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After the Silence

Written by Jake Woodhouse

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After the Silence

JAKE WOODHOUSE



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For *Zara*, and my parents

Prologue

‘Move.’

The voice shot out from behind him in the dark, and the cold touch of a gun, his own gun, jammed into the back of his neck.

This was not how he imagined it would be.

He’d been shoved to the hard, freezing ground, where something – *a stone, a shard of glass?* – had jabbed into his right kneecap, a trickle of blood cooling fast. He twisted his head up towards the sky, his breath rising plumes, stars piercing the dark, and somehow the pain made it all seem more beautiful, more precious, more real.

He had to play it cool, had to make sure he didn’t give in to the fear wrenching his gut, pulsing right through him. But, he thought as he fought down the rising panic, he wasn’t a soldier, a commando trained to kill with his bare hands, or a martial arts expert who could whirl around, kick the gun away and deliver a fatal blow to a secret place on the side of the neck.

No, he was just a police officer, an Inspector, specializing in homicide, dealing with crime after the fact, after murder had been committed.

His work began where someone’s life ended. And he’d seen enough of those to know he wasn’t yet ready to be a mere job for someone else, for some other Inspector to

arrive at the crime scene, piece together his life, and the events which had led to its close.

How could I have been so stupid, he thought, *letting them catch me?*

The people he was supposed to be chasing, bringing to justice. Who'd tied up the old couple and let them burn alive in their own home . . .

'I said *move*.'

Increasing pressure from the gun barrel, pushing on the spot – the same spot as the earlier impact just on the back of his skull – made him rise up, both knees cracking like pistols.

'Take it easy,' he said, and couldn't believe how scared his voice sounded.

He moved forward, step by step, the odd patch of ice shooting his feet away until he learnt to just shuffle along. Steel from the cuffs cut into his wrists.

He pictured the man behind him, the leather face mask with the zip where the mouth should be.

Is this it, am I going to die now?

Part of his mind screamed at him to engage his captor, he seemed to remember that was the key to surviving these situations, making them see you as a human being, not just a target, a kill – and where exactly did he know that from, a film? He was pretty sure he'd never received any such training from the Amsterdam Police Force – but he didn't know what to say.

'Stop.'

That voice. Harsher now, more guttural, as if the freezing air was corroding his vocal cords.

He thought of his wife, at home, her belly swollen

with the life he wasn't going to see. Doubling up, he vomited bile.

A kick to the back of his legs made him fall to his knees again. The feeling of being trapped rushed over him, crushing the air from his lungs, and making his head spin so badly he jerked sideways before managing to right himself.

It was then he heard the car, moving slowly, behind him off to the left. The sound grew, headlights streamed out of the darkness and his elongated shadow spilled forward on to the ground, a monk kneeling at prayer.

Prayer, he thought, the last resort.

He took a moment to scan his surroundings; it was a concrete drainage ditch – he'd thought as much – the shallow, sloped sides leading up to the trees which he knew must be all around.

The car stopped, engine turned off and ticking gently, but the headlights stayed, blue-white lasers slicing the dark. Doors opened then closed with soft thuds. Footsteps from the road, difficult to tell how many people, soles grinding grit against concrete, then quieter steps on grass, before more hesitant footfalls on the ditch's sides, each one carefully placed to avoid slipping.

Voices, in a language he didn't understand, grating, sinister.

He was shivering now, his whole body shaking as if every muscle had simultaneously gone haywire, but he didn't know if that was the cold or the sheer terror, or maybe both.

Someone walked round his left side and flicked a torch directly in his eyes, dazzling him. Instinctively his eyelids

closed tight, protecting, even though part of him wanted to see who it was. He squinted them open just in time to see a figure in silhouette, wearing some kind of trench coat. The man's arm moved, checking the time on a large wristwatch.

Then the light was off, one word uttered behind him and the footsteps retreated, doors opened and closed again, and the car, its engine roar splitting open the silence of the night, reversed away.

