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Karel the Walker

“FATE IS ALL THE BRIDGES between people,” my father said, “and if you don’t know that then we’re all alone.” Sometimes, he had a sparkling cloak around him. They were his last words to me.

Let me say first that my father occupied himself as a psychiatrist, so I have thought a lot about fate. We lived together in a boat that was a house, on the *Bloemgracht*. The canal has high brick walls, in a city that’s seven-hundred years old. I am determined by this or I am not.

“The mind is like a houseboat,” he used to say to me. He had a slightly round forehead, very tall and wide, and I thought his brain must be twice the size of anyone’s. But below that were his happy eyes and a face that always wrinkled into a smile. I looked at him with the adoration of a little boy. My genius father. My genius father who loved me. “Why?” he said, tapping his finger on our plastic dinner-table. Why is the mind like a houseboat?

“With all of the compartments?” I said, as a guess. I had many nights been awake on the bunk and listened to him with his friends. I was good at hearing clever sentences and then making similar ones later. Their conversations had big loops and knots to copy.

“Explain, my little man.”

Ah, though. He had got me too young for this line of question. In our kitchen area there was a tap we pushed down into the sink, and then pulled a section of counter over the top to make a chopping board. Or, if we pressed the wall panels in the right places they turned like rotating doors. On one side, racks for our metal picnic chairs, on the other side, bookshelves. All of our tables folded down like ironing boards. I could not say why any of this was like a mind. I did not know why any Thing was like a Something Else. Our house was like itself. All I was able to do was my trick with sentences, which I could fill up with sounds from the conversations of grown men. The bathroom sink and toilet, packed away, left a shower

unit. Wardrobes were underneath beds. Beds were underneath beds. There was an ice-box in the floor.

“You are thinking of only the inside,” he said. The inside of a boat, or a mind. “But look outside on the canal. What do you see? Along the sides there are many other boats, all like ours. And bridges that go to other canals, with more boats.” This is how he raised me, presenting to me all his gifts before I could appreciate them.

He was a community psychiatrist. He worked with a team in a social firm that employed people with disorders. The ideal was to make a good fit for them.

My mother, elsewhere in the city, owned a dress shop. She dealt with a different kind of fitting. She had silk and chiffon, and trailing ribbons. In the afternoons, when she was upstairs, taking tea, I tried on skirts and blouses in her shop, and looked in mirrors. This was very innocent. When I was seven—perhaps, or it could have been later—I stopped, aware of new meanings that had crept, while I was busy playing, into clothes, and now suddenly there they were. Adult meanings in everything. Adult meanings in words, in pictures and in the things people said to each other, and in how they wore their clothes. My mother’s afternoons in her bedroom. She was very pretty. I began to understand that she had the attention of men. They turned their heads. She pressed her hands along her hips. She pointed her toes. And this was not innocent.

“Your father’s problem,” she said to me, “is that he’s infatuated. Tell him there are other women out there.”

My father hardly ever spoke about my mother. But she had understood something perfectly. She was his obsession.



My father made his final statement about fate. Let me give to you something else he once told me. This is how.

I was still young—twelve, thirteen, fourteen—when we shared a special time together in the mornings. The first part of our route, him to his office and I to school, was the same, and we walked it together most days, turning first onto *Prinsengracht*. My father talked to me about anything from the inside of his head. Each morning we passed the statue of the hiding diary girl, under the Nazis, and he told me the same thing every day: the girl was my age when she started to write her diary. Yes, if you want to think of the forces that smash into a life. And he told me, Forget school, it is what I give you on these walks that is your education.

After a night on a boat, it takes time to be on your land legs again. In your ears it feels like swaying. So my method when we got off the water was to look only at the rooflines and not at the ground. Never to look where I put my feet.

I don't know if you know the part of Amsterdam where we lived. Mine was a childhood on the canals, with little bridges and elm-lined avenues. Piles of bicycles against the railings. The roofline, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years old, just a clutter of step-shaped gables, and bell-shaped ones, long-necked ones, and squat arches, steep angles. Our neighbour's boat was full of cats. Daily, walking, we passed the statue of the skinny girl in black-gold bronze. Daily, I received the intelligent attention of my father.

