



*The Sister Who was not Anna Magnani*, a novel by Aristide von Bienefeldt, published by Meulenhoff, Amsterdam, 2010 (recently I left this publishing house, today I am in negotiation with another company, also Amsterdam based).

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## About *The Sister Who was not Anna Magnani* and former novels.

The main characters from my previous novels (*Confessions of a Son and Heir*, *A Decent Young Man*, *Tell Me All About Walter*) all suffer from an incompatibility between everyday reality and the world they live in, a world making them believe that everything is feasible, including happiness and love. In each novel the protagonist confronts an obstacle rising between life and their universe in which nobody breaks a leg or shouts at his neighbor. In the first book the main character is obsessed by a ‘phantom love’, in book two the partner dies from an incurable disease whereas in book three we encounter rather unconventional family ties (the lover who turns out to be the son).

In *The Sister Who was not Anna Magnani* we also meet a protagonist with an almost natural aversion to reality, using all kinds of weapons to construct armour protecting her and her surrounding world.

But some differences occur.

Books one, two and three are explicitly referred to as ‘first-person confession novels’. For each story, I selected an element from my own life and worked that out in a fictional manner. *The Sister Who was not Anna Magnani* is a novel in the classic sense of the word, involving a constructed plot and a protagonist with a clear-cut need. The novel is written – quite novelly too – in the third person.

There is a development discernible from novel to novel: the main characters of the first three books choose short-term satisfactions to ease their frustrations, whilst the protagonist of book four tries to find a long-term solution.

Almost every character in *The Sister Who was not Anna Magnani* leads a double life. The basic idea is that cheating is worth the effort, as long as you follow your own rules and never hesitate to apply them, even when this seems rather absurd.

The initial image remaining from Alice Nola – witty, sensitive and intelligent, someone whose name will appear on the guestlist for everybody’s birthday – is a positive one. But those who dare to pick up the book again, will *not* be disappointed: underneath the lovely top layer, they will discover a slightly rotten core.

There is no sex in this novel – nor eroticism – and no homosexuality. The latter surprises me, but sometimes stories impose themselves – beyond the author’s control. That is what happened here.

*The Sister Who was not Anna Magnani* is a family novel, written in a breezy, sometimes ironic, but always accessible style.

Some details: in the book I make a – modest – use of footnotes. The reader will get background information that may otherwise be unknown to them: like for instance the origin of the name Breedvat-Guis, the previous owner of the taxi the Nolas sometimes call, or the reason why Alice plans to decorate the town hall with carnations, the day of her sister’s marriage.

Swan City is an imaginary city based on several existing towns on the eastern side of the country, and although the names on the street signs are names of people who really existed, no actual street will ever bear those names.

At first glance, Adriaan van Campen and Maria Swanenburg may sound like Adriaan de Ruyter or Juliana van Stolberg, nevertheless three Google clicks later you find out that the blue street signs of *The Sister Who was not Anna Magnani* hide a large crowd of poisoners, serial killers, thieves, liars, rapists...

## *The Sister Who was not Anna Magnani* (résumé)

The reader is introduced to Alice Nola, a forty-something woman living in Swan City. She shares a house – that has been in the family for five generations, on the mother’s side – with her two brothers, Castro (a traveling sales representative for some vague product, possibly teddybears, with whom she had an incestuous relationship in the seventies, and communicates by post-it notes ever since) and Emiel (a poet who rarely leaves his room); also her sister, the flamboyant Blommia, a heavily made up blond who works for a postal company, spending eight hours a day in front of a computer ‘being beautiful’.

Their parents met at the Hauptbahnhof of Bremen, in the early fifties. Wina, the mother, was traveling back from Stockholm – where she had just missed a high-pitched note at an audition for the local Conservatory – and Lamberto Nola (an Italian who had managed to remain jobless in a full-employment period in Germany) who was returning to his hometown, Naples. Wina and Lamberto argued about anything, but living without each other was not an option. Wina dies seven years before our story begins, only two weeks before Lamberto commits suicide after having organised an ‘mercy-killing party’, for which his only surviving sister, Coletta, especially came over from Italy. This first attempt fails as he accidentally takes the homeopathic gout pills of his wife.

At the start of the story we find Alice in the garden where she has just finished weeding the fuchsia flowerbed. She had been resisting for long weeks before doing so: all that time her sister had complained about the nettles pursuing their invasion of the flowerbed.

This flowerbed, visible from the kitchen where Alice often discusses matters with her dish washing brush (‘The only one who remained when I needed someone to talk to’; ‘we all deserve someone who never contradicts us’), which symbolizes the main thread of the story. From now on, Alice will seek her sister’s gratitude.

Until the end of the novel, this theme – usually in the background, occasionally in the foreground – plays an important part.

The following day she finds a turd in the bedding. The work of a cat, Alice hopes, and she begins to scatter catfood in the garden. The food is particularly popular and the turds get bigger every day. Alice’s only social contact – Bram, a man in his fifties who injured his right eye in a motor accident in a french village (Brenas) in his younger years, who seems to wink ever since –, with whom she drinks one or two gin and tonics in a café every day, helps her with the identification of the animal by showing her pictures of a large variety of turds.

The day he declares that the animal living in her garden could never possibly be a cat (‘a cat buries its turds’), she ends the friendship.

That night she receives a post-it note from her elder brother. ‘A fur cap is wandering through the garage,’ it says. The next day, unexpectedly assisted by Emiel, she finds, in a desolate forest where their father used to read the *Decameron*, a Persian cat.

She calls him Brenas (after the village where Bram first winked). She experiences the trip home as the ‘natural’ counterpart to the Calvary. She hides the cat in her bedroom. The pet shop owner she shows a picture of Brenas to, recognizes her cousin’s cat.

Alice does at first attempt to contact this cousin (Mrs Antje van der Sijsjes, a well known figure in the village). She pays more attention to her appearance and changes the eternal men’s shirts and jeans she normally wears for crepe dresses, fashionable suits and extravagant coats ornated with feathers. The makeover ends with a final touch from the hairdresser who dyes her hair blond. It is now obvious she looks like her sister. Everybody notices it, except herself.

Yet, when they were children, Blommia and Alice were best friends. Together they dreamed of a career in Hollywood. In anticipation of their departure, they had imagined the ‘Hollywood norm’ in Swan City: they elaborated a list of the people in their community likely to be invited on the plane to America, a glamorous counterpart to the Ark of Noah. The arrival of puberty had killed the Hollywood dream. It was also the end of their friendship.

Alice's first attempt to justify the presence of the cat (she buys 24 white mice and sets them free on the deserted top floor of the house) has little effect. Then Brenas ruins Grandfather's paintings.

When Alice comes home in a taxi on Christmas Eve, she finds a stack of suitcases with Brenas' traveling basket on top of it, in the garden. To the driver she says: 'My family thinks I deserve a vacation. This is their way to surprise me.' She rents a room at the Walden, one of the most expensive hotels in the area.

There she befriends Esmeralda, a guest from Prussia who changes countries every year in order to study the destiny of political refugees from the inside.

During a walk she runs into a boy who is busy sticking a poster on the wall. His name is Erol and she discovers a huge portrait of Brenas on the poster where she reads: *Lulu, where are you?*

Erol takes Alice to the flat of the cat owner, who indeed appears to be Antje van der Sijsjes. Her apartment is filled with pictures of Lulu everywhere: from teacup to toothbrush, from bowl to nightstand. In order to avoid 'misunderstandings', Alice introduces herself as Anastasia Stein. She easily wins the friendship of the widow ('If I get married,' she promises her, 'you'll be my bridesmaid').

In the meantime she locks Brenas inside the – unused – chapel of the hotel, fearing that Erol has guessed her double role.

With Esmeralda she travels to Marmer City to post a letter to the widow, supposedly written by Brenas. He explains that he is now living in a 'grand' city, and very happy with his new life. He points out he does not want to come home anymore.

Erol, the widow's devoted neighbor remains a risk though.

When Antje tells Alice that he – during an intense door to door search – has also called at her house, she learns that Blommia had a mouse on her shoulder when she opened the door to him. She slips into the skin of a science journalist (Eliza Bruinzwein), and warns Antje – over the telephone – against a life-threatening mouse virus spreading around.

Deeply troubled, the widow begs Alice to come over. 'And bring Dormifuns' (sleeping pills).

When Alice arrives (leaving Esmeralda waiting outside in a car), the widow is thrilled with joy: Erol has just called to say that Lulu was found in Marmer City. They raise a glass of champagne. Alice has no idea what is going on.

