

The Parvenu

Also by Mark Schalekamp

De Rebellenclub, Thomas Rap, 2000

Mark Schalekamp

A novel

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Hudig, Dennis Bergkamp, my mother, John Mayer,
Sander Ruys and Willem Sodderland.

‘If you are one,’ said Mrs Wasp, ‘you just are,
but if you are not, well, then you are not.’

‘And you never will be,’ added her husband.

‘And you never will be,’ she repeated, ‘no matter
what you do or how hard you try. Whereas if you are
one, there is nothing to worry about, because you just are
one.’

From *Eric in the Land of the Insects* by Godfried Bomans

Prologue

‘Champagne!’ cried the man who had just entered the main room of the club. The others in the room looked around at him and stopped talking. The newcomer joined one of the groups, slapped a few backs and shook a few hands. The buzz of conversation resumed.

Plumes of cigar smoke rose above small knots of men, to form a thick cloud a few feet below the ceiling. The ornamental mouldings were almost invisible and a veil of smoke obscured the eighteenth-century portraits of pompous whiskered gentleman surveying their distant descendants.

I had been standing in front of the fireplace for some time – too close I suddenly realised, and I rushed back into kitchen to dab my trousers with a wet tea towel. A tray full of flutes of champagne stood on the counter. I took one for myself, feeling I had earned it.

‘Are you out of your mind, Stadman?’ I hadn’t seen or heard him come in; my boss had crept into the kitchen the same way he crept around the club members. I nearly choked and put the glass back, but he grabbed it and emptied it into the sink. ‘I can’t serve this. We will discuss this matter later, I’ll be taking it out of your pay check, but first take this tray in. And what’s this?’ He bent forward a little, squinting at me, ‘I thought I smelled something. You stink. Make sure no one can see your backside.’

‘Shtadman.’ I think I found his lisp the most irritating thing about him.

‘Yes?’ I was already halfway down the hall.

‘Your sort doesn’t drink champagne.’

I was seventeen and it was my first job. Three weeks later I lashed out at my boss and he fired me. When I left the building I stopped in the parking lot long enough to deflate the tyres of his Fiat.

1

It was supposed to be an ordinary lunch. Even though I had plenty of time, certainly more time than Willem, I was late, as usual. We had known each other for a little over a year and had settled into a comfortable routine of lunch twice a month, claiming turn-about as a business expense, tennis every Tuesday evening and talking most days. We sometimes discussed important things, like landing a new client, but as often as not it was trivialities; an email with a link to a relevant financial article – we had both worked for banks for about seven years.

I walked into the restaurant, cajoled the waiter into giving me a better table than the one where Willem sat waiting for me next to the washrooms and ordered a glass of fresh orange juice.

‘Sorry, I was busy,’ I said as Willem sat down.

‘No problem, mate, I haven’t been bored.’

When he crossed his legs I saw that he was wearing red socks with his suit. I made a mental note: red socks are apparently okay.

As usual, we talked about work – who had been transferred, who had been fired, which bank was raking in big profits again, which one was in trouble, the usual idle gossip. But as the lunch progressed, just after the

waiter brought my cappuccino and a second glass of juice, Willem raised a new subject. The Batavia Club. I had known for some time that he was a member of that secretive group. I had hoarded the crumbs of information he had dropped over the past few months, but today I felt like a homeless person at an all-you-can-eat buffet.

‘The Batavia Club is a gentlemen’s club that meets once every four weeks, at the new moon,’ he said solemnly, ‘ever since 1676. The members are men of all ages and from all walks of life. What they have in common is that they are men who matter.’ He fell silent while the waitress served his omelette. ‘After the opening ritual we have dinner and drinks. Sometimes there’s a lecture or a debate.’

Willem paused. The moment seemed artificial, rehearsed. And then he said ‘Hugo, would you be interested in joining the Batavia Club?’ For a minute, the world stopped turning. Every detail of that moment is burnt into my memory, probably forever: the colour of Willem’s cufflinks, the people at the table next to us, the number 24 tram crossing over the intersection, its driver a Surinamese woman. There were two wasps on the windowpane. Willem was eating his lunch – cheese, no butter – and there was a little spot of blood on his collar. It was five past one on a Thursday.

The Batavia Club.

The world resumed its orbit, as if someone had plugged it back in. U2’s Elevation was on the radio, Willem took another bite and the tram rang its clattering bell at a reckless cyclist.

‘Sure, why not?’ I made a superhuman effort to hide the excitement in my voice. ‘That sounds great. Men who matter, that’s me, isn’t it?’

‘Good. I’ll suggest your name to the Senate. The board, I mean. I’ll get back to you.’ Willem looked at me proudly, like a teacher beaming at a favourite student.

We parted out on the street. ‘See you Tuesday,’ I said. ‘Be prepared to take a beating.’

‘To my recollection, you haven’t won a set for the past three months,’ he replied, ‘but you never know. Thanks for lunch.’

‘No problem. I’m claiming it as a portfolio review with Mrs D’Aubrey. You look just like her. Thank you for putting me up for....’

‘Shhh.’

I feigned indifference for about forty long paces, until I was out of sight. I felt like running and jumping like a football player who’d just scored the goal of a lifetime. When I’d turned the corner, I raised my fists, like *The Greatest*, Muhammad Ali after a fight that had destroyed his opponent, but that had nearly killed him as well.

2.

Three shopping trolleys and two full supermarket bags were lined up in the hall of my apartment building. An envelope on top of the heaviest-looking trolley was addressed to me, from one of my neighbours. The building was typical of this part of Amsterdam, stately and old, like most of the residents. Elderly, single ladies lived in seven of the ten apartments. They were spry, elegant and rich.

They did their own shopping in the street around the corner, at the overpriced greengrocer whose apples were laid out like jewels, and the

butcher where the amount of time they took to place their tiny orders infuriated the other customers. They left their shopping in the hall and assumed that the ‘nice young man from the fifth floor’ would carry it up the stairs for them. The lift had been out of order for several weeks. So every day when I came home from work I carried at least three bags or their little two-wheeled shopping trolleys up two, three or four flights of stairs.

I didn’t mind, particularly not today. Today I’m walking on air, today I could carry those trolleys up ten flights of stairs. I put down my own shopping and picked up a trolley. The note in the envelope read, ‘Thank you so much Mr Stadman, yours sincerely, Mrs Weisberger.’ Every day the envelope contained a five-euro note, which I always tucked back into the shopping bag. Some of them treated me like a doorman; Mrs Van Oldenbarneveldt had recently asked me to look at a leaking tap in her apartment.

Sometimes I left their groceries at the door, but I preferred to take them into the apartments. It was like stepping back in time – old furniture on the floor and old masters on the walls.

My own apartment is different. Stepping into the hall brings you face-to-face with a big bronze statue, a three-foot nude. Coats hung on a set of antlers. Shot by my grandfather, I always say, but I picked it up for ten euros at the Waterlooplein flea market. The kitchen on the left has my bottles of champagne in a well-stocked American-style refrigerator. The sitting room is straight on. Nothing superfluous here: a dining table, a sofa, a design bookcase and music equipment. A plasma screen on the wall and two photographs of Muhammad Ali. In one corner, a spiral staircase leads to the roof terrace. A door in the other corner leads to the bedroom and the en suite bathroom, with a bathtub I never use.

It was half-past eight and I had just finished eating when someone kicked the door. Jochem is eight and can't reach the doorbell.

'Hello mate, how are you?' I called out, hastily scanning the apartment for things that might not be suitable for his eyes. 'Isn't it past your bedtime?'

'No, mummy said I could bother you for a while.' His mother Jet is the only other adult in the building under the age of seventy-five. Jochem's father lives in London and is so obnoxious that even his son notices.

'And why should I let you come in?'

'Because.'

'Well?'

'Because I'll scratch your car if you don't.'

'Oh yeah, that's right.'

The apartment was clean, he could come in.

'It's not much fun here,' he said, settling into his favourite spot on the sofa. 'It's a lot more fun in our apartment.'

'So go back there then. How's Rebecca?'

'It's over. She smells.'

'Does she ride horses?'

'Yes, how did you know?'

'There used to be a girl in my class who rode horses, and she smelled really bad. If you sat next to her you had to dust yourself off or you'd get fleas.'

'If Rebecca touches me, I'll punch her. Now I like Fiona.'

'OK. Is she fit?'

'Do you mean is she good at sports?' he asked, picking his nose.

'No, is she pretty?'

'She's all right.'

'Don't wipe that off on the sofa. Does she play football?'

'Course not. She's a girl.'

There was a silence as Jochem wandered around the apartment, picking up things, examining them and putting them down again. Subject closed. He was an unusual boy. He could be wild, and he almost always has a band-aid somewhere. Last month he had to wear a sling after he fell off his cross bicycle and broke his arm. But he could be surprisingly wise as well.

'You're thirty aren't you?'

'Yes.'

'Why don't you have a girlfriend?'

'How do you know I don't have one?'

'You live alone, don't you?'

This week's toy of choice, a bouncing ball, has twice threatened to topple one of my vases.

'Yes...', I said.

'Well then.'

