

Tomer Gardi
And Nothing Ever Ends

Novel

Translated by Laura Radosh

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I am an insatiable person, someone of pressing need. So when opening night of the theater festival was over, there was three things in my mind: a beer, a sandwich, and a cigarette. I was one of the first out of the auditorium and the first one to the buffet. My lighter and cigarette was already in hand. I took two sandwiches from the buffet, then I went to the bar, got a large beer, and that was it. I was ready to go to the outside, where I could drink, eat, and smoke in piece.

By then, not suprisingly, my hands were very full, and after two steps from the bar to the exit, a slice of pickle fell from my sandwich on the floor. I decide to ignore this small accident and took a couple steps more when behind me I heard a scream, a fall, and a knock.

Alarmed, I turned myself around to see what was happening. The festival director lay on the floor, he'd slipped on my pickle. In one hand he had his injured right knee. His face was doubled up for pain. With the other hand, he was touching his forehead and right eye, lightly, with his fingertips, as if he went blind from the fall and was trying to get to know his face again. The right side of his face was red. Tomorrow the eye

would be all blue. The day after tomorrow, a weird green. Then an ugly yellow. The poor director.

Next to me was one of many bar tables that had been placed in the lobby, clothed with white tableclothes and vases with white and red flowers. In my hand, my last cigarette, broken in two in my shock. There was tobacco crumbs on the sandwiches. Quickly I put the things from hand to table and hurried myself to the director. I am so sorry, I muttered, embarrassed, worried, I am so so sorry.

Help me up, you idiot! he whisper-screamed in my ear, full of anger and pain. Help me up!

I immediately saw the relevance of my problem, the seriousness of my situation. In normal life, in prosaic everyday life, anything can happen, and slipping on a slice of pickle is not a big deal. But in the theater, in an esteemed house like this, there is no place for a scene like this. Such a cheap act, worn-out slapstick, so un-modern, so sub-standard, had no business on a stage like this. And I, with my carelessness, had just caused exactly such a scene, here of all places. A man slips on a sliced pickle, falls on his butt. And who has the leading role? The festival director, of all people.

Pain comes and goes. Bad eyes too. These are irrelevant. They don't matter. But what had happened here was serious. Life had offended Art. Art would take revenge. And I am the battlefield.

I helped the director, shaking and red from pain and from shame, back on his legs. He was taller than me, and not a lightweight man. His left arm was around me on my shoulder. He held his injured right leg in the air. His weight was on my body. He looked around the lobby to see who had seen. I felt his warm breathe on my face as he did recon, turning his

head left and right. I followed his gaze to assess the situation. There was only four or five guests at the buffet, busy with food. The lobby was filling up very slowly. It was still mostly empty, the guests were leaving the theater with no haste, caught in their discