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The Secret Diary of Hendrik Groen, 83 $\frac{1}{4}$ Years Old

Written by Hendrik Groen

Published by Michael Joseph

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HENDRIK GROEN

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The Secret Diary of
Hendrik Groen, 83 $\frac{1}{4}$ Years Old

Tuesday, 1 January 2013

Another year, and I still don't like old people. Their Zimmer-frame shuffle, their unreasonable impatience, their endless complaints, their tea and biscuits, their bellyaching.

Me? I am 83 years old.

Wednesday, 2 January

Great clouds of icing sugar were spilled a moment ago. Mrs Smit had put the plate of apple tartlets down on a chair because she wanted to wipe down the table with a cloth.

Along comes Mrs Voorthuizen, who inadvertently parks her enormous bottom right on top of the pastries.

It wasn't until Mrs Smit began looking for the dish, to put it back, that someone came up with the idea of checking underneath Mrs Voorthuizen. When she stood up she had three tartlets stuck to her flowery behind.

"The apples match the pattern on your frock perfectly," Evert remarked. I almost choked to death laughing.

This brilliant start to the New Year should have given rise to all-round hilarity, but instead led to forty-five minutes of carping about whose fault it was. I was glared at darkly on all sides, on account of having found it funny, apparently. And what did I do? I mumbled I was sorry.

Instead of laughing even harder, I found myself grovelling for forgiveness.

For I, Hendrikus Gerardus Groen, am ever the civil, ingratiating, courteous, polite and helpful bloke. Not because I really am all those things, but because I don't have the balls to act differently. I rarely say what I want to say. I tend to choose the path of least confrontation. My speciality: wanting to please everybody. My parents showed foresight in naming me Hendrik: you can't get any blander than that.

I shall wind up spiralling into depression, I thought. That's when I made the decision to give the world a little taste of the real Hendrik Groen. I hereby declare that in this diary I am going to give the world an uncensored exposé: a year in the life of the inmates of a care home in North Amsterdam.

I may die before the year's out, true; that's beyond my control. In that event I will ask my friend Evert Duiker to read a few pages from this diary at my funeral. I'll be laid out, neatly laundered and pressed, in the small chapel of The Horizon Crematorium, waiting for Eric's croaky voice to break the uncomfortable silence and read some choice passages to the bewildered mourners.

I do worry about one thing: what if Evert should die before me?

It wouldn't be fair, considering that I have even more infirmities and funny lumps and bumps than he does. You ought to be able to count on your best friend. I will have to have a word with him about it.

Thursday, 3 January

Evert was keen but wouldn't guarantee he'd live longer than me. He also had a few reservations. The first was that after

reading publicly from my diary he'd probably have to look for another place to live. The second consideration was the state of his dentures, caused by a careless jab of the billiards cue by Vermeteren. Since he has a cataract in his right eye, Verme-teren needs some assistance with his aim. Evert, ever prepared to help, was standing behind him giving directions, his nose lined up with the cue. "A tad to the left and a bit deeper . . ." and before he could finish Vermeteren had rammed the back of his cue right through Evert's snappers. *Score!*

Now Evert looks like a little kid waiting for a visit from the tooth fairy. People have a hard time understanding him because of the lisp. He'll have to have those teeth fixed before reading at my funeral. But that's not bloody going to happen any time soon, the denture repairman, it seems, is out of action. Two hundred thousand per annum, an assistant who's a real looker, three trips to Hawaii every year and still his nerves are shot; how is it possible? Maybe years of having to deal with ancient dentures so food-encrusted that they're crawling with maggots have sent him over the edge. So to speak.

The New Year's doughnuts they're serving in the conversation lounge downstairs this year can only have come from the charity shop. Yesterday morning I took one to be polite, and spent a good twenty minutes trying to get it down; as a final resort I had to pretend my shoelace had come undone so that I could duck under the table and stuff the last piece down my sock.

No wonder they had hardly been touched. Normally anything that's free round here is gone in the blink of an eye.

In the conversation lounge coffee is usually served at 10:30. If the coffee hasn't arrived by 10:32, the first residents start glancing ostentatiously at their watches. As if they've got

something better to do. The same goes for tea, which is supposed to be brought in at 15:15.

One of the most exciting moments of the day: what kind of biscuits will we have with our tea and coffee today? Both yesterday and the day before it was the elderly doughnuts. Because of course “we” wouldn’t dream of throwing food away. We’d rather choke to death on it.