Then Erol calls again: the cat he found appears to be another. The widow is inconsolable and Alice takes her to bed. She hands her a glass of hot milk. She adds 24 Dormifuns.

In the following dialogue, it becomes clear that nothing is what it seems: Alice who thinks she has masterminded the whole thing in a brilliant way, is herself confronted by someone who is stronger than herself.

The last words of the widow are: 'You did a great job, but you were not sensational. I was.'

So, what did happen?

When the widow learned she had terminal breast cancer, she decided to search a new home for Lulu. She wanted to do this in a theatrical way. Mary, Lulu's au pair and Blommia's former maid, had told her about Alice Nola.

The manipulator eventually finds herself manipulated. Alice – along with the reader – discovers that many coincidences turned out to be calculations invented by the widow: the cat in the garden, the posters in the vicinity of her hotel, etc.

Following the widow's death, Brenas falls seriously ill. The doctors haven't got the slightest idea, Alice fears that an 'ancient virus' was transmitted when he beheaded a statue of Jesus in the chapel.

No cure seems to work, he loses his fur and becomes very skinny. Alice, desperate, calls her younger brother and pleads for them to be able to come home ('The right thing to do,' says one of the receptionists at the Walden, 'when you feel like dancing you go to a dancing, when you feel like dying you go home').

The following morning they come to fetch her, Blommia (who has gained weight, and does not

dye her hair anymore), Emiel, and Castro who addresses her after twenty-four years of silence.

As Brenas's health continues deteriorating, he is taken to a clinic. Alice visits him every day. Blommia won't set eyes on him ('He reminds me of aunt Tip on her deathbed').

Doctor Breedvat-Guis suggests to transfer Brenas to a university hospital in Free City: 'We have no choice: it's either Free City, or death.' They agree. Emiel assists Brenas in the ambulance, Alice is too distressed.

Brenas's new physician (Gijsbert Graadjetien) calls every morning with an update. Brenas is diagnosed with a strange virus that makes him sleep all the time. His situation remains very worrying.

One afternoon, Alice runs into Bram and they have a gin and tonic, like in the old days. When the waitress asks questions about the forthcoming 'big' day, Bram gets very embarrassed. Alice realizes the waitress has taken her for Blommia.

Bram admits he is having an affair with Blommia, and that they plan to marry. Alice walks away angrily. 'I will ask the mayor to decorate the City Hall with carnations the day you marry my sister,' she shouts.

Alice keeps answering the phone every morning, and while staring at a reproduction of *The Scream* (by Munch) she absorbs the news from Free City. Reports on Brenas' health remain worrying, though he does wake up occasionally.

One day Alice sleeps in, meanwhile Blommia answers the phone.

Alice jumps out of bed to listen to the conversation at the top of the staircase. From the enthusiastic reactions of her sister ('That is wonderful news, doctor, I cannot wait to tell my sister!'), she concludes that Brenas is saved. Upon hanging up, Blommia notices Alice listening in.

This scene is not unfamiliar to Alice. She dreamed it many times, except that the woman she met in her dreams – or *thought* she was meeting – was Anna Magnani. When she looks into her sister's eyes – a sensitiveness never encountered so far – she realizes that the woman in her dreams has never been the Italian filmstar.

And suddenly Alice, who had always presumed she did not get on with Blommia because of an inconsolable difference of characters, comes to the conclusion that they did not get on because of an unretrievable difference of character, but because they are so much alike.

During breakfast a letter is delivered. Castro rips it open and reads the contents.

'It is the bill of the Walden Hotel,' he says, passing it to Emiel who reads it and passes the letter to Blommia. Alice is passed it next.

After having read its contents, she looks up at Castro. He laughs and says: 'There is only one way to deal with this. We will have to sell the house.'

Alice Nola brought her left wrist, around which was fitted a silver man's watch with a black leather strap that used to be brown, close to her eyes. It was half past five and she had done what she was expected to do.

That very morning she had been to Gardino's Papershop to fetch a box containing the discounted post-its Castro had asked for, and she had just put an end to a colony of rapidly expanding nettles settled in the flowerbed of the fuchsia – a circular pattern in the middle of the lawn –, largely commented upon by Blommia who said, each night she came home after having posed before a computer screen all day: 'That you are able to watch that wilderness without ever feeling the urge to grab a tool is totally beyond me.'

Her sister – several shades blonder, fourteen months older – was a creature from the nineteenth century trapped into the body of a twentieth century person. There was 'crinolinish' blood running through her veins and she had a real talent for the mere unnecessary.

She used to have talent for theater, too. 'Your elder daughter and theater are like two branches of the same tree,' master Wolfheart had said to Wina and Lamberto Nola while discussing her future.

He also added it was utterly dangerous to leave the talents given to you by the almighty Magician 'up there' unused. If you leave those talents given by the almighty Magicien unused, they end up leading their own lives. He had compared the talents leading their own lives with unguided missiles.

Years later, Master Wolfheart's words were still crossing Alice Nola's mind whenever the headlines of the Gazette quoted a serial rapist or a freedom fighter. Then she wondered what kind of talent such a person may have left unused.

But before granting him a talent – that needed so much upkeep that its owner had discouragingly started to behave immorally, firing rockets at someone he did not know anything about, whether he preferred Granny Smith's or Golden Delicious –, she realized she lived with three unguided missiles.

And that she was one too.

'What do you need a ruler for?' Blommia asked.

With her body leaning against the post of the kitchendoor, she raised her head and lowered her eyelids like a dancer who has just auditioned, now awaiting the subsequent answer of the jury. Castro was in the dining room, Emiel had gone to his IU.\*

'Only in my IU\* does my poetry reveal itself properly,' Alice's younger brother had replied, at Alice's advice, years ago, to expand his territory.

Something that sounded like an interview had developed, Alice was on about enumerating the names of cafés where she used to hang around in the old days, when she still tried to get herself on the map.

She was now washing the dishes, involved with her sister in something that could also turn into an interview.

'Why would I tell you I use rulers?' exclaimed Alice.

'*A Ruler*,' Blommia corrected, pointing at a wooden ruler laying on the table, next to a pile of plates on their way to the pantry. 'I don't know the quality of your eyesight, as for me, I can see only one ruler here.'

Typically Blommia, thought Alice, talent for the unnecessary. When the compulsory comes along, she is busy painting her nails. She tried to move the conversation to a higher level. 'Don't you know about my new hobby then?'

'Huh? A new wh... at?'

'I have a new hobby.'

Blommia smiled softly to the doorpost. 'Well, that is something I'd like too, a hobby. Unfortunately, that kind of luxury is not meant for people who devote their lives to a career.'

Alice looked into the garden. The fuchsia had not dissolved into darkness yet and its bedding seemed to emit a fluorescent light. 'Have you ever noticed the crack under the door of the garage?'

'Of course, I have noticed that crack,' Blommia said, 'and I do hope it struck you too while you were busy lolling about all those years. But what's the connection between this crack and your new hobby?'

'This crack expressed a deep desire.'

'Honestly? And what did that little crack desire?'

'That crack wanted to be measured.'

Silently, Blommia dropped her hands, staring at the doorpost. She felt as disappointed as a nurse who comes to the conclusion that her patient, after having been resuscitated for half an hour, will never be able to thank her for her efforts. She sighed deeply. 'Do you know that *your* life is one gigantic downward spiral?'

Alice ignored the sisterly observation. 'Then I got inspired.'

'Inspired?'

Alice nodded.

'After having done the crack, I measured the fuchsia, each individual branch. And then everything else that crossed my path and screamed 'Measure me!': A boulder, a box of Dinky Toys, father's weeder, a ginkgo leaf. I have taken down all these measurements. If you want to have them, just give me a shout and I'll make you a copy.'

'I see,' Blommia said ironically, 'Castro and I work like mad and you spend your time measuring up useless things. Really, sometimes I wonder if you are... But, what did you just say? Ginkgo? Have you... eh... measured a ginkgo leaf?'

Alice nodded proudly. 'I did measure a ginkgo leaf. The left lobe is 5.7 centimeters wide, and the right lobe 5.5 centimeters only. This small difference really came as a surprise. I would have sworn ...'

'Alice,' Blommia interrupted, 'our mother cut down the last ginkgo tree in 1957, just before she married dad. Ginkgos reminded her of something she did not want to be reminded of. We *have* no ginkgos here.'

'Well,' argued Alice, 'some little cutting may have given it another chance, after all those years. Nature is like a story by Edgar Allen Poe, we never know how it will end. I found it very romantic, that lovely little ginkgo leaf nesting in the fuchsia bed.'

'Impossible.'

Alice turned slowly. 'If you don't believe me, go and have a look for yourself.'

