly, "but not your father's. I don't hate him. I never did." There was no pretense in her, no politics but truth, but sometimes it seemed as if when she looked at me, she saw a lower species. "You love your father," she said. "And you should. But I didn't—never."

"I lied," I told her. "My father never mentioned your existence—not once in his life. I never knew of a first bride."

Her eyes turned to steel, and the corners of her lips fell.

"Until yesterday, Mrs. Janssen, I didn't even know you existed," I told her. "I had absolutely no idea my father married you. I knew nothing about his taking a wife to Canada." Each line hit her hard, so I kept at it, assaulting her for reasons I really didn't know fully. "You can't imagine how surprised I was when I found your name with his," I told her. "My father married! He never spoke of you—not a word. Never mentioned you. Only by accident am I here—only by luck. You understand?"

She reached for her cup, gathered what she could of her strength before lifting her eyes to mine once again. And then, some dignity coming back, she said, "So what do you expect me to believe," she said, "this first story or now the second one?"

I pulled the chair up close to the table. "Look at me," I said. "I'm telling you that not once in my father's life did he mention a word about you. I didn't know you existed until—" I looked at my watch, "until yesterday. Not even 24 hours ago."

She looked across the room, pulled her arms back from the table, sat straight on her chair, then lifted herself quickly and stepped back. "That's why I left him," she said. "Damned Christians and their stoic nonsense—if you don't talk about it, it doesn't exist." She raised her hands to her waist, stood there straight and proud. "Damn them—damn them all for their secret sins. Damn them all for their righteousness and their Godliness. Isn't that like them?—like him. You can always tell the Christians because their backyards are full of dirt that's just spaded—so much they have to bury back there." What she said wasn't aimed at me. The anger spilled from something tipped full inside her. For a moment she seemed to have forgotten I was in the room, and then she looked up at me once again, and something softened. "And he is alive today yet—your father?"

"He's dying of cancer, " I told her.

"That's nothing of my doing," she said.

"I didn't blame you," I told her. "I didn't come here to blame you for anything—"

"How many others like you—brothers and sisters?"

"Three—I'm the oldest."

"America?" she asked.

"He left Canada—he had relatives in the States, in South Dakota." I didn't know the story exactly, but I played what I knew against her. "Probably soon after you left him," I said. Something of the defiance had drained from her face. "And you're back here in Holland?" I

asked.

She circled the empty chair and then held both points of the back. "I got what I deserved," she said. "I got what I had coming. I don't think God is who the Christians think he is, but there is a God in heaven." She smiled. "I left your father," she raised her hands, rubbed a palm, "and my war lover left me—not even two years. Never married either. Not that I cared." Then she looked at me. "There's a God, I suppose—I just don't like him."

"Maybe it's a woman," I said.

"He's not a woman," she said. "God has a man's heart, as I do."

"Why do you say that?"

"We could never get along—too much alike, me and God." Deliberately she rolled the *g* in the Dutch way. "Women who believe in him love God," she told me. "Men who believe respect him. I never loved Him."

"Not even then?" I asked.

"Before the war maybe," she said, reaching for her cup. "Then I was a girl." She pulled it up into both hands but remained standing. "When I was a child, I thought as a child—you know what I mean?"

"And when you knew my father?" I asked.

"I was no child. After the war, there were no children left." She stopped quickly. "Well, maybe your father—I don't know. But none of the rest were children—"

"Nonsense," I said. I wanted to grab her—I really did. "You went winging off to Canada after some war hero? You lied with your body to my father for some pipe dream—to chase some guy in a uniform—and you say you weren't a child?"

She stood straight and tall behind that chair, the cup in both hands, and smiled, then laughed. "You're not like him," she said. "You're not like him at all, are you?"

"How do you know?" I said. "How long were you married?—a week?"

At that moment it hit her for the first time that I hadn't been lying to her, that the man she'd once married under pretext, the man she'd hauled on to some straw mattress somewhere in order to cover her sin, the man she had slept with, only to reach her baby's father in Canada—at that moment she understood that this man she didn't know at all had never even suggested her existence to me. She looked at me and said, "You don't know, do you?"

"I honestly don't know," I told her. "I don't know a word of the story. You're a revelation. Before yesterday, I had absolutely no idea there ever was a Berendina Janssens-Versteeg no idea."

In little more than ten minutes, I'd seen iron resolve, an arrogance that angered me, and now something close to defeat—all of it so clearly written on her face that she never had to speak at all. I've seen that before in Dutch people—eyes that mirror every splintered emotion from the soul—concrete conviction to abject helplessness. What's going on inside appears so openly on their faces that I wonder what immigrant experience altered that characteristic in so many of the Dutch who left this country, my father included. Dena Janssens never ever would have buried the secret my father did. Why?