One day I trod in some gum, and I was embarrassed by this. I started to fall behind, making to scrape it off on the brick and the stones, but in a way so no one would notice. I thought everyone would be looking at this idiot with the gum stuck to his shoes, walking along like . . . we used to call them cripples, the English word—and if I could not get rid of it by school . . . I was desperate. My father soon made the catch onto this, but he did not laugh. He did not tell me that it was nothing serious. He said, “A-ha.” Just in that way. You should have met him. “A-ha, so now you have an experience the same as the Great Karel. Did I ever tell you about him?” This is what my father says to me. “Did I ever tell you about the Great Karel the Walker?”

I had never heard of this Karel. But I knew from his title that he must be a particular hero.

My father was a man now very excited, like the best thing to happen all week. He made me walk ahead and he said, “Concentrate hard, exactly how it feels.” It was not gum: it was eight parts glue. I had to walk with a lift at the knee. But because my father was so thrilled with the making of this experiment, it stopped the embarrassment. Did you know that gum is only just more sticky on top than on bottom? It is just enough so it stays to your shoe.

“Remember this, how it feels,” my father said. He was always wanting to tell me this story, but I had to be ready for it. If I remembered exactly my foot then I was ready.

It was a long time ago, when the story he wanted to tell is set. And it is a difficult story. Even now the meaning is not so easy to pull out of it. I remember how my dad told it to me, a sort of reverence, but jumping in his voice, and always the watch to check I understood. I felt like I was being told a new sort of story, that I would become, as a result, *older*, and

that something had changed because now I was old enough to be told a story like this.

It starts that there had been storms great enough to shift the coastline, and a number of floodings. In these old times, Karel the Walker set out to cross the Kingdom from Zuiderzee to Vaalseberg. Now, you would not maybe appreciate this as I do, that this makes it the story of an ascent, from the lowlands to the foothills of the Ardennes. When he told it to me I missed that, too—I was a bit young for metaphor and symbols. I liked spies and escapes and adventures. But it is very rare to come across gradient in the Netherlands. It is mainly absent from our story-telling, and so I point this out, as a piece of the background: when you get a story with a slope in it, you pay attention.

Also, the hero set out with no maps. He had the channels around the lakes and through the marshes to guide him. Local information in the villages and the free cities. A journey towards the sunrise, away from the sunset. So you can see already, why this man Karel is linked to my ideas about fate.

In the medieval times, you should know, it was safest to travel by horse, which is called riding on the post. To walk was dangerous because it was slow. And the footwear was ... it was medieval. He wore small leather socks for the comfort and he strapped onto these a pair of wooden overshoes. It is how clogs started, for which we are now famous. And two pieces of heavy wood tied to the feet are not, although they have benefits, the best thing for a long journey. But Karel had walked in the marshes before, he knew about wetness and the rotting that could set into toes, and so he chose this uncomfortable protection, better than nothing.

It was slow progress and uneventful, and dangerous. There was scenery. A tale for the walking on foot from one place to another does not have much more than meditation, all in the head of the traveler. The resolution and the keeping going. The longer, proper version of the story is all about this. Also, a lot of description of Karel's feet.

In the villages they considered him with suspicion. On the highways there were robbers to avoid and messengers to hail and princes, with trains and caravans. In the failing light of the evenings, if the next village was a long way distant, this was when it was dangerous, when Karel had to choose between sleep at the side of the road or darkwalking. In the villages there was the routine to set down for the night, to get information for the road ahead, and then the next morning to leave.

In the middle of his journey, however, something happened. His route was not straightforward. He came to the great city where the dam had been put into the Amstel. At the gate he paid the toll and presented his

papers. Karel's plan was to rest for a few days, to find lodgings. His only bag was a large sack, tied to a pole, which he carried over his shoulder. But as he took his first steps into the city a great tiredness overcame him. His feet dragged and the fronts of his legs ached, and he was shot with stabbing pain like knives. He thought at first it must be the cramping that fell sometimes onto him at the end of day. But then it became clear it was not the ordinary fatigue. The difficulty was not in his legs, in his steps ... it came from the ground itself. His clogs were sticking to the flags and cobbles. It was for Karel just like my gum. At first. Then for the steps it was more like wading. The wooden blocks were like molluscs on stones, clinging, and they slapped his heels when he pulled them up, and the binding straps pulled tight across the tops of his feet. Karel stopped and looked at the street in amazement. It was a long time since he had been in a large centre of population. In medieval times it was common to see filth in layers and layers. But here the local custom, after vespers, was to haul buckets from the canals and to slosh the streets. He was in a city of waterways and paved roads, and had arrived in the evening. The streets were clean. There was no sticky sediment to explain his problem.