Blommia stepped out of the doorway like a character stepping outside a painting. 'You have *not* seen what you think you saw,' she said menacingly. 'In a garden plot with no ginkgos, there are no ginkgo leaves either. A simple matter of deduction. Everything in life is a matter of deduction.'

'Just have a look, and you'll see,' Alice insisted. 'You'll have to hurry though, there is a nasty breeze blowing tonight. It may already have been blown away.'

Blommia advanced that only people with too much leisure time on their hands and 'other' drop-outs retrace things that need no retracing. Alice objected, saying that peregrinations were not the privilege of humans. 'Leaves are very good at it too.'

Then Blommia wanted to know if her new hobby had a name.

'Of course it has one,' replied Alice. She was expecting this question. Her sister was not only a specialist in the art of deduction; under that artificial blond there was also room for sectarianism. 'Calling my hobby archival work is a suitable option.'

'Archiving?' Blommia watched her with amazement. 'If that is true, we might as well call everything archiving. There is a lot of archival work going on in madhouses too, I heard. Do you

also write down how many times you shit? If I were you, I would look for a job.’

That was the end of all conversations with her sister, or what passed for conversations. In the past, Alice sometimes ventured a reply.

‘But Blommia, why would I look for a job if you have one already?’ she said one day, pointing her dish brusher at her sister like a loyal ally.

Blommia’s eyes had blinked. ‘Only one person named Alice Nola is likely to come up with such a nonsensical argument,’ she had said, somewhat puzzled.

‘You must admit I’m not totally wrong here,’ replied Alice, keeping her weaponry at bay, ‘you and Castro work, Emiel and I guard the house. We are domestic guards. Every house needs domestic guards.’

\* Imaginary Universe.



[...]

Emiel nodded. ‘You do have a point, but I don't think those old Romans of yours could show you the way to that fur cap.’

‘When are you going to tell me what this fur cap business is all about?’ Alice asked.

‘It is quite simple, indeed.’

‘Simple?’

‘Of course it's simple. It just walked by.’

Alice watched her younger brother suspiciously. ‘Walking? Have you seen the fur cap... eh... *walking?*’

‘Far away, *very* far away.’

‘*How* far?’

Emiel gestured vaguely towards the Hinterland.

The Hinterland was a lower plot on the southwest side of the Nolas' House, a place where Alice's father used to retreat to read the *Decameron*, of which their mother used to say: ‘If you want to see your ancestors dance and your father read, then you must go to the Hinterland.’

Alice suggested they take a walk.

Emiel agreed. ‘I have nothing better to do anyway.’

Alice shut the garage door and together they crossed the lawn.

A Japanese Cherry opened the way, joined by a group of shrubs, somewhat aloof, among them a jasmine tree, a goat beard, a bunch of outlived poppies, three lilacs and a handful of immature linden trees.

Then they entered a forest of a thousand trunks looking rather devastated, whether by inferno or by autumn. They were in the Hinterland.

Emiel opened up to Alice about his desire to resume jogging. To get into the right mood for it, he had chosen an appropriate suit. ‘It will be jogging or tap dancing.’

He raised his right forefinger and, pointing the other one to the left, ran towards the trunk of a perennial oak. He touched it playfully, tipping on his toes as if he was afraid to wake somebody up, then hurried back to Alice. His performance had something of an audition.

Alice shook her head. ‘I think you'd better stick to jogging.’

Emiel ignored her advice. ‘What about tango? Do you think I'd be good at tango?’

Alice knelt down, gazing at the field. ‘A bellboy's position, this should be of interest to you,’ she said absently.

‘Bellboy?’

‘You know, those little boys in red uniforms who live in the elevators of expensive hotels. You still come across them in novels. They are an endangered species.’

She bounced up. Emiel looked at her with delight.

‘Do you think I could end up in a novel?’

‘I didn't mean that. *Of course* not,’ said Alice firmly.

They advanced in the wood, walking over a carpet of decaying leaves.

‘But what *do* you mean then?’

‘You could *work* in a hotel. Like the Danieli, for example. You know, the Venice hotel we used to live in.’

‘The Danieli?’

‘Don't you remember? I was thirteen, you were still in elementary school.’

Emiel pressed his hand against his mouth, like someone about to sneeze or laugh. It turned out to be a laugh.

‘Of course, I remember. When father pretended he was the alderman of Naples. He was damn

good, wasn't he? He fooled them all.'

Alice smiled. 'We were even allowed to use the private pool belonging to the director. Britt Ekland was dying of jealousy.'

'And yet, she gave me an autograph.'

'You were so young and so good at handling people. Jeanne Moreau also fell for your charms.'

'And Raquel Welch.'

Alice glanced sideways. 'I don't think we're here to talk about film stars.'

Her brother went on. 'What a pity we got thrown out, eventually.'

They had now reached a huge birch-tree with a complicated growth pattern. There were two birches actually, but one day, for some odd reason, they had decided to continue their way to the clouds together. Alice grabbed a twig.

'Now you listen to me carefully,' she said, 'the six of us lived at the expense of the municipality of Naples over a month at least. We were as spoilt as the children of a sheikh. It was our best vacation ever.'

'And our *only* vacation.'

'That makes it even more special. Just imagine we were still living at the Danieli, at the expense of the Napolitan taxpayers?'

Emiel gave her a playful look. 'I wouldn't object if the city of Naples paid for my tap dance classes.'

Alice's eyes turned skywards. 'You have a serious problem. And the worst part is that you aren't even aware of it.'

Emiel heaved a sound close to a sigh, which could equally be interpreted as a mild form of respiratory distress. 'Thank you for being here to remind me.'

'You have an immense lack of responsibility.'

He looked at her in astonishment. 'So you don't?'

'Living at the expense of those poor, hardworking Napolitans, never in my life could I cope with it, not in a million years.'

'Well,' said Emiel loosely, 'no one escapes his destiny.'

Thus, he pointed at the trunk of the birch-tree, showing the complicated growth pattern. 'Look, there is your fur cap.'

[...]

‘I think my sister has gone crazy,’ Alice said to Brenas, kneeling at her bedside.

He sat on his bottom, his back set against her pillow, slipping his tongue over a well-fed, Buddha-like belly. At the touch of her hand, he stopped his activities.

Hoping to find some vocal comparison, she searched for a similar moment in the life of aunt Tip, only to realize she had never actually witnessed the upkeep of aunt Tip’s belly.

‘Your aunt Blommia has gone crazy,’ she repeated. ‘You understand, the aunt you do not and won’t ever know.’

Brenas’s gaze intensified, encouraging her to tell the rest of the story. He is a much better listener than Bram, Alice thought.

She stood up and continued. ‘Brenas, something has happened and you must know what it is. I will be short, they are waiting for me downstairs. I have beaten a hedgehog to death. Your uncle was there too, it was his hedgehog, in fact. Uncle Castro has fled to his room and aunt Blommia has taken the pasta plates to the kitchen.’

Brenas gradually closed his eyes, leaving the apex of his tongue slipping out of his mouth, like a sock popping out of a briskly opened washing machine. Words seemed unnecessary.

She walked out of her bedroom. On the fourth step of the stairway, she stood still and crossed herself lightly, with dignified discretion.

At the bottom of the stairs, there was Emiel waiting for her. He bowed. ‘You were brilliant.’

‘I feel so sorry about your hedgehog,’ Alice said, ignoring the compliment. She was far too busy having to deal with all the logistical aspects of the family expansion to care about something as trivial as a compliment.

Emiel grabbed her fingers. ‘You’d better come with me...’

He was smiling in the same way as a fairy trying to push a child into a ghosthouse. He pulled her to the front door that stood open.

Brenas’s new travelling basket may come in handy after all, she thought, as she stepped over the threshold.

They were soon standing in front of the flowerbed.

This is totally insane, she thought. That flowerbed is about the only anchorage I have, like the backpains in the life of my father.

‘I shall have to live with it,’ she heard herself say. The knuckles of Emiel’s left hand were pushing against the callous marks in her palms, left there by her father’s weeder.

‘Now shut up about that hedgehog,’ he said, ‘there is a bag full of hedgehogs in your room. It was your own hedgehog anyway.’

Alice shook her head. ‘I was not talking about the hedgehog. What I said was not meant to be said. It was out of turn. An immature thought.’

‘Immature or not, it fitted perfectly.’

‘Precisely, this is the point, it fitted.’

She was not entirely satisfied about the strange flow of conversation, outside in the evening air. Emiel laughed.

‘There’s no harm in having a small dose of Babylon in the front yard,’ he said flamboyantly. He had thrown himself into the misunderstanding like a mouse on a piece of Leerdammer.