Friday, 4 January

Yesterday I took a walk to the florist’s to buy some potted bulbs. So that I can tell myself a week from now, when the hyacinths start to bloom, that I’ve made it to another spring.

Most of the rooms in this retirement home keep their Christmas decorations on display until April. Next to an ancient sanseveria and a primula whose days are numbered. “Be a shame to toss it.”

If Nature’s role is to bring cheer to a person’s life, it certainly doesn’t do the job in the bedsit of the Dutch old age pensioner. There the condition of the houseplant is usually an accurate reflection of the state of the mind of the human entrusted with its care: both just waiting for the sad end. Since they have nothing else to do, or are a bit forgetful, the old biddies water their plants at least three times a day. In the long run not even a sanseveria can survive that.

Mrs Visser has invited me in for a cup of tea tomorrow afternoon. I should have declined, if only because of how she smells, but I said I would love to stop by for a minute. There goes my afternoon. Cripes, what a gormless wimp I am. On the spur of the moment I couldn’t think of a good excuse, so I shall have to endure the mindless jabbering and the dry

sponge. How she manages to turn the moistest of cakes into dusty cardboard is beyond me. You need three cups of tea per slice to wash it down. Tomorrow I will take a bold stand and turn down the second helping. Start a new life.

A new life in scrupulously polished shoes. I spent half the morning on them. The shoes themselves were done relatively quickly. Trying to scrub the shoe polish out of my shirt-sleeves took much longer. But they're nice and shiny now. The shoes, I mean. The sleeves I just rolled up in the end. I couldn't get them clean.

It's bound to raise some eyebrows. "How *do* you always manage to get your sleeves so grubby, Mr Groen?"

Life in here consists of either *never* or *always*. One day the food is "*never* served on time and *always* too hot," and the next, "*always* too early and *never* hot enough."

On occasion I have ventured to remind people of their previous rather contradictory statements, but they don't have much use for logic here. "Ah, Mr Groen, you *do* have a lot to say for yourself, don't you!"

Saturday, 5 January

A kerfuffle again last night at dinner: Indonesian fried rice on the menu. Most of the old folk in here are of the bubble-and-squeak persuasion: none of that fancy foreign fare for them. Even back in the mid-Sixties, when spaghetti was first introduced to the Netherlands, they'd said no thanks. Spaghetti simply didn't fit into the week's menu: endive Monday, cauliflower and porridge Tuesday, mince Wednesday, beans Thursday, fish Friday, soup and bread Saturday, and the Sunday roast. If they really threw

all caution to the wind and had hamburgers on Tuesday, it made a right dog's dinner of the rest of the week.

Foreign grub just isn't our thing. We're usually shown the menu a week ahead, so that we may choose from three different options, but sometimes there's a slip-up. Yesterday, for some unknown reason, there was nothing but Indonesian fried rice. Something about a delivery mix-up. It wasn't the cook's fault – naturally.

The choice therefore was fried rice or fried rice. People on restricted diets were given bread.

A tidal wave of indignation. Mrs Hoogstraten van Dam, who insists on being addressed by her full name, just picked at the bits of fried egg; van Gelder doesn't eat rice but scoffed down an entire jar of pickles, and fat old Bakker demanded that they bring him some gravy for his rice.

My mate Evert, who sometimes joins us for dinner when he gets sick of his own culinary prowess, offered his unsuspecting dinner companions a jar of chilli sauce. "Would you care for some ketchup with your rice?"

He was the picture of innocence as Mrs De Prijker proceeded to spit her dentures into the relish. She was helped out of the room, coughing and sputtering, upon which Evert picked up her teeth and started passing them round like Cinderella's slipper, to see if anyone wanted to try them on. When the facilities manager reprimanded him, he was all bewildered indignation. He even threatened to go to the Food Inspector to report he had "found" a set of dentures in the relish.

Before dinner I had tea with Mrs Visser. Her conversation is even more tepid than her tea. Told her the doctor had said I shouldn't have any cake. But why? she asked. I said it was my blood sugar. It's on the high side, somewhere between 20 and 25. I blurted it out without thinking, but she decided it

was very sensible of me. She pressed three slices of cake on me when I left, in case my blood sugar went down again. Those slices have found a home in the fish tank on the third floor.