He listened until he could no longer hear it.

Was that it? Was this just a warning?

He couldn't be sure but he felt he was totally alone now, the man who'd brought him here had departed as well. Relief surged through him, but then . . . if they'd found out about him . . .

I've got to warn Jaap, he thought, his knees aching, stomach loose. He forced himself up and started to turn around.

A shot rang out, and faded into the darkness.

a world of dew,
and within every dewdrop
a world of struggle

(Issa)

DAY ONE

I

Monday, 2 January

07:34

‘Just ’cause you’re police doesn’t mean you don’t get broken into.’

Inspector Jaap Rykel glanced out of his houseboat’s porthole, across dark water to the trees lining the opposite side of the canal. He could see their naked boughs, heavy with Christmas lights, each orb glowing like a strange winter fruit.

‘Is there really no one else?’ he switched the phone to his other ear, bent down and peered at the jimmed door again, scratches in the black paint revealing raw wood underneath. ‘I mean, I know I’m on the rota for today, but as I said I’ve been up most of the night and –’

‘I hear you, but there’s no one available. And it’s not straightforward, it needs someone who knows what they’re doing.’

‘So you’re resorting to flattery now?’

‘Whatever it takes.’

It’s either that, he thought looking at the door, or dealing with this.

‘Okay,’ he sighed into the phone, ‘I’ll take it. But I need you to get someone over here right now to clean this mess up. And replace the lock.’

‘No problem, but don’t hang around. And I’ve sent Kees Terpstra –’

‘Not Kees . . .’

‘Express orders, you’re to hold his hand on this one.’

‘Anyone trying to hold his hand is likely to get it bitten off.’

‘So fill out a form, wounded in action. Look, I’ve gotta go –’

‘Wait, check a name for me. Friedman.’

‘First name?’

‘I don’t know, just run it, call me if anything jumps out. And try and get hold of Andreas, I’m not having any luck.’

Jaap dropped the phone on the kitchen table. He’d only answered thinking it might be his partner, Andreas, calling to explain his text message last night.

Call me, I’m on to something. A guy called
Friedman is our way in.

Maybe I should have gone with him when he asked, he thought as he tried to call him. It just rang out again, as it had before.

He pulled up Andreas’ home phone number and was just about to hit the call button when the thought of Saskia stopped him. She’d never been an early riser, and he was sure being pregnant hadn’t changed that.

I’ll wait a bit, he thought, pocketing his phone.

He spent a few minutes checking what had been stolen, and found that nothing had gone. Not even the most valuable thing he owned, his *nibonto*, the ceremonial sword he’d been given when he left Japan.

He looked at the silver dragons sinuously coiling round the black lacquer scabbard.

It's right there on the wall, he thought, how could they not have seen it?

He figured it would take a while for anyone to arrive so he pulled out his battered I Ching and the three two-euro coins he kept with it. He threw the three coins together on to the table's surface, noting down the result each time. Each throw corresponded to one line, and he threw six times to form a hexagram.



He recognized the bottom three lines, the symbol for Lake, and the top three represented Thunder.

He looked up the combination and read 'Do not argue with how things are' just as he heard footsteps clanging on the metal gangplank.

A uniform stepped through the door, bending down to avoid hitting his head, and wiped his nose on his sleeve. Jaap could see the glistening trail it left on the dark blue fabric as he slipped the coins and book back.

'What have they nicked?' asked the uniform.

'Weirdly, nothing.'

'Maybe you've got nothing worth nicking.'

Jaap pointed to the sword and the uniform studied it for a moment.

'Hmm. Probably got disturbed then.'

Jaap thought it unlikely. Most break-ins were done by drug addicts desperate for cash. Having got in they'd leave with something, disturbed or not.

'Maybe.' He shrugged. 'Anyway, I've got to go. Get the

door replaced, and drop the new keys off at the station,' he said as he stepped outside.

On deck he had to pause for a moment as he struggled with the zip on his jacket – it kept jamming just below the throat and he had to strum his hand up and down to release it – before moving off across the narrow gang-plank, swaying gently until he reached the shore.