Karel pressed on, with great effort. After all, he had come a great distance, many leagues, and it could not be much further to a boarding house. He pulled his legs forward, moving through his knees. He came to a narrow laneway. Here, they had told him, he might find a tavern. The light was dimming. The gloom was thick because of the tall houses, which leaned forward and nearly closed out the night sky. Every level jutted out further than the one below. There was a barn with a hayloft and a system of pulleys, with straw spilling out onto the pulleys and onto the gables of the next house along.

He had not taken more than twenty paces when the lane itself started to lift up with his feet. Stones at first, stuck to the soles of his clogs, but then a plank-length section of the road came up, lifted behind his heel, and crashed back down. Karel's heart pumped fast and he cried out, but there was no one in the alley to make an answer. There were no lights in the windows. His movements, you think, looked comical at first, with the small stickiness; he was like the villain across a stage, creeping. Like me, stepping in gum. But then the road lifted up like that and crashed down. Now, the Walker was scared. Of course it was only the limited and reasonable fear of a hero in difficulty. He crouched down, studied the road: nothing. Just the clean, wet stones. He untied the straps from his feet, unfastened his sack from its pole, and placed the wooden overshoes inside. Perhaps this small thing would be enough. After weeks on the road, he had achieved method

in his adversity. He set forwards again, with resolution, with this time only his leather socks to the ground.

The cobbles were cold and they pushed into the bottoms of his feet, but the leather kept him dry. After twenty paces, it began all over again. Poor Karel. Ten more and the road lifted with every step, just as before, the plank-length pieces behind his heels. When he stopped and looked back, he saw that the lane was now slanted, as if he had come down a steep hill.

The night was completely silent. Nothing in his years had prepared him for this. I mean utter silence. Not even the faint drift of psalms from the Westerkerk. There was no commotion from the night-fastening of the barracks and the keep. There was no steady flow, even, from the Amstel or any of its channels. No rats, no dogs. I give it to you short: there was nothing in his senses to persuade Karel that anything existed beyond the lane, or that there was any life within it. He was alone in the city.

Though he had removed his clogs, it felt like weights of iron, heavier than shackles, had taken their place, and he could no longer move at all. There was no welcome sign near ahead for the promised tavern. The lane went over a small hump-bridge—he could not hear the canal below it—and it disappeared around a corner.

With great effort, Karel tried to get his feet off the ground. He heard the straining of deep rock. I remember the words my father used. He said, “The rattle and clatter of surface, which broke into the silence.” People will say after an earthquake, they say they heard it coming before it hit. They say a low, rolling rumble, just before the sharp crack. And then a massive lurch. But it is impossible, it is a Physical Impossible to hear an earthquake until it happens. And for Karel, he felt something of a similar illusion, he imagined, as he struggled to lift his feet, he imagined a grinding as of great gears inside the planet, as if they were turning only to keep him pinned in place. He closed his eyes. He leaned forward, legs straight, nose almost to the road, like he might tear apart at the ankles, and the noise he thought he heard grew louder, until at last, sweating and nearly completely empty, he felt his knee bend, and his foot start to come up. But ... ah. As he moved, the ground snapped, it cracked about him like a giant whip, and the road flipped into a great circle, from his feet, to stretch up above the houses, over his head and back down to his feet. When he opened his eyes, this is exactly what had happened. For the barn he had passed at the opening to the laneway was now ahead of him on the road, and the little bridge had vanished. Slowly, Karel turned around. The barn was behind him, too.

The same barn was up ahead and it was also where he had been some minutes before, with the stuffed hayloft that spilled out across the roofs. All the details of the pulleys that ran up to the loft, and the pattern of the

spilling-out hay, all the details the same. The two directions were exactly identical, with Karel in the dead centre.

Karel felt that he had a choice. Remember he had turned round to see what was behind him. His choice was therefore to turn again, to continue in the same direction as before, or he could go back now to the first barn. But the truth was that his path was the same path whichever choice he made. He could only revisit the places he had passed before, with paces that he had already made. In one direction, it was to be the same as before. Or if he retraced his footsteps, then the things that had been on his left would now be on his right, and the things that had been on the right ... so on, so on. But he did not know—I will not tell you on which direction he decided—as he took his first steps, there is no way for anyone to know, and this is true whatever decision Karel made, there is no way to know whether he was on his way to the foothills of the Ardennes, as he originally intended, or whether he was headed back towards Zuiderzee, and the storm-wrecked past.