Sunday, 6 January

My dribbling keeps getting worse. White underpants are excellent for highlighting yellow stains. Yellow underpants would be a lot better. I'm mortified at the thought of the ladies of the laundry handling my soiled garments. I have therefore taken to scrubbing the worst stains by hand before sending the wash out. Call it a *pre*-prewash. If I didn't send out anything to be laundered it would rouse suspicion. "You *have* been changing your underwear, haven't you, Mr Groen?" the fat lady from housekeeping would probably ask. What I'd like to reply is, "No, fat lady from housekeeping, this pair is caked so firmly onto my old buttocks that I think I'll just keep wearing them for the rest of my days."

It has been a trying day: the body creaks in all its joints. There's nothing that will stop the decline. At best you have the occasional day when you're not bothered as much by this ache or that, but genuine improvement is not on the cards, ever. Hair isn't suddenly going to start growing back. Not on the pate, at least; it readily sprouts from the nose and ears. The arteries aren't going to clear themselves out. The bumps and lumps won't go away, and the leaky nether parts aren't going to stop dripping. A one-way ticket to the grave, that's what it is. You never grow younger, not by a day, nor an hour, not even a minute.

Look at me whining and moaning like an old crock. If

that's where I'm headed, I might as well go and sit in the conversation lounge downstairs. Whinging is pastime number one down there. I don't think a half hour goes by without somebody bringing up their aches and pains.

I do believe I'm in a rather sombre mood. You're supposed to enjoy your sunset years, but it bloody well isn't always easy.

Time for a little stroll, it's Sunday afternoon for cripes' sake. Then a smidgen of Mozart and a large snifter of brandy. Perhaps I'll stop by Evert's too, his thick-headedness can be very therapeutic.

Monday, 7 January

It appears that an investigation was launched yesterday into the sudden demise of the fish on the third floor. A considerable amount of cake was found floating in the water.

I suppose it wasn't one of my brightest ideas, tossing Mrs Visser's sponge into the fish tank. If she should ever hear that the fish died from soggy-cake overdose, the evidence will point straight at me. I had better start preparing for my defence; I'll swing by Duiker the lawman for some good advice. Evert is an expert in the art of little white lies.

Pets are forbidden in this home with the exception of fish or birds, "as long as they do not exceed 10 or 20 centimetres in length respectively," it says in the house regulations. Just in case we wanted to keep sharks or white-tailed eagles.

The policy has caused a great deal of anguish for poor old biddies mercilessly torn from their dogs or cats when they move into the House of the Setting Sun. No matter how calm and sedate, old or lame the animals are, rules are rules: off to the pound.

“No, madam, it makes no difference that Rascal is the only creature in the whole wide world that you love; we simply cannot make an exception.”

“Yes, we understand that all your cat ever does is sleep on the windowsill, but if we were to allow one cat, then someone else would want to bring in three Great Danes that sleep on the windowsill, wouldn't they. Or maybe a purple crocodile.”

Mrs Brinkman holds the record; she managed to hide an old dachshund under the sink for weeks before it was discovered. Someone must have ratted on her. To have lived through the War, as we all did, and still be so heartless as to turn in a mangy old dog! And instead of tarring and feathering the traitorous collaborator, it was the poor little dog the director deported to the pound! Where it spent the next two days howling pitifully before dying of a broken heart. And where was the RSPCA when we needed it?

The director thought it best to keep Mrs Brinkman in the dark about this turn of events. When Mrs Brinkman finally managed to catch the right tram to take her to the pound, her dog was already six feet under.

Mrs Brinkman asked if her dog could be exhumed and laid to rest beside her when her own time comes. She was informed that “it's against the rules.”

Tomorrow I have to go to the doctor.

Tuesday, 8 January

There was a notice on the board by the lift.

A quantity of cake crumbs was found in the fish tank on the third floor. The fish in the tank have died as a result of ingesting said cake. Anyone who is able to shine some light on this incident is kindly

requested to report to Mrs De Roos, Floor Manager, as soon as possible. Anonymity honoured upon request.

I went to see Mrs De Roos at 11. What marvellous irony, for someone like her to be named after a rose! Even “Mrs Stinging-nettle” would give her too much credit.

It would make sense if truly ugly people were extra nice, to compensate, but in this case the opposite is true: this one’s a solid wall of cantankerousness.

But to resume.

I told her I might be able to provide some explanation about the cake incident. She was immediately all ears. I explained that I had been reluctant to refuse Mrs Visser’s homemade sponge, and had left a plate of it on the table in the third floor pantry, fully confident that some resident would appreciate the offering from an unknown donor. To my regret I realized that the cake had somehow ended up in the aquarium, and that my blue plate had disappeared.