The distant rumble of a tram came to his ears, and then the splash of an early water bird, landing in the canal off to his left. He shivered, then set out east, his steps like gunshots on the laid brick road, shooting across the water and back again.

I hope Andreas has got somewhere, he thought, we need to close that gang case down.

They'd been working on a murder which had led them to a gang who called themselves *Zwarte Tulpen*, Black Tulips. They were from a variety of ex-Soviet states, and were vicious, secretive and well-organized. As Jaap and Andreas had started investigating they'd begun to understand the sheer reach of the gang. In the four years since the Black Tulips appeared on the scene they'd virtually taken over the ports; if it went in or out and it was illegal you could be sure they controlled it.

And they didn't get to be the major players by being lax. In the two weeks since they'd started on the case he and Andreas had been continually frustrated by the lack of a way in. They kept hitting a brick wall. And it'd begun to feel like the wall was never going to crack.

Ten minutes later he turned the last kink in Herengracht, one of four canals which cupped Amsterdam's centre. He could make out an ambulance and a patrol car,

their blue lights strobing. Red-and-white-striped tape reached from a house out to a leafless tree on the canal's edge, fluttering in the icy breeze which had just started up.

The scene was already bustling – he counted at least five uniforms – and as he got closer he could see they were all looking skywards like acolytes in some religious painting in the Rijksmuseum. But as his gaze rose he could see the object of their worship wasn't an angel descending from the clouds on feathered wings, but a body.

Naked.

Hanging by the neck from a pulley.

When the dispatcher had said there was a body he'd assumed he was going to spend the morning fishing someone out of the canal, a tourist perhaps, unused to the strength and availability of Dutch dope or beer. Or the two combined.

He felt his phone buzzing in his pocket, and checked the screen to see Andreas' home number.

'Andreas, where've you been?'

'Is he not with you?' Saskia's voice. 'I thought you were going with him last night?'

Shit.

'Uhh . . . no . . . I didn't in the end. So did he leave early this morning?'

The breeze brought a pungent hit of tar and brine off the canal.

'No, I woke up just now but he hasn't been back, and he's not answering his phone.'

Where the hell is he?

'I'm sure it's fine, you know what he's like when he gets stuck into a case –'

‘But he’s *never* stayed out all night and not let me know before.’

Jaap wondered if there was an implied criticism there, but decided she was sounding too scared for point scoring on an old relationship. And anyway, that was history now.

‘Look, I’ll try and get hold of him, someone at the station will know where he is. I’ll get back to you soon, but in the meantime don’t worry, okay?’

Once Saskia hung up Jaap called the station and got them to check the logs, find out where Andreas had gone last night.

I really should have gone with him, he thought as he walked the last twenty yards.

His footsteps announced him, the uniforms all turned as one, and he ducked under the police tape, noticing for the first time an old man sitting in the back of the ambulance.

One of the uniforms, Ton Baanders, was smoking by the canal edge. Flicking his cigarette into the water, the orange tip looping downward through the air, he stepped over to meet Jaap.

‘Hey, how’s it hanging?’ he asked in English syruped with an American drawl.

‘Funny guy,’ said Jaap, turning his head up, wondering how difficult this was going to be. His eyes connected with the body, pale skin basted by the sodium glow of a street light, rotating slowly first one way, then back again like the soles of his feet were dancing to an unheard tune.

Jaap motioned to the old man in the ambulance.

‘He the one who found him?’ Because it was a *him*, that much was visible even from down at street level.

‘Yeah, that’s the guy. He was a bit distraught when I arrived but he’s calmed down now. He seems to have something against immigrants, he was banging on and on about them earlier.’

‘What’s he called?’

Ton inspected his notebook as if he’d spent all morning interviewing fifty suspects with complicated names.

‘Pieter Leenhouts.’

‘Keep him here, I’ll want to talk to him. Forensics up there?’