‘A slip of the tongue is the harbinger of a tragedy.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I have a special talent for the invisible. I can see things you do not see. Telepathy has no secrets for me either.’

She was trying to dim his light-hearted look, as she had tried to dim the light-hearted look of

the hedgehog, round the dinner table earlier that night.

‘I happen to have a different opinion on that matter,’ said Emiel.

Alice wondered if there had been someone, somewhere, who had written ‘explorer’ in his passport under ‘occupation’ recently. Her head was perspiring.

‘That is exactly what I mean,’ she said, as her eyes met the fuchsia, ‘you do not think the way I think. Our thought patterns are like birds. A swallow flies higher than a jay bird, just to give you an example. A swan fits somewhere in between, according to me at least. Yet it does happen, when they are hungry or when their mating instincts are woken, that suddenly they fly side by side. It is what happened today. Today, you and I have flown side by side.’

[...]

Alice stood in front of Grandfather's paintings and watched the additions brought about by Brenas.

He had scratched the lower parts of Europe and America – symbolized by a gingko and a willow – in a style reminiscent of Dada and expressionism. Grandfather's poplar – Australia – would have been well at home in the Biennale, where her mother had taken her in her Arte Povera days. The firmly cut, right-angled tears cast funny little shadows on the wall and the cautiously applied scratches gave to the woodgrain a surprising, modern twist.

'I am deeply impressed,' Alice said softly. Brenas sat on her shoulder staring at his oeuvre, looking rather pleased.

'Oh yes, I am equally impressed,' echoed Emiel laconically.

Alice walked silently from Europe to America, giving herself a break in Australia, and tiptoed back to Europe.

'Emiel,' she went on, with the energy of a royal family member giving a speech in order to master his 'fear of cutting', on account of which he spent many years in therapy. 'Do you remember I wrote a page in your diary, when we were children? The next day, you did exactly what I had written down.'

Emiel looked up, surprised. 'Yes, I remember.'

Curious, thought Alice, he remembers this, and yet seems to have forgotten that his younger sister has just come back from a fateful appointment at a hairdresser's salon including a kidney-shaped counter and a Charleston girl with no lips.

'If your past gets into your present more and more frequently,' aunt Tip used to say, 'then uncle Alzheimer has sent you his first postcard. Emiel may already have joined his mailing list.'

'I thought it was about time for you to put a white carnation on the tombstone of Gesche Gottfried, to learn to draw a bat and to know how it feels to place pins under the tires of Master Wolfheart's bicycle.'

Emiel nodded cheerfully. 'When I read this years later, I had almost forgotten that I owed that day to you. You had even imitated my handwriting.'

I had it in me to become sensational, Alice thought, even then. It just took me a while to realize it. 'All you had to do was change the date. What I mean is... that ... the thing is, I hope you see what I mean.'

'I'm afraid I've lost you there.'

His eyes lingered on a little triangle of canvas, where a small aspect of grandfather's Australia could be seen. It was the nose of a kangaroo.

'Brenas has tried to change grandpa's view of the world, just as I thought you needed to change your view of the world.'

'I must admit,' he said, 'that I couldn't stand Master Wolfheart any longer after that day.'

'Master Wolfheart was a fascist swindler taught by Mussolini. That's what I wanted to show you.'

'I am with you, but what does Brenas want to show us? Why has he left Africa and Asia untouched?'

'We can't fathom that. It is utterly impossible for us to gauge what goes on in those brains.' She laid a hand on the head of the Messiah, who, with greedy eyes, stared at a hummingbird in Grandfather's America. Was he contemplating new retouches?

'He may have relatives there,' she suggested, 'unless Grandfather whispered instructions in his ear. Brenas supplies us with so many alternatives that it makes me dizzy.' She laid a hand on her own head.

'Nevertheless,' Emiel went on, 'I am afraid that none of these alternatives will please Blommia

or Castro.’

Alice sighed deeply. ‘You have such a pudding heart these days, my dear. We have mice to solve that problem.’

‘Do you really think I can persuade them this is the work of a mouse?’

Alice paused for a moment. Then she uttered: ‘I’d rather not, naturally. It would be a terrible blow on Brenas. Sometimes you read about *attributed* paintings. They hang in a museum for decades, with noone bothering to add a name tag. My valvelets begin to rotate spontaneously when I think of those poor deprived artists. But if it is what it takes to keep Blommia and Castro under control, let’s do it.’

‘That is not what I mean.’

‘But what *do* you mean?’

‘Don’t you understand that no one in their right mind is going to believe that a mouse has destroyed those paintings? A tiger would be more adequate.’

‘Emiel, this matter doesn’t interest me any longer. Brenas and I are going to withdraw in our rooms. You shall have to cook tonight.’

[...]

[...]

‘They all gave something,’ Alice whispered as she watched the huge pile of suitcases displayed in front of the Nola House. Jim had parked the taxi across Beekman Road.

She recognized every suitcase at a glance: the dove gray Samsonite her father had acquired at a gentle price from a befriended widow who had lost the use of her legs after a nasty fall, a cyclamen-red suitcase made of home-spun tweed that had once spent two hours and forty minutes in a locker at Bremen Hauptbahnhof, a retro cardboard model with a pied-de-poule design Emiel had bought with the Costa Brava in mind, her own collapsible suitcase, made from a Scottish plaid (aunt Tip’s birthday present to her), Castro’s Mandarina Duck, the shiny, pearl coloured, suitcase of her sister and, at the very top, the varnish that is supposed to fight wood rot, in other words: Brenas’ travel basket.

She turned to Jim. ‘Touching, isn’t it?’

‘I am so sorry for you,’ the driver replied.

He sounded like someone whose future funeral card would be covered with words like ‘fond’ and ‘considerate’.

Alice smiled. ‘This is a historic moment.’

Jim looked worried. ‘Hysteric? What do you mean by that?’

Alice shook her head. ‘Hist-O-ric, Jim. This is... eh... history in the making. Usually it takes years before we can decide whether an event contains a symbolic value for a whole era. Sometimes we recognize its historic value in the blink of an eye. This is what happens here. Suppose history was a little girl dancing in a spring meadow, right now her arms would tingle with goosebumps.’

Meanwhile she had unzipped the cover of Brenas’ traveling basket. Her ally, who was just about to swallow a piece of dried cat fruit, raised his head.

Jim expressed his sympathy again.

‘I know that for good,’ Alice replied irritably, ‘but don’t you think it’s about time to load the suitcases?’

She lifted Brenas from his temporary residence. He immediately climbed on her shoulder and pressed his head against her ear.

‘Load?’ Jim asked incredulously. ‘Are you quite sure, Mrs Nola?’

‘What else do you propose? Sitting down right here for a picnic? Brenas needs a roof and he needs it now. You can’t tell from the outside, but his heart is shivering. He’s very much like me. We don’t show our feelings.’

Jim pointed to the house. ‘I thought you might ... eh ...’

My goodness, thought Alice, first his sympathy overwhelms me, now he actually *thinks*. She looked at him poorly.

‘I suggest you listen to me carefully, Jim. My family thinks I deserve a vacation. Since I would never in my life get around such an... extravagant project myself, I am simple-natured, you see, happy with a proper flowerbed and a brand new dishbrush, then they have decided to take me by surprise.’

Jim mumbled something unintelligible.

Alice tossed her head, a neckline move Brenas reacted to with a dubious glance. ‘Sorry, I didn’t get your sentence, Jim.’

The driver sighed. ‘Nothing, Mrs Nola. I said nothing.’

[...]

Later that night (Alice had had supper in the dining room whose floor was covered with plastic snowflakes looking so real that she had asked for a cushion to fight cold chills and was accompanied by an ageless Prussian woman who changed countries each spring in order to study the refugee problem from within), Lan was waiting for her on the carpet stretching from the reception desk to the Ladies toilets. She asked whether she had enjoyed her seaweed dish.

‘The seaweed dish was unforgettable,’ Alice said.

‘I am so glad to hear that,’ Lin’s sister replied, then pointing at two huge pouffes opposite the desk. ‘Can you spare a minute?’

Alice nodded and followed her to the pouffes.

When she was a child, Lan explained, she used to play at ‘reception desk’ with her sister. Properly speaking, they were not identical twins, but, as they used to wear similar dresses and shared the same lipstick hue, they succeeded in creating the illusion they were identical twins.

After a short pause, dreamily staring into a heart-shaped mirror, she said she had spoken to the manager of Hotel Walden. ‘The manager says there is no reason for concern.’

‘I see,’ observed Alice.