De Roos heard me out with undisguised incredulity. Why hadn’t I eaten the cake myself? Why the third floor? Was there anyone who could corroborate my story?

I asked her to keep it confidential. She said she would see what she could do.

She then promptly began wondering how Mrs Visser could have baked the cake herself in the first place. Cooking or baking in one’s room is strictly forbidden. I hastened to add that I wasn’t sure that it was homemade, but it was too late: the cake mystery was out of the box. I shall lose Mrs Visser’s friendship; not a big tragedy in itself. But the distrust and suspicion in our unit, already rife, will be whipped up for weeks, and there will be no end to the gossip.

I also went to the doctor’s surgery today. He was out sick.

If he hasn't recovered by Monday, they'll dig up a locum. If it's an emergency, the GP of a rival nursing home will see us. Some in here would rather die than let "that quack from Twilight House" have a look at their wrinkled carcass. Others prefer to call in the air ambulance for every little fart. Speaking for myself, it doesn't make much difference which doctor ends up telling me there's nothing much that can be done.

Wednesday, 9 January

I have to say I was a bit off my game yesterday because of the dead fish business. I came down with a bad case of the runs from all the tea I'd had at Mrs Visser's, combined with my nerves. Spent half the morning on the loo with some old reading material I'd borrowed from the conversation lounge.

Quite a mouthful, that "conversation lounge", but it doesn't do justice to what really goes on there. "The GGG suite" would be more accurate. In which the three Gs stand for gossip, grouching, and gibberish. A full day's work for some.

Evert stopped by briefly to fill me in through the loo door on the latest: everyone now suspects everyone else, seeing a potential fish assassin in every co-inmate. My absence has roused suspicion. I've asked Evert if he would quietly spread word of my diarrhoea, as an alibi of sorts. I wasn't up to much except leaving the loo door ajar as well as the door out to the corridor, in order to air the place out. I can usually stand my own smell but this time I was making myself nauseous. Both literally and metaphorically, for what a calculating piece of chickenshit am I – in this case a rather fitting image.

Speaking of fresh air, I really need to get out for a bit. After a whole day of dry toast and Imodium, I think I might

risk venturing outside again. To go look for the celandine, which – so say both the newspaper and the Nature Calendar of the Phenological Observation Network (another mouthful!) – is the first true sign of spring. If beside the celandine, I were to find some coltsfoot, cow parsley or wood violets as well, I'd know that spring has truly sprung. Pity I haven't the foggiest what those plants are supposed to look like.

Nature is six weeks ahead of herself. But – bad news for the migratory birds that have made the decision to stay put this year – there's a cold spell on the way.

Thursday January 10

The care home has a lovely garden. But for some inexplicable reason it is locked. In the winter no one is allowed in. For our own good, presumably. Management knows what's best for us inmates.

So if you want some fresh air at this time of year, you have to make do with a stroll round the neighbourhood. Ugly sixties flats. Dismal refuse dumps masquerading as strips of grass. You would think that at night the street cleaners roll through the area strewing litter instead of sweeping it up. One has to wade through a sea of tins, empty crisp packets and old newspaper. The people who used to live here originally have almost all traded their flats for a modern terrace in Purmerend or Almere. The only ones left are those who can't afford to do so. Turkish, Moroccan and West Indian families have moved into the vacated buildings. It makes for quite a jolly melting pot.

My range these days is about 500 metres each way, with a pause on a bench at the halfway mark. I can't manage much

more than that. The world is shrinking. Starting from here, I can take one of four possible one-kilometre round trips.

Evert has just been to see me. He is getting enormous pleasure from the kerfuffle surrounding the fish massacre, and has a plan to turn it up a notch. He wants to mount a second offensive, this time with pink fondant fancies. He thinks the colour will have a more dramatic effect on the water. Yesterday he took the bus to a supermarket a few kilometres down the road specially to obtain a supply. If he had bought them here, in the home's mini-market, they were bound to remember his purchase. The cakes are now stashed in his cupboard. I asked if he thought they were safe there. "It's a free country; a person can hide as many fancies in his own home as he likes, can't he?" he said.

Saturday, 12 January

The home's director, Mrs Stelwagen – I'll have much more to say about her later, in all probability – has announced an energy-saving measure: the thermostats in the residents' rooms are not to be set above 23 degrees. If the oldies are cold, they should simply wear their coats, is the message. There is an Indonesian lady who likes to set her thermostat at 27 degrees. There are bowls of water set out all over her room, to increase the humidity. Her tropical plants are thriving. There hasn't yet been a decree stipulating the maximum size for houseplants, but I suspect Stelwagen is working on it.