'I can still have a girlfriend. You and Rebecca didn't live together.'

'Rebecca smells. And I'm not a grown-up. Do you have a girlfriend?'

I grabbed a stack of DVDs from his hands, suddenly not sure there wasn't any porn in there.

'No,' I said.

I did, in fact, but I meant to do something about that very soon.

'Good,' said Jochem. 'I'm going to find one for you.'

'That's great, but now it's bedtime,' I said, steering him back towards the door.

3.

The girl I'd been seeing for the past few weeks is called Nana. She rang twice yesterday, left a voicemail and sent three text messages. I didn't reply. Yesterday I saw her skate by in the street. Just a few hours before we had woken up together and had sex. She didn't see me. I felt no desire to call out to her.

Now I telephoned her. 'Hi Nana.'

'Hi'

'What are you doing?'

'Nothing, I just got in, I had dinner with my sister and brother-in-law.'

'Did you have a good time?'

She said nothing. She said nothing for quite a while.

'Is something wrong?' I asked.

‘Hugo, I told you before... I don’t like playing games. So don’t act like nothing is wrong, I’m not stupid.’

Now it’s my turn not to say anything. She is giving me an unhopd-for easy way out of the relationship. Is that what I want? Yes, it is. I no longer find her attractive, her crooked tooth is no longer sexy but irritating, her clothes are cheap, not hip. And above all, I don’t need a girlfriend who’s a stewardess and whose entire family lives in some squalid suburb. A girlfriend named after Nana Mouskouri, who says toilet instead of loo. I simply can’t afford Nana any more, not after this afternoon.

‘Ok, Nana, you’re right,’ I said, ‘we need to talk.’

Her breathing became heavier.

‘These past few days I’ve been thinking about us and I... I think you’re sweet and pretty, but I don’t think we belong together. You said so yourself, didn’t you?’

‘So it’s over?’

‘Yes, I think it is. I think you deserve better.’

‘Don’t go there, please,’ said Nana.

‘Sorry.’

She started to cry. ‘Is that all you can say?’ She doesn’t wait for my answer. ‘You are so mean. You know, it’s like you’re two different people. Sometimes you’re an angel and sometimes I just don’t know, you’re like a devil. I just don’t know. I’m hanging up now, okay?’

According to my phone, the whole thing was over in just four minutes and forty-three seconds. I stood in front of the window, gazing out over the rooftops. Somewhere out there, less than a mile away, Nana

was crying. I picked up my newspaper, turned on the television and got a beer out of the refrigerator, even though it was a champagne day.

Before I went to sleep, I wrote in my Little Black Book: *Perhaps the most important day of my life: I'm a candidate for the Batavia Club. I fill in my list at the back: Nana, nr.63. Three weeks. Looks 8, IQ 5, Sex 7½, Overall: 7. Details: nipples too big, too close to her family, socially inferior.*

4

Five.. four.. three.. two.. one.. I watched the timer my father had installed in the shower cabin knowing that the hot water would shut off when the timer ran out. I was allowed to take a longer shower, but it would be cold, like a shower at a camping site. That's how it was at my parents' house. I had forgotten about it until a gush of ice cold water hit me and I jumped out of the shower, cursing, and almost slipped. They were repairing the heating in my building, that was probably it.

As I was getting dressed I remembered that my father used to say 'Every little bit counts', and 'Pound wise and penny foolish'. He always stressed how strapped we were for cash, saying we couldn't afford any extravagance. Thriftiness was his greatest virtue: savings stamps from petrol stations and supermarkets, coupons on packages. Stickers written in pencil on the three piggy banks that stood on the dresser in the living were marked 'colour television', 'holiday', and 'new football boots for Hugo'.

If I gave him eighteen nickels, my father deposited a guilder in my savings account; twenty-four dimes were worth a two-and-half guilder

piece. We spent our Saturdays at the football club, where he urged my brother and me to collect beer bottles. There was a fifteen cent deposit on each one and if the first team was playing at home, we could earn as much as ten guilders. I can't imagine that we were very popular with the men who stood along the sidelines. We waited impatiently next to them, arms crossed, our eyes boring into their beer bottles.

I usually pumped my ten guilders straight into the pinball and slot machines the same afternoon. My brother managed to save two hundred guilders. I saved only two. I was twelve or thirteen at the time.