‘Yeah, they got here on time for once. Said they’d just set up and wait for the word.’

Jaap turned back to the house where three stone steps, a faded bloom of green algae coating their surface, led to a cream front door. There were five storeys, three tall windows on each floor, and in the triangular facade a modern addition, French windows which echoed the roof’s outline.

Ton broke the silence.

‘Not sure I’d top myself if I could afford to live in one of these.’

‘He didn’t do this to himself.’

‘No?’

Jaap followed the taut line of the rope from the man’s neck, up over the pulley wheel and then as it sloped down, to where it ended up, jammed between the window and frame.

Is that all that’s keeping him up, he wondered, or is the rope attached to something else inside?

‘He could have hanged himself. Not sure he could have closed the windows behind him though.’

‘See what you mean,’ said Ton.

‘No sign of Kees?’

‘Isn’t that him there?’ Ton pointed back down Herengracht, past the concerned neighbours gathering at the tape, necks craning. A figure, a phone clasped to his ear, was heading towards them.

Jaap watched as Kees stopped, intent on his phone conversation, his left hand throwing out angry gesticulations.

‘When he gets here tell him to come straight up. Unless, of course, he’s got more important things to be doing.’

Ton grinned. ‘Looks like a domestic to me.’

‘Yeah, well, domestics should be kept at home.’

Inside the house a short hallway led to wooden stairs. An antique table stood to his right, on it a cigar box and a pile of letters. Jaap picked them up and looked at the first. The paper was plain, a plastic window revealing a printed name and address.

His stomach clenched.

The name was D. Friedman.

2

Monday, 2 January

07.57

The piercing ring of the phone jerked Sergeant Tanya van der Mark awake. She pulled herself out of bed, feet against the cold tiled floor, and stumbled towards the source of the racket.

‘Hello?’

‘Tanya, it’s Roelf, did I wake you?’

‘Umm, kind of . . .?’ She shivered, wishing her cheap landlord would replace the chipped chessboard tiles with carpet. Roelf was the station dispatcher, which meant she wasn’t getting back to bed any time soon.

‘Sorry, I didn’t have any choice, I’m kind of short on options here.’

‘What about Baltje?’

‘He’s down in Amsterdam for a few days. Some stupid course about reaching out to the community.’

‘So he’s living it up in the big city and I’m stuck up here covering for him?’

‘Yeah, life’s not fair. I tell that to my kids every day, just to prepare them.’

She looked down at her feet; one on a white tile, the other on black. ‘Your place sounds like a lot of fun.’

‘Has its moments,’ he said. ‘But anyway, the reason I’m calling is we’ve got a fire, out by Zeedijk? And –’

‘Call the fire service, they’re generally better at that kind of thing.’

‘– and with all these arson attacks we’ve had you know Lankhorst said someone needed to attend any suspicious fires.’

‘Is it suspicious?’

‘It’s a fire, isn’t it?’

Tanya tried to see the hallway clock, but it was too dark to make out either of the hands.

It must be before eight, she thought, I haven’t heard the rubbish collectors yet.

‘Okay,’ she yawned, ‘I’m on my way.’

She’d been wrestling with a dream, the familiar nightmare, when the phone had roused her. Standing there it took her a moment to separate everything out into the right compartments before returning to the bedroom and dressing quickly, her eyes squeezed to slits against the harsh electric light she’d been forced to turn on.

She drank down a glass of orange juice, just to clear the sour taste from her mouth, and went to the drawer where she kept her ID. She couldn’t find it, and it wasn’t in her jacket pocket either. She gave up and left the house, looking at the photo she kept on the hall table as she picked up her keys.

Her parents.

Thirteen years this Thursday, she thought as she stepped out into the glacial air, a hint of woodsmoke catching her nose. A cat, or maybe a fox, startled by her appearance, jumped on to her neighbour’s fence, back paws scrabbling

for a few seconds against the wood, before making it over and rushing through the undergrowth with a rustle which quickly fell into silence.