And then, just as quickly, those eyes softened once more. She pressed her lips together, then smiled, softly. "You could have been my son," she said. Gentle smile—even adoring. "Maybe I would have liked your mother."

"No," I said. "Not really."

"Why so?"

"The older I've become," I told her, "the more I believe his marriage was not what he wanted us to believe it was. He is a good, good man, but he is capable of falsehood, for righteousness' sake."

"I believe that," she said.

"He was happy in the barn—a different man in the house," I told her.

"What is she like?"

"She's gone. She died five years ago. He's alone." I pushed back the chair from the table, and just for a moment as I looked down at that hiding place beneath me. "My mother," I said, "is as difficult to describe, as she was hard to love." I wasn't tailoring my words. "No one would deny that. But he never complained—I never heard about you, nor about her—never."

Determined smile, sympathetic, even stoic. "It is an act of faith," she said, "to withstand pain—and acts of faith count with the Lord." She bowed her head for a moment, seemed almost sad. "Bloody Christians all swear by election but work their heads off chasing righteousness for a reward they think they're winning all the same."

But she didn't know my father. He is not arrogant, not boastful; he is not puffed up. He may have faults, but he has never chased righteousness for any reason other than personal happiness and service to God—what he would call, simply, "thanks."

"So, you—" she said, and sat down once again beside me, "where do you fit in all of this?" She pulled the chair up close, leaned both her arms over the table towards me. "If you're not your mother's child and you're not your father's boy, then where did you come from—you historian?—"

Every word was measured and cut sharply to fit a path. I will admit it now. In a way, in those few moments in that old house, I loved her for her deliberateness, the way she cut to the quick, so much unlike my father, who seemed to me then to be living—and dying—in a completely different world. She had told me that she was too much like God to love him, and in a way I believed her. Not for a moment did she fritter away the words she could have chosen. I watched her moods shift like wind in the moods in her eyes. Everything was at the surface—nothing hidden away like my father.

"Where did you come from?" she'd asked me.

And I answered her in her own way—unflinching, direct. "Where did you?" I said. "Where do any of us come from?"

"From the air we breathe," she said. "All this genetics is just so much wasted science," she said. "I am a child of the war, the third child, second daughter, of Hendrick and Berendina Janssens. I was raised in their home--this one. But the war made me what I am." She sat back once again. "You would not believe what this place was like back then." Her arms spread instinctively. "It was a railroad station in here—people coming and going. Resistance people. Three Jews in the barn," she pointed to the back, "three pilots in the mooie room." Behind me, a closed door. Onderduikers in and out and in and out." Her hands twisted and whirled and jigged. "And my parents—they were like your father, so naive. I sometimes think my father heartily believed that some great dome of grace protected this house." She looked at me directly, silent. "I hated him for that, really—for his innocence. It is a curse to be born of innocent, Christian parents—a curse. And all that time, me and my Canadian were making love—"

"Where?" I said. "With everybody in this house, where did you find a place?"

She laughed. "The great tragedy," she said, "is that we die—and before that grow old." She was back in this house, fifty years before. "For everything that happened—for what I did to your father and what that big-time hero did to me, for all of my parents' innocence, and the craziness," she laughed to herself, "—and the craziness of all of those people and outside the Nazis capable of killing us all." She shook her head. "With everything that happened to me since—my children, who knows where, and your father, and being forced to come back here to Holland—for those months at the end of the war and that man, that Canadian, I'd probably do it all again." She raised a hand toward me. "You'll never understand that, but you asked, 'Where did we make love?' And my answer, Professor Versteeg, is where didn't we?"

"It was war—people were killed, millions," I said.

"And you," she said. "Did you ever know love?—you and your wife?"

"I'm divorced," I told her.

"I don't care," she said. "What I asked you was did you ever know love?"

"As a child?"

"Have you ever known love?" she said, slowly, as if pronouncing the words to an idiot.

"I don't know," I said.

"Then you haven't." Her fingers peaked as she held her hands up in front of her face. "For six months of my life, I had all I could do to breathe it in—in the middle of all of that bombing and Nazis all over, I was in love."

"Seventy-some years," I said. "And that's all the longer it was—six months?"

She raised her finger, pointed. "I was born in 1929, more than a decade before Hitler came to the Netherlands, but I am a child of the war."

"My father?" I said.

"You know him."

"Not like you did."