I don't remember much about the time before then. Sometimes an image emerged from the thick mist clouding my early childhood: white bread with chocolate sprinkles, the newspaper, flat, generic-brand cola, church on Sunday, and a big photograph of Queen Beatrix and Prince Claus above the sitting room door. The big basket of Brussels sprouts my mother trimmed for the green grocer every Tuesday. Yes, we ate Brussels sprouts at least twice a week, once with *slavinken* and once with meatballs, and always with potatoes. My mother was a firm believer in the five-food groups principle and the health benefits of a basic meat, potatoes, and vegetables diet. We only ate rice with Chinese takeaway when my mother was sick. I didn't eat pasta until I went to university.

When I was fourteen we moved from our flat to a terraced house with a garden. The flats turned out to be full of asbestos, and have since been demolished. I remember a red Mazda my father bought from his brother but rarely used. He travelled to work on his moped. 'It's faster,' he said.

He worked for a bank, Ruijgrok & Co. It no longer exists, having been taken over by a bigger bank, which last year was swallowed up by an even bigger bank. Ruijgrok & Co. was a family bank, always managed by

at least one Ruijgrok progeny. My father worked in the administration department, where his career followed an unusual path. When he started at the bank as an eighteen-year old, his department was the biggest in the bank. But with each technological development, the department became smaller and less important until at the age of fifty-four my father, who received a small promotion from time to time, became the boss of a department with only two employees.

Once the staff magazine honoured him as their Employee of the Month. The caption read ‘Twenty-five years at the bank and he’s never taken sick leave’. It wasn’t true. My father wasn’t sick very often, but even he had flu once in a while. If he was too sick to go to work, he used his holiday allowance.

For a long time I was sure that there had been a mix-up when I was born, the fault perhaps of a confused nurse, exhausted by a hospital ward full of crying babies. A simple mistake had landed me in this shabby family. I knew that one day a big car would pull up outside our door. A chauffeur would chase away the gaping neighbourhood children before opening the car door for the man who had come to get me. My real father.

5

Five... four... three... two... one... go. I took my cue from the cyclists’ light instead of the ordinary traffic light and pulled away just a fraction ahead of the Porsche 911 next to me. I shifted gears as late as possible and slipped into the traffic backed up on the Stadhouderskade ahead of

the Porsche. The angry driver sounded his horn, feigning outrage at my reckless driving.

Traffic was gridlocked. Some city official had planned these road works, which incompetent contractors and their drunken Polish workers would carry out at a leisurely pace over the next few months. I was almost frustrated enough to consider cycling to work, but not quite. They had given me a car and I intended to use it. It didn't matter that a bicycle would have been much faster. The ever-present threat of rain was not the reason either. At some point you had to stop going to work on a bicycle. It was a ridiculous, typically Dutch phenomenon that government ministers and even the prime minister had to be seen riding a bicycle to prove they were just ordinary blokes.

A delivery truck was blocking traffic on the canal, a few yards away from my office. Fuck, I was hemmed in, unable to reverse, but it didn't really matter; I was already almost half an hour late. Time for a cigarette. I was banned from smoking inside ever since a couple of secretaries had threatened to report the bank to the health services.

A little later I parked in the garage under the building, which wasn't easy because Van Zuylen had parked his Range Rover over part of my parking space. He did this at least twice a week.

Ratelaer Van Twist is a small bank primarily engaged in private banking: managing rich people's money. It's a posh bank, especially by Dutch standards. I had often heard my boss Ronald announce to clients that it was the oldest bank in the country, established in 1838. No idea where he got his information; the bank was founded in 1898 by Ratelaer and Van Twist, who got rich trading with the Dutch East Indies, and the bank had made them even richer. Ratelaer Van Twist only has one office, in a

beautiful building on Amsterdam's elegant Herengracht that's too big for the forty people who work there. The bank had recently been taken over by the British giant Brown & Jones. No one knew why, but in the end nothing much had changed, and even the name had stayed the same.

I am Senior Private Banker. My card also says that I am the Deputy Head of the Wealth Department, the number two in the department. That sounds more impressive than it is, once you know that the department consists of eleven people – four private bankers, four asset managers, and three assistants – but I wasn't complaining.

The aim of the Wealth Management Department is to make rich people richer – it's as simple as that. In fact, it's even simpler. Our goal is to make Ratelaer Van Twist richer. The two objectives are not always compatible: clients can lose money if they make the wrong decisions about their money. They may be acting on our advice, but when things go wrong, it's better to blame them. The bank always wins. The trick is to switch the portfolios around as often as possible, from shares to bonds, moving on to structured products, then back to an investment fund via a hedge fund and a little real estate. The bank earns a fee on every transaction. In fact, the bank earns money on everything it does. A phone call to a client to ask how things are going? The client pays. Telling a client about a new investment product? The client pays. Even the actual telephone charges are passed on, but the clients are too rich to notice.

'Good morning fellow workers, did you all start without me again?'