I remember when my father finished, checking to see that I understood. He had gone into such detail, more than I did just now. A great long description of the barn, which I don't know if that's so important.

He was always very good at the details. Above the streets, what he called the housescape. To parts of things he gave proper names: architraves, gables, soffits. "Lozenges," he used to say. Lozenges of detail, buried in the pile of the housescape. The sorts of words he used. "Remember the boxy casement at the corner of *Felixstrasse*?" Or, "See that moulding of plaster horses, above the windows," on a side street, on the *cornice*. Which side street? He would still know, if I could ask him.



I come back home every holiday and also some weekends. This last visit I found him next to the boat, staring into the water. He was in his felt hat, which he had taken to wearing all the time, which made him seem very old to me, and it was perched, tipped back on his old bulging brain. The water in the canal was thick and slow, as it always becomes around dusk. On the roof of the boat next to ours, two of the cats were fighting. They sat upright and they boxed, fixed in place like two pear-shaped punch-bags with ears. It was nearly that certain point of darkness, where in the gloom you can't make out the bridges.

I knew that during the previous year, while I started my formal education in Behavioural Science at Utrecht, and my informal education in its cafés and art house cinemas ... I knew that my parents had tried to make a reconciliation. It had crashed to pieces on my father's optimism. So my first thought, now, seeing him at the edge, staring down, was of the many people, the ones who are drawn to canals because here they can make it look like an accident, like too much to drink and somehow they must have lost their footing. This is what the family can say to itself afterwards. I approached him carefully.

"Hoi."

He nodded gently and said hello. He told me of a new patient. The neurosurgeons had finished their work. "No more delusions for Jozef B. In our profession, these days, they will tell you he is cured. A laser ablation. Some drugs." Before the surgery, Jozef B. had believed that everything in the world was set up for his personal benefit. "Because of a particular lesion, which was killing him, he thought this. But now he doesn't think this any more. He sees the world as you or I see it, the real way. And we must help him through this. The difficult work. What I used to call psychiatry."

I listened. All the light of the night-time city brightened the sky, and the arches above the canal became silhouettes. "Not easy," I said.

"No. A difficult week in the mind work."

We spent some time in silence, looking at the canal together. There had been an earlier man, a motivator, still large in life, and always thrilled with the business of rescue. A man who explained life. I stood next to his successor, this other man whose substance had taken hit after hit, who could stand still for minutes, saying nothing.

My mother is changed, too. She wanted the reconciliation. She wanted to trade in being fascinating for being loved because who wouldn't? In her shop, she talks with the young ladies. She laughs with them, and believes in them, and her eyes move jealously across the fabrics as she folds up tissue and ties ribbon.

The water made a knocking sound on the flat bottoms of the boats.

I said, "This canal. I do not know, when we look at it, whether we see the same."

My father turned towards me, slowly, shuffling on the flats of his feet. "How could we ever know?"

"I think very much the canal is like our fate. Do you think so? The ebb that mixes our future out of the past. And at this time of night, especially, all the shadows."

"No, my little man, you have got yourself sideways to the truth."

Beneath his face, in the elements of its lines, there was now a trace of the man from ten years ago. Some of the old sparkle.

“Sideways from the truth,” I said. “I like that.”

“The bridges are the fate: the links across the water.”

I was due to meet some friends. I tapped his shoulder, lightly, and said, “I’ll be home later. You can tell me what you mean.”

“We shall continue.”

So, going at first along the same old route we had shared long ago, when I was only a schoolboy, I found that I was thinking about time and memory, and hope, but not really thinking, really drawing up a progression of sentiments. I passed the dark outline of the girl in bronze and I thought I heard my father, next to me. *All alone*, he said, or *Not all alone*. I did not catch the exact words, and they were an impression, anyway, not real.

I crossed the *Singel* and passed along dozens of side-streets, over clusters of small humped bridges. The tavern where I was due to meet my friends was in a narrow laneway. It had a sign swinging from a pole, sticking out above the door, half-way along a row of tall houses. The houses jutted out in layers until their gables almost touched with those on the opposite side. The cobbles were like cricket balls.

Some time during the night my father had a stroke and he tipped off the bow of our boat into the canal. He left an empty tumbler, which rolled back and forth on the deck.

I was not to know this for several hours. I went towards the tavern and stopped for a moment, just before going inside. I looked back over my shoulder. The sides of my feet twisted against the tight, shallow gaps in the cobble. Then I looked ahead to the far end of the lane. There was nothing very determinate in either direction. I pushed the door open and went inside.