Tanya checked the post box, hoping for her exam results. If she made Inspector she'd be putting in a transfer request right away. But all she had were offers of faster broadband and falafel delivery.

She looked at her bike, frost crusted on the black chassis, but turned to the police car. As she got in she paused and sat behind the wheel for a moment before firing up the motor, unable to completely shake her dream. She still had them after all these years. Their power over her hadn't diminished.

She shook her head quickly, trying to focus. She didn't want the distraction, not now.

Not ever, she thought to herself.

Off to her right she could see the first hint of dawn, the intensity of the night sky just easing, and over the next twenty minutes as she drove through the flat landscape she watched the transformation of the world from night to day, the horizon cycling through layers of colour like a kaleidoscope.

Her destination was clear even before the satnav – silent on the long straight road north – barked at her, a pillar of smoke rising up into the apricot-tinged sky. There was no wind at all judging by how straight a line the smoke was forming and it reminded her of a column on an ancient building.

Should that be Doric or Corinthian? she wondered as she slowed down, and found a mud track leading towards the source, a plot of land wedged between fields with a low hedge marking out the perimeter. Small potholes in

the track were frozen solid, fish eyes looking towards the sky.

Approaching what remained of the house she could see it had probably been one of those typical bungalows built, along with so much in the Netherlands, by a mad eighties architect who had all the visual flair of a blind civil servant. They were dotted around the countryside, cumbersome and out of place, and she'd always disliked them.

One less ugly building, she thought to herself as she pulled up, parking in the long shadow of the fire engine cast by the low sun. The fire crew – about seven in all, their hi-vis clothing dazzling in the first rays of light – were winding the hose back on to an enormous reel, each turn forcing another spurt of water out of the nozzle. It looked to Tanya like a gigantic python retching.

The first thing that hit her as she got out was the dark, heavy smell of burning, and as she walked round the front of the fire engine she could feel the heat, radiating like an oven. The building had been levelled, two corner uprights on the far left-hand side all that remained of the structure, forlorn against the sky.

It was still possible to distinguish some things, the kitchen retained its outline, a fridge severely burned – but still standing – and the bath and toilet blackened, cracked, but still recognizable.

The lead fireman saw her and started walking her way. As he reached her he offered his hand and they shook.

'Tanya van der Mark,' she said.

'Paul Lemster.' His face was weathered; a smudge of soot on his left cheek just below the eye reminded Tanya

of a soldier. ‘As you can see, it was pretty much done by the time we got here.’

Tanya looked around, clocking the lack of a car – impossible to live without one in this remote spot. A vegetable patch sat off to the left, neat rows of winter kale and leeks, pushing free from the tilled earth.

‘The owners?’

He pointed to the remains of the building.

‘Looks like a couple of adult bodies there, they didn’t make it out in time. Give us five minutes to get it cool enough and we can take a look.’

‘Any idea what started it? More arson?’

He shrugged.

‘In my experience it’s usually something minor, bad wiring or something like that. These buildings weren’t built to last.’

She walked round the property, just close enough to feel the heat but without it being uncomfortable, and looked out at the surrounding landscape.

Beyond the hedge lay agricultural land, neat field after neat field, dotted with the black-and-white cows from which the region, Friesland, got its name. To the north, past more fields, a lead-grey sea brooded. She felt the bleakness, and wondered if living out here could drive someone mad.

As she followed the path of the hedge something caught her eye, just at the base. She knelt down, her left knee feeling the hardness of the frozen ground, and tried to pull out whatever it was, hidden behind the dark green leaves veined with frost. Pushing her hand further in, feeling the brittle branches scraping her skin, she

managed to get hold of something smooth. Twigs broke as she pulled it out.

In her hand was a small doll, which despite the frost looked brand new. She stared at it, the white arms and legs, the crimson dress pristine, and the blonde hair frozen solid.

A distant ship's horn barged in off the North Sea.

So where, she thought, turning back to the burnt wreckage, is the child?