She nodded at me as if to say I deserved what she was about to say. "A good man. Not handsome. A Christian—but not a damned hypocrite—never a hypocrite." She touched her finger to her lips, sat there for a moment, thinking. "Of course, I used him, and I remember those nights, too. But I had to—my body told me I had to, and my soul said it too. I remember feeling his body on mine, in mine—and all that time I kept telling myself that when we got to Canada, the moment we got to Canada—." She made a bundle in her hands. "I can't say that what I did haunts me, because it's all now so far behind, but I remember him loving me—yes, here on this farm. I lied to myself before. I had to make him think the child already there was his. And I remember wanting to cry, not for him, but for my burden of having to deceive a good man, a man I didn't love." She looked at me, shook her head. "I don't expect your sympathy."

"You never loved him?"

"I couldn't let myself love him, even if I wanted to. Heaven was in Ontario, Canada. All I wanted was heaven."

"What did he say when you left him?"

"I never told him."

"You mean you simply walked away?"

"In a letter," she said. "I left him a note three days after I left that horrible farm. Three days. I told him the whole story and that he shouldn't come after me because I'd known what I wanted from the day he'd come here to this back door. I'd known exactly what I wanted." She looked at her open hand, as if there were some scar there, something telling; then she raised it to her face, wiped at the corners of her eyes. "In Canada, I simply disappeared—as if it were still the war. I left him, two weeks after we first put down our feet over there, and I went to find my lover and hero."

She looked up at me, her eyebrows raised, not so much a smile on her face, but something endearing pulled from a corner of her heart she'd not opened before. "You should not have come," she said. "Maybe even your father would say it—we can get by in this world from day-to-day if we don't have to remember some things."

"My father would say there's forgiveness," I told her.

"Yes, he would," she said.

She sat there at her table, alone in a house with more history than a place should have, and for the first time something unburdened within her threatened the strength of what had kept her energized, alive. Maybe they were not so much different, I thought—my father and this first bride.

"I hadn't even thought about that time," she told me. "I hadn't even thought of your father

for years—and years. He was gone."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"And so am I," she said, nodding. "And so am I."

Something broke, something stiff and unyielding and very, very beautiful. For the first time, grief came over her eyes like a shadow. "You tell him that, Professor Versteeg," she said. "You tell your father that before he dies—you tell him Dena Janssens is sorry for what she gave him—that pain."

I hadn't gone to that house like the prophet Nathan, to exact some penitence. When I'd come up the lane, I didn't know even the barest outline of the story. But when I left, I'd come to learn more than I'd ever guessed I would. I understood that what she'd told me she wanted my father to know was not only something painfully torn from her own stubborn and courageous heart, but also something my father would want very much to hear—not for himself, not simply to staunch a festering wound of unrequited love. Both of them were beyond that. But my father the Christian would want to know what she'd told me because it would enable him to leave this earth with hope for his first bride, accounts settled. He would want to know that she'd said what she said, not for his sake, but for hers, this woman he probably loved so much he couldn't speak of the pain she'd given him for the rest of his life, pain he'd likely tried hard to cover with love.

What I've come to believe, now, as I drive back to my father's South Dakota farm, is that this burden of history I've unearthed, this story will be a gift I can bring to his last days on earth. It will not be unsettling, a nightmare arising from ashes long grown cold and blown away in the countless seasons of prairie winds he's endured on land many would question was meant for anything other than buffalo. The story of Berendina Janssens will give him peace.

I know exactly how he will take the news because I know that what he sees before him now is an honored appointment with the King of Kings. His final journey began two years ago with the discovery of his cancer. Death has been made flesh in his ravaged body, and while he always knew he was going to die, since he's discovered how, his stoic sense of when has only deepened his assurance.

And if I can't give to him what he really wants—something of his son's clean and clear commitment to the Lord he himself has served through so much of a loveless life—I can at least bring him this last gift, the broken heart of a woman who once broke his, but more than that, the penitence of another sinner, one he knew intimately and yet not, a woman he slept with and thought he knew, just as fully as he is known. This historian who happens to be his son is very grateful that he can make this one last road straight for the coming of his Lord.

Today I will see my father. We will sit on the deck of the house where I grew up, a place my mother left five years ago. We'll look out on the empty barn he ritually visits three times a day to feed a multitude of cats, the only animals left. We'll sit on chairs beside the geraniums he keeps up on the railings, the sweet smell of redolent life in the air all around us, just as it was on that small farm just outside the Veluwe.

I'm on my way to tell him something he will savor. When I went to the Netherlands, I wondered whether I should even leave the continent, with my father in the condition he was. I went with no motive other than something professional and academic. But I have become, by grace alone, a prophet of joy, and for that I thank my father's God, for he has entrusted the great blessing of healing to me, someone who has doubted His goodness and mercy for many years.

My father has been ready to die for a long, long time. But today, maybe for the first time, his son, who has given him great pain in many years of questioning and doubt, is finally ready for him to leave.