To the Prussian lady, she had said: ‘Since I’ve moved into the Walden, my life has shifted to the ‘adventurous’ mode. If only I had known, I would have chosen to live by myself years ago.’

She turned to Lan: ‘When I look into the mirror, I see a bird of paradise. Brenas is as happy as I am, but I am not sure yet of what he sees when he looks into a mirror.’

The princess of the night smiled, in a highly receptional manner, very much like her sister. The difference laid in the corners of their mouths. The princess of the day pointed hers upwards, whereas the princess of the night pointed hers downwards.

‘So glad to hear that,’ she said cheerfully, ‘if you don’t mind, though, we really should discuss the matter of the rabbits.’

‘Sure,’ replied Alice, ‘let’s discuss the rabbits.’

In this place, she reflected, everything is thought over, they can’t even forget the rabbits. If this hotel did not exist, I’d have to create it.

‘As for me,’ Lan went on, ‘I thought the rabbits were sleeping in, it is Christmas after all. The manager has a different view. He pretends they left hunting.’

Alice nodded absent-mindedly. ‘We can’t... exclude that option.’

Lan raised her finger. ‘But then, I said to Mister manager: ‘Mister manager, I am so sorry to interrupt you, but won’t those little rabbits need to eat some time?’

‘Of course,’ added Alice, ‘it’s Christmas after all.’

Lan had a big smile, like someone who has just found out that the value of her lottery ticket has been multiplied by several millions. Something seemed wrong with the identical-twin illusion.

Lan was through with her talk, busy inspecting the contours of her lips in the heart-shaped mirror. She stood up.

‘I need to work now,’ she said emphatically. ‘May I invite you for a drink in the Coffee Room, tomorrow at three?’



[...]

Halfway through the lane, Alice was overtaken by a bike. The cyclist was wearing a navy blue anorak and transported on the rear carrier a bag filled with white tubes. When he came up to Alice he lifted a finger.

In a split second, a profile emerged against a frail birch-tree: Mediterranean, possibly Turkish, as handsome as Castro in his younger years.

A part-time student in the hands of a slumlord, Alice thought, unless father's last slut has taken up Arabic lessons. She waved back to him in a lady-like way.

At the end of the lane she crossed a parking lot.

As she was leisurely fingering on a Mercedes, then a Twingo – in a flash, the slogan 'Alice Nola was here' crossed her mind –, she thought about her father's formula regarding the location of the parking lot nearing the lane. He would have said the lane was 'crowned' by the parking lot. Lamberto Nola did not believe in accumulations and sequences. He believed in coronations.

[...]

Alice had meant to 'crown' her walk with a session at Simona's hairdressing salon but, as she stepped into Zucco Alley, she was faced with two long rows of posters on both sides, with a cat's face on each of them.

A little further, someone was busy smearing a wall with a strong synthetic lime fragrance. She advanced in the alley.

Nuns had lived there in the past, retired nuns, or – as her father claimed – *fallen* nuns; then, the municipality had housed refugees there, who had to be evacuated rapidly one day (after a gas leak was detected). The houses had been empty ever since.

Alice approached the wall smearer.

'Isn't it wonderful,' she broke out loud, with an enthusiasm out of character, 'from now on the Zucco Alley has a brand new *raison d'être*!'

The man turned to her slightly, dragging along his brush which stopped right on her plexus. She recognized instantly the cyclist who had greeted her in Maria Swanenburg Lane.

He apologized for the near-incident and sank his brush into a container. He wanted to know what she had in mind. His tone was distant therefore, suspicious even.

Alice commented upon the new potential of the neighbouring houses. 'Thanks to this sweet lady-cat, they have something to live for again. Lady-cats are born go-betweens, aren't they?'

The poster man frowned. 'Are you taking me for a ride, or what?'

'I wouldn't dare!'

'Take a good look at him. Lulu is a male cat.'

Alice apologized. 'I am so sorry, I'm not good at this sort of thing, you see. I am a sensitive woman, sensitive women are moved at the intensity of glances rather than genders.'

She scrutinized one of the posters. There was no room for doubts in her mind about the identity of the cat, not anymore. The cat in the picture was Brenas.

'What a glowing little person,' she murmured.

The boy eyed her with suspicion. Then he asked if, by any chance, she had seen Lulu lately.

Alice forced her lips into a smile. 'I see Lulu every day.'

The boy laughed too. Then he asked if she measured the power of her words. He put on a straight face. He was getting serious again.

Alice began to feel uneasy, like that time in the church, when Johannes' interest in the broom closet had translated into physical signs. She shook her head negatively.

‘I wish it were true, young man. I am trying to imagine how it feels to wake up with an empty pillow next to your face. I think I’d rather not wake up at all.’

The poster boy nodded briefly. On his lips appeared something that could easily become constructive: empathy. ‘Humans are the cruellest animals on earth, did you know that, ma’am?’

‘Tell me about it!’

He nodded again. ‘We understand each other, don’t we.’

Alice meant to ask him a personal question.

The boy who reminded her, in a certain way, of Castro as an adolescent and in another way, of her broom closet admirer, warned her. ‘If I don’t want to answer, I’ll keep my lips sealed.’

Alice replied that no answer could also be an answer. ‘Do you.. eh... know Lulu personally?’ she asked.

‘Of course I do. I often cat-sit him. Just like my parents, they cat-sit him too.’ He stroked a poster carefully with his little yellow brush.

‘Is Lulu... single?’

The poster artist watched her incredulously, weighing down her mental ability, possibly wondering if she could be held responsible for her statements. ‘Lulu lives ... eh ... together with anyone?’

‘It would be no surprise, really. Sensational creatures are never alone. And who is the lucky one, if I may ask?’

‘The lucky one? *What* lucky one?’

‘The she or the he who has chosen to wake up next to Lulu every morning. Before it happened, of course.’

‘The... eh... lucky one is my neighbour, Mrs. van der Sijsjes.’

‘Before Lulu ran away.’

‘Before Lulu ran away,’ repeated the artist. ‘Now Mrs van der Sijsjes’s head goes from one state to another.’

Alice conjured up a map of the United States, with in every state a tiny screaming widow. ‘I can imagine that so well.’

‘I doubt it,’ said the young man firmly. ‘You should see her, then you would understand what I am talking about. You *might*. In two months’ time, she has aged twenty years.’

Another month and she’ll be ready for the Guinness Book of Records, Alice thought within herself. She obligingly said: ‘Sometimes I wish I were a magician.’

The boy put his brush in a bag of the same colour as his anorak. Subtle people make subtle colour choices, she almost said, but the devoted neighbour interrupted her train of thought.

‘Come on, read this!’ He was aiming at the poster he had just straightened up with his little yellow brush. ‘If nobody gives a damn for what’s written here, I might as well quit. You match our target group.’

You’ll never know how much I do, Alice thought. She concluded on a bitter-sweet note. ‘The suffering of other people, it always ... how shall I put it, it makes me feel terribly powerless. I have a sort of love-hate relationship with Jeroen Overbeek.\* We respect each other, but that’s about it.’

Lulu’s neighbour looked puzzled, as if he had put something sweet in his mouth while he expected something salty. He pointed at the poster again and Alice began her reading.

### LULU, WHERE ARE YOU?

Who will reunite us?

I offer a great reward to whoever will bring my Lulu safely back home. Lulu is a male cat of Iranian descent. Gone missing during my vacation, maybe kidnapped.

Description:

Eyes: bronze (at dawn), copper (when the kettle is boiling), gold (in the glooming).

Coat: feels like satin, purple.

Legs: four, slightly hairy.

Belly: idem, odd curls here and there.

Tail: looks like a feather duster.

Age: four and a half.

Responds to: 'Lulu' and 'Oh little baby'

Details: He has dedicated his life to spiritual growth and sometimes tends to neglect earthly worries. Nearsighted, due to a medical error in his childhood.

Any information, even bits and pieces, welcome. Please call: A.J. van der Sijjsjes  
(0 \* \* 7 89 \*\* 73)

There was a special message aimed at Lulu personally, in small print. It was to be feared, unfortunately, that he would never be able to decipher it, because of the medical error of long ago.

Lulu, if you read this: Please give me a miaow!

Whatever you did wrong, I have already forgiven you. If you're not ready to come home yet, I understand. I just want to make sure that you are well-treated, and that nobody does strange things to you. Lulu, Oh little baby, come home soon. If you have forgotten our number, no doubt some sweet lady will be happy to give you a hand. Lulu baby, come home soon.

\* Dutch newsreader.

[...]

‘You heat up the milk,’ the widow said to Emiel, ‘Anastasia will put me to bed. Make sure you don’t forget the Dormifuns.’