Mrs Stelwagen is always friendly, ready with a willing ear and an encouraging word for everyone, but concealed beneath that veneer of sympathy is an unhealthy dose of self-importance and power lust. She is 42 years old and has been in

charge for a year and half now, but is always on the lookout for an opening to kick or arselick her way up the ladder, depending on whom she is dealing with. I've been watching her for a year or so.

I also have a most valuable informant: her secretary, Mrs Appelboom. Anja Appelboom was the secretary of the last director, Mr Lemaire, for twenty-three years, until the latest merger, when Lemaire was forced into early retirement. Anja has two years to go before her pension sets in, and since a new office manager was appointed over her head, she's determined not to let Stelwagen get the better of her again. Anja still has access to all the minutes and confidential documents. A few years ago she lived next door to me and saved me from the homeless shelter by arranging for me to come here. More on that some other day perhaps.

I often have a coffee with Anja in her office on Thursday mornings. That's when Stelwagen and the office manager are off to their meeting with the unit managers and the district manager. Promotion to district manager is the next leap Stelwagen is hoping for.

It's a chance for us to gossip. "Can you keep a secret?" she'll often ask before launching into a blow by blow of Stelwagen's latest machinations. We've collected quite a dossier on her.

Sunday, 13 January

Last night Evert tossed six pink fondant fancies into the fish tank on the second floor. The goldfish gorged themselves silly. Their corpses are floating up there amongst the cake crumbs. All hell has broken loose in here.

Evert simply excused himself during after-dinner coffee,

announcing he was going to the loo, then climbed the stairs, peering round to make sure no one saw him, and chucked the cakes he'd been hiding under his jacket into the water. He deposited the plastic wrapper neatly in the wastepaper basket, not such a bright way to dispose of the evidence, I suppose, but luckily the cleaner has already been round to empty the bins.

The fish tank is tucked away in a rather dark corner, so no one noticed anything last night. The operation wasn't without risk; if he'd been nabbed, he'd have been obliged to call in the moving van. Perhaps somewhere deep down he doesn't care if he gets caught, even though whenever he's in a tight spot he'll lie through his teeth, and rant and rave, swearing he had nothing to do with it. That's how the game is played, he says. His philosophy: the only point of being alive is to kill time as pleasantly as possible. The trick is not to take anything too seriously. I envy him. But I'm a quick study.

I myself was rather on edge yesterday, because Evert had told me about the attack beforehand so that I could prepare a fool-proof alibi for myself. It wasn't easy. I had to hang about in the conversation lounge until finally a couple who live on my floor stood up to go upstairs. "I'll walk with you, for some company," I said. Mr and Mrs Jacobs did give me a rather funny look.

The alarm was sounded just after nine this morning. Mrs Brandsma, on her way to church, caught sight of the fish floating belly-up. They tried to keep it quiet at first, apparently, but Brandsma had already blabbed about it to everyone she encountered on her way to find the duty nurse. My next door neighbour has just knocked on my door: "You won't believe what I just heard . . ."

I'm looking forward to all the chin-wagging when I go down for coffee.

Monday, 14 January

Another pet catastrophe: Mrs Schreuder accidentally hoovered up her canary when she was cleaning its cage. When after several desperate minutes she finally managed to control her shaking hands enough to get the hoover open, there wasn't much left of her perky little birdie. She should have turned off the machine immediately, of course. Her little Pete was still alive at first, but gave up the ghost a few minutes later. Schreuder is inconsolable and racked with guilt.

The only victim-trauma response from the staff came in the form of advice to throw out the cage as soon as possible.

Everyone in here has strong views on the subject of cake crumbs in fish tanks. But ask them what they think of the war in Syria and they'll stare at you as if you just asked them to explain the theory of relativity. A handful of fish floating belly-up are a thousand times worse than a busload of women and children blown to smithereens in some far-off country.

But let's not be hypocritical: I am enjoying the fish scandal immensely, I cannot pretend otherwise. The outrage that has overtaken the entire population here is remarkable. I'm about to go back down to the conversation lounge for some more juicy fish talk.

Winter has arrived. Not a flake of snow on the ground, but yesterday I saw the first old gentleman stepping outside with wool socks pulled on over his shoes. To guard against slipping.