Once Antje van der Sijssjes was tucked in, Alice hurried downstairs. Halfway down, she texted Esmeralda:

*The hour has come!*

They arrived in the kitchen simultaneously.

‘Ten pills is more than enough,’ said Esmeralda. She smelled of cigarette smoke and early spring rain. She had informed Ginette – via Lan – that they needed more time to fulfill their mission. The scrabble champion had not objected. A little financial contribution, the princess of the night had suggested, would greatly be appreciated.

‘I wonder how much that warmed up Javanese corpse puts into her own pocket,’ Esmeralda hinted at.

‘Don’t talk so badly about the saint of Walden,’ Alice said while she unscrewed the cap of the bottle. ‘Ten, isn’t it?’

‘More than enough,’ answered the German, fingerspelling in a broad way.

‘Then we’ll do twenty,’ compromised Alice, ‘it sounds more professional to me. You never know, in case they cut her open. You hear the strangest things these days.’

‘Make sure the bottle is empty,’ advised Emiel.

Alice peered at her younger brother. ‘What do you mean, *Aldemar*?’

‘Put ten, twenty if necessary, feel free. We’ll get rid of the rest and leave the bottle on the widow’s night table. Empty.’

‘Why empty? Antje must know about Esmeralda’s dosage. What do *you* know about it anyway? Esmeralda says ten pills are enough.’

‘More than enough,’ the Prussian added noisily.

‘Now, listen to me carefully,’ said Emiel haughtily, ‘someone who hangs himself, never leaves a piece of cherry pie for the next day. If he did, the doctor would immediately suspect something. He who chooses Nightflights brings the bottle to his lips and swallows it up. It must look like a rush job. People who are in a hurry do not count.’

Alice took a thoughtful pose. ‘Those are fine words. But take me, for instance. I always count, so I am never in a rush. This must be the reason why my life has taken such a sensational turn lately. Only because I count. There are twenty four pills in the bottle. Twenty four Nightflights.’

Emiel insisted. ‘Throw them in the milk, for God’s sake. We must go. Ginette is impatient to get her Austin Mini back.’

‘You are right.’ Alice poured the pills into the cup. ‘All I need is a little concluding conversation with the widow. We are friends, after all.’

When Alice handed her the cup of milk, Antje asked if it was stirred.

‘Of course, it is stirred,’ said Alice. ‘I know you don’t like it when it makes a skin, silly girl.’

‘That’s not what I mean, Anastasia.’

The widow gazed at her ambiguously. Alice had no recollection of anyone looking at her that way, or maybe long ago, in the course of reading lessons or at the swimming-pool. The widow continued (the devil comes out in the end): ‘Or... should I call you Alice? Eliza, maybe?’

Alice found an appropriate spot for the bottle, between a portrait of Brenas, set in a bronze

frame with a tiara on top of it – in a flash, it looked as if Brenas wore the tiara himself – and a purple washcloth.

Her hand, on its way to the bedside table, began to shake. ‘I... am afraid you... are very ill, Antje. You say such... weird things.’

‘You may be right,’ hummed the widow, remarkably cheerful. ‘Maybe not. Give me that cup.’

‘Sure,’ said Alice, who had finally set the bottle where she wanted it to be. She placed the cup into the hands of the widow. ‘Enjoy it, my dear.’

The widow took a sip. ‘It tastes like milk.’

Alice laughed. ‘What else would it taste like?’

‘How strange,’ the widow went on, concentrating on the next sip, a generous one this time. ‘There is no unusual taste to it.’

‘Antje, it’s your own milk. From your... very own refrigerator.’

The widow shook her head. Her deep red curls, blessed by Queen Polycolor possibly assisted by Simona, swayed disconsolately. ‘The pills you have thrown into it, they don’t come from my *very own* refrigerator.’

‘These are definitely strong words, coming from someone who once occupied the seventeenth position on the national hitparade, Antje.’

‘You promised me Dormifuns.’

‘I brought you Flights. *Nightflights*. Same product, under another label. You asked for them.’

‘Alice ...’ The widow produced her seldom ambiguous look once again. ‘How many ... pills did you drop in it?’

‘Oh Antje, I really can’t tell. One, two at the most, enough to doze away dreaming. I couldn’t bear the idea of you laying here all night, alone and sleepless. One Nightflight... and you sleep all the way.’

‘All the way to the land where you never need a vacuum cleaner, where the air is continuously filled with toilet fresheners, isn’t it what you mean?’

The widow spoke clearly and firmly – just like Simona’s assistant, Alice pondered.

‘I am going to call a doctor. Your condition worries me.’

‘You wouldn’t dare,’ the widow retorted.

‘Antje, you hurt my feelings. I thought we were friends.’

The widow jerked laughing uncontrollably. Far too much for someone who has just put an important down payment on a single ticket to the land with no dust, in which the air smells forever like toilet fresheners. ‘But Alice, we *are* friends. I hope you know it.’

‘Give me the number of your doctor.’

‘I’ve been waiting for you,’ murmured Antje devoutly, ignoring Alice’s remark.

‘You are in a delirious state.’

‘I’ve been waiting for you,’ repeated the widow. She had something of a police-woman, either skeptical of thundering sermons, or fanatic of repetitive melodramatic prose.

Alice sighed. ‘Well, here I am.’

‘But it’s not enough.’

Alice had turned away from the bed and watched closely the tiara on the head of Brenas. She looked up. ‘Not enough? What do you mean by that? I think you owe me an explanation.’

‘Only if you tell me how many pills you have thrown into this cup. It’s now or never.’

She reached out a hand, Alice hesitated. Someone who reaches out a hand, expects to come across another hand. She was not so sure she was ready for Antje’s words of consolation – not sure at all. She wondered when the pills were going to do their job. Then she uttered: ‘Twenty-four. I’ve put twenty four Nightflights in your milk.’

‘Good,’ said Antje. ‘Very good.’

Then, as if this confession marked the end of an era and the beginning of a new one, she emptied the contents of the cup into her mouth.

‘Good,’ she repeated. Her tone suggested there was much more to come – it was an open ‘good’, one that looked outward, not a closed, inward looking ‘good’.

‘You have come to kill me. And you thought you could take me by surprise.’

Alice realized she had reached an area where denial was as unrealistic as claiming that the Queen of Denmark is actually a man, and therefore should be addressed as ‘His’ Royal Highness. An area full of shadows cast in many different directions, as if there was more than one sun shining above. ‘Yes-you-told-me.’

The widow smiled, visibly pleased with her new position. ‘Do you remember Mary?’

Surprised, Alice opened her eyes wide. ‘Yes, of course. Mary, who was also called... Alice?’

‘Mary is her real name. Mary Spinsterband. South African, in her late thirties, with connections and a drug problem. She told me about you.’

‘Where is Mary now?’

‘Nobody knows. Mary makes apparitions like Virgin Mary. She hangs around enough time to do the laundry and dust the mantelpiece. Once the job is done, pffft ! She vanishes into thin air. You thought she was hired by Blommia to tighten up her room. That was the worldly reason. Her real motive was quite different. She had come for you.’

Alice nodded. ‘I’m not surprised. If I were the Pope, I would put her on the list of beatifications to come. It is never too early for those things. I was shocked the other day, when Erol spoke so... mercilessly about her. You know, when I discovered that photograph.’

‘He did it in order to distract you. You were to believe it was Mary’s fault Lulu escaped.’

‘Wasn’t it her fault, then?’

‘Of course not. But let me start from the beginning. We don’t have much time left. Believe me, there are two kinds of people in this world: the ones who read leaflets, and the ones who don’t. I am from the first kind. We have fifteen minutes.’

‘Not if I call a doctor. He will pump your stomach; then, you’ll have plenty of time to explain how you betrayed me.’

‘You were eager to be betrayed, you wanted it all along. You were running like a sprinter who thinks that Olympic Gold smells of Chanel number 5. You never looked back, not a single time.’

‘If I remember it correctly, looking back is not exactly encouraged by the Bible. They are busy chopping you up to pieces in a salt factory before you know it. I am a modern, contemporary woman picking up each day.’

‘When are you going to keep your mouth shut? I am likely to slip into a coma at any minute. Don’t you want to know the truth?’

‘I wonder if I am still interested in hearing that truth of yours. You might as well tell me that you attend a flower arrangement course with my sister, or say that you call each other every day to run my reputation through the shredder.’

‘I do have Blommia’s phone number.’

‘What? How did you get *it*? The bitch always refused to give it to me.’

The widow had pulled her pillow against her back and was now sitting up. It was hard to believe that those eyes, lighting up like rabbit’s eyes in the headlights of a car, would soon be rolling into a recycle bin. She looked a little groggy, right, but this could have been the effect of champagne on her. ‘Let’s say that Mary disposes of powers to unlock any given lock.’

‘Talking about locks, was Teun part of the plot?’

‘Not until you asked him to put that lock on your sleeping-room door. From then on, we worked together nicely. He told me Lulu was safe.’

‘How can it be? You were on the Aegean Sea at the time, on the Freedom... or whatever its name.’

‘I told you about Mary’s forces...’

‘The forces of Mary, I know all about them by now. I’d rather learn about the reason why you chose me. Hopefully, that business supplied me with an ally; otherwise I would no doubt have

suffered from paranoia. Or some other incurable disease.’

‘It all seemed so simple.’

‘I’m listening.’

‘I was searching a new home for my Lulu, and Mary ventured your name: ‘Alice Nola would be perfect, just perfect.’ I could have brought him, but I was doubtful upon this issue. You are not the type of person ready to accept gratuitous presents. It was all a bit adventurous, letting Brenas go into the Hinterland, but he could not get lost. Mary told me your brother had put fences up and that there were no rabbits. He couldn’t get caught up in a burrow. Erol checked on him every single day, until you found him. What happened afterwards was beyond my control, of course.’

‘You have no idea what’s on your conscience, you old goat. If I were to bump into last year’s Alice Nola, I would say: ‘That woman? I have never seen her. She’s a total stranger!’

‘Everything you did, you did it out of love for Lulu. Giving me this cup is an ultimate declaration of love.’

‘How strange... You did not hesitate one second. You loved it!’

‘My time has come.’

‘You really think so? You don’t sound that worn out to me.’

‘It’s not true.’

‘You drank that milk as if it was champagne!’

‘Metastases, Alice. Metastases.’

‘What? Metastases? Brenas?’

‘No, silly cow. Me, of course. Two years ago, my breasts started to grow. Within three months I had moved from cup C to cup D, it was very disturbing. Erol said, ‘Lottie, you’re blooming in your old days’, but doctor Outflagged was less optimistic. ‘It is not good, Antje, you might just have time for one last cruise, that’s all, I’m afraid. The day I flew to Italy, Erol took Lulu to the Hinterland.’

‘I can’t deny you have a flair for symbolism,’ remarked Alice, with a grimace forced into a laugh.

Antje shook her head compassionately, her rusty curls dancing along. ‘Lulu followed me in Italy, in a way. Believe me, Alice, I would have thought out a different scenario if only I had known about the forthcoming events.’

Alice looked straight in the eyes of the widow, for the first time since she had handed her the cup.

‘I hope you forgive me, but I am not buying that. Who tells me you weren’t on the look out for someone to present you with this cup? Because you didn’t dare to do it yourself. You were using Lulu as a mere accessory, weren’t you?’

‘Maybe. But you can’t prove any of it.’

‘Mary had obviously told you I had some experience.’

‘Experience with what?’

‘With mercy-killing ventures. My father was a recidivist. First he missed it, then he succeeded. The first time he swallowed the homeopathic gout pills of my mother. Sometimes I wonder if it was a test, a sort of dry swimming before the big dive, or if he really was mistaken. We will never find out whether he had read the leaflet or not.’

‘You could start a business,’ said the widow motherly, ‘business cards, brochures, advertisements. *No euthanasia is complete without the charming presence of Miss Nola.* Something like that. Unfortunately, I won’t be around to write you a testimonial.’

‘You sound like my sister. When I talk about my flowerbed, she says: ‘Why don’t you look for a job?’ As if you existed less when you don’t work. Like a plastic teaspoon you throw into the canal after having used it once.’

‘I don’t mean a *real* job. A job is like a secondary home, a relief for the neighbors and for cutting down income taxes, but make sure it never happens to you. People who don’t work exist *more* than people who do work. It would never occur to my niece or to your sister to change their

name into Anastasia Stein, or launch a search for a cat they formerly threw out. Do you think that anyone under custody from nine to five could ever invent a character like Eliza Bruinzwein?

Alice smiled at the thought of the mouse virus alert. 'You know, I almost fell in love with Eliza Bruinzwein.'

'Because of the 'ei' in her name.'

'You thought I was good, then?'

'Very good.'

'Well, isn't it a wonderful closure? A closure of my evening and a closure of your life. I would have preferred you to claim I was sensational, though.'

'This cannot be.'

'Why not?'

'You did a great job, but you were not sensational. I was.'



Some authors describe every minute detail for the sake of filling pages - often ad nauseum. Everyone is not ready to devote valuable time to read about (for example) 'one Thursday in the month of October, one o' clock in the afternoon, [when] the steep iron step of the yellow stage coach, driving via D - from C - to E - and vice versa, was fitted' etc. A quote from the one and only Hildebrand, (the 19th century Dutch writer) who transformed summing up into an art form. Aristide von Bienefeldt also likes to share handfuls of details, but thanks to the beauty of his sentences he is, as far as I am concerned, forgiven.

The sentences are often very long, a predictable habit in a classic novel, but not in a modern book. The point is that the absurd world of *The Sister Who was Not Anna Magnani* cannot be expressed in a few words and calls for lots of descriptions. One of the characters is introduced like this:

*'He was wearing a post-it yellow twinset and his hairdo, forever blond but too long according to the previous hairfashion and too short according to the latest hairfashion, was the hairdo of someone who has fallen asleep on the treshold of a church after having forgotten the lyrics of his confession.'*

Telling the story of the main character Alice Nola is not a simple task, as this book seems to have been composed deliberately to put the reader astray. As a true ode to Alice in Wonderland (1865), nothing is what it looks like and logic does not seem the right issue.

Amid all bizarre conversations and events, a storyline can indeed be deciphered, in which Alice is busy tracing the owner of the cat who walked into her life. The cat - she calls him Brenas - becomes her ally, since she does not feel comfortable with her sister and two brothers, with whom she shares a house after the death of her parents. There are multiple sidetracks along the story (such as Alice's incestuous relationship with her brother and the statue of Jesus in the hidden church, decapitated by Brenas). Right from the start, it is obvious that we are not dealing with an average book and that the utmost concentration will be needed to follow the thread of the story.

Then, just when you think that the characters share a great deal of similarities with the characters of the Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini, you lose yourself in the book. A little persistence is needed, but at about three quarters of the story the proverbial penny drops and the pieces of the jigsaw fall into place. At first the bizarre literary universe of Von Bienefeldt is difficult to understand.

And when you finally come to the conclusion that protagonist Alice is terribly grotesque, you realize that the story's other characters are not only very much like her but seem to take their living environment completely for granted. Every character in this book reacts in the same, surrealistic way. This offers a contrast to Lewis Carroll's Alice, who is the only 'sensible' person in the classic children's book.

Accepting this absurd universe is also the best option for the reader. From start to end, the story branches, just like a whirlwind, into all kinds of directions, without leading to a formal understanding. But there is no need for that: *The Sister Who Was Not Anna Magnani* takes the reader on a literary rollercoaster ride and leaves him or her vibrating with at least a hundred new ideas in their head. With or without meaning.

Judith van den Berg

\* \* \* \* (Four stars, out of five)

## THE ANIMAL WHO HAS TO MAKE UP FOR EVERYTHING / Review NRC HANDELSBLAD / National dialy (Dutch equivalent of The Times)

It is very seldom for the Messiah to enter a room in a Dutch novel – or in Dutch reality for that matter. In *The Sister who was not Anna Magnani*, the fourth novel by Aristide von Bienefeldt, he does enter a room, four legged though: the Messiah is a cat.

In Von Bienefeldt's books, the way a person is seen is always more important than the way he is in reality. Therefore it is not strange at all that Alice Nola, the narrator from *The Sister who was not Anna Magnani*, loses herself completely in something her housemates consider an ordinary stray cat. The housemates concerned are two brothers, Castro and Emiel, and a sister named Blommia. Their parents (from Italian origin) died years ago – they have kept their room the way it was – and they have now reached a certain age themselves. 'I am not young, I look young,' Alice says at some point.

She is the type of woman whom it pleases to describe herself as 'phenomenal': unconventional and disturbing. In her universe, a casual meeting with a man in a supermarket can lead to everyday gatherings, soaked in gin and tonic, watching photographs of excrements.

This last word sounds familiar to the followers of Von Bienefeldt: he enjoys writing about the things that enter or leave a human body, reaching its rancid peak (in *Tell Me All About Walter*) when a teacher scrapes margarine off a slice of bread in order to lubricate the arse of a pupil. This time Von Bienefeldt remains chaste, though: we do not get an explicit report of what happened between Alice and her brother Castro for instance.

This broken relationship – all that remains from it is communication via yellow post-it notes – emphasizes the loneliness of Alice, socially the least equipped member of the Nola family. She cherishes a warm aversion for her sister Blommia in particular, who does have a social life or is at least able to maintain the illusion of having one.

It is hardly surprising that Alice abandons herself in the cat Brenas (who is also the producer of the turds on the photographs), the animal who has to make up for everything. But Brenas is also the pampered animal of a widow who lives elsewhere in the city. Alice tries, through various efforts, to keep the cat for herself, which results in an endless string of characters and mistaken identities. *The Sister who was not Anna Magnani* is never normal, often witty, and gets quite orderly towards the end.

Although Von Bienefeldt remains decent, he is still able to produce excellent sentences, like the one in which Alice lures a man into a church for a cozy gathering. 'Alice noticed that something flourished in his eyes, something that made him suitable for all kinds of distractions, but a visit to the broom cupboard wasn't one part of them.'

Sometimes Von Bienefeldt exaggerates (describing a relinquished cigarette end as a 'smoldering stimulant' is really not necessary), but we forgive him.

Also because there is always a certain weight of tragedy behind the disrespectful gaiety he portrays his characters with, as in this characterisation for instance: 'He sounded like someone whose future funeral card would be covered with words like 'fond' and 'considerate'.

This contemptuous interpretation cleverly comes from Alice's mouth, at the point where the reader has clearly understood that, despite her self-inflicted impenetrability, she is above all in search for someone, someone fond and considerate.

Arjen Fortuin.

PLAYFUL WITH A MORBID EDGE / Review by Arie Storm / Het Parool, national dialy  
(Dutch equivalent of The Guardian)

Aristide von Bienefeldt (1964) publishes his fourth novel, *The Sister Who was not Anna Magnani*. Referring to other reviews doesn't seem to be the right thing for a critic – a non official rule that was probably invented so that the nonsense of other reviewers remained unchallenged. Other reviews mentioned that this book was fairly inaccessible. There were references to long sentences and mistaken identities – some even wonder if the characters exist at all – and there was also, at about three quarter of the book, question of 'pieces of jigsaw' falling into the right places (for some critics, literally every cliché is allowed) whereas others remain in darkness until the very end.

In reality, nothing is really very complicated in *The Sister Who was not Anna Magnani*. Just keep on reading quietly, don't stop breathing and you will get remarkably far.

What is it all about? It is about four already adult children who continued to live in the parental house, after the death of their parents. Alice Nola is the obvious protagonist. Her name contains a deliberate reference to the legendary creation of Lewis Carroll. Alice Nola also enters a sort of wonderland, a wonderland largely created by herself though: her view of the world is sometimes rather peculiar.

In this novel Von Bienefeldt uses multiple alienation effects: utterly common things are described in a rather singular way. True, some doubts may indeed arise about the exact number of children. We get to know Alice and her younger brother Emiel in particular. Castro, the elder brother and the elder sister Blommia remain shadowy figures – do they actually exist?

At approximately page number 70, Alice wanders through the house with her younger brother Emiel and she ends up in all kinds of rooms. The house also turns out to be a bit strange. Not very strange, in the sense of: for God sake, what is going on here and where have we landed this time? No, just a bit strange: 'There were no identical rooms in the Nolahouse, including the bedrooms. Emiel's was the largest, Alice's room the only one overlooking Swan City, Castro's was the smallest, their parents' room the only bedroom with a terrace and Blommia's the only one facing both South and East.'

In exploring this house, its surroundings, and – later – other surroundings lies the major attraction of this book. It is done playfully and with imagination. For the record: Swan City does not exist. All the streets are named after serial killers. Von Bienefeldt does what every real writer should do: he entirely shapes the world according to his own pleasure, and to the rules dictated by the story he tells. One of the joys of reading this book is exploring, along with the author, his universe: a playful universe with a morbid edge.

The tension is further built up by the sometimes confusing dialogues. But they never leave the reader ill at ease. They would rather leave him with a smile.

Another thing, some elements in this novel are playful, but above all witty and a little disconcerting. At a certain point Alice finds a cat. She launches a search for the former owner. And the former owner launches a search for her. Then, the storyline derails completely.

*The Sister Who was not Anna Magnani* (Anna Magnani was an Italian filmactress) is a pleasant comedy, skillfully constructed. It would be nice to see this genre expand in the Netherlands. Aristide von Bienefeldt has kicked it off successfully.

Arie Storm

\* \* \* \* (Four stars out of five)

## Aristide von Bienefeldt meets Alice Nola, the protagonist of *The Sister Who was not Anna Magnani*.

I met Alice Nola on three occasions.

The first time, I bumped into her in Amsterdam Central Station. She was standing inside a shop, holding a postcard between her thumb and forefinger, and she asked the shopkeeper how many stamps she needed to send a card to Gent.

The shopkeeper wanted to know in which country Gent was located, and Alice Nola turned around as if she was searching for an audience to the reply she was about to give.

'I am unable to cope with this case of force majeure,' was her reply and I was the audience.

She slid the card – an image of a grey Persian cat, playing with something that looked like a little flask, used for perfume in the old days – back into the rack. She offered to 'consume' something in the station restaurant. My option – one of the terraces facing the station – hardly stood a chance. 'I simply *adore* stations,' she said, 'I hang around them all the time.'

The second railway station where our paths crossed again was Deventer Central Station.

This time, there was no geographically illiterate postcard assistant to bring us together. She had called me the day before. She was looking for someone who 'did' biographies.

'I do not 'do' biographies,' was my reply. She had insisted.

She felt that there was a 'thin but unmistakable thread', running through the phenomenon of 'force majeure' and our blossoming friendship.

In Deventer, Alice Nola told me about herself. 'If you want me to write about you – for this had been her purpose all along – you will have to give me *something* was my advice to her.

She was dressed in a white coat adorned with oddly shaped feathers ('Fake swan,' she mentioned), and only once did she remove the sunglasses balancing on her nose: when she leaned over to whisper in my ear that one of her admirers had sent her a new perfume.

She talked about her friendship with Mary.

'The mornings I spent with Mary are the most interesting mornings of my life. I still have three vacant periods to fill. At the moment I concentrate on the most interesting afternoon of my life.'

While entrusting me with all kinds of details about Mary, she carefully watched the tables around ours, like a private investigator searching for set-ups and conspiracies.

'Whence this suspicion, Alice Nola?' I asked.

She gave me one of her serious looks. 'I feel that I will meet Mary one more time in this life. It might just be today.'

It was nice to think that someone had asked me to write the story of her life. And yet, it was not nice to think that this person was going to interfere in the end.

Authorized Biographies are not only the least interesting biographies left to read, they are also the least interesting biographies to write.

My fears proved ungrounded.

'Write anything you like,' answered Alice Nola when I shared my doubts with her. 'We will meet one more time. Then I want to find the book by accident. In a supermarket or a station, in a bookshop. *Somewhere*.'

She asked me to choose a title she would immediately recognize. 'Something that suits me. You know. Something sensational.'

We spent all afternoon in Deventer, had several coffees, gin and tonics, soda water out of little red bottles, and ordered sandwiches with seaweed in a tearoom. In front of a tobacco

shop I asked her if she would allow me to read *The Gospel According to Brenas* – her beloved diary, named after her cat.

‘Out of the question!’ she screamed, while she opened the pack of Chesterfield cigarettes she had just purchased. ‘My diary only has one author and one reader. I happen to be both of them.’

I did manage to get several pages from her – photocopies, with initials in six different colours, to be returned to an address in Gent – thanks to the little sentence that had triggered our first encounter, the one I borrowed from her: ‘I am unable to cope with this kind of force majeure!’

Half a packet of Chesterfields and three gin and tonics later, Alice Nola was still laughing. ‘I knew it, right from the beginning.’

I asked her what exactly she ‘knew, right from the beginning’.

‘The first time I saw you, I knew you were *made* for my life.’

Two weeks later, in the station restaurant of Antwerp, she handed me 24 pages.

‘If you make improper use of them,’ she said maliciously, ‘*we* know where to find you.’

Once again I could have borrowed her little introductory sentence, but I preferred to agree in silence.

She hailed a taxi in front of the station and hastily jumped into it. I asked if we would meet again.

‘I don’t think so,’ Alice Nola said, shutting the car door.

The automobile hit the main road and at the end of a long row of hotels, Alice Nola began to move eastwards.

She waved until the car vanished behind some gloomy Hilton-wall – or was it Ibis? One of Alice Nola’s requests I have not granted.

She wanted me to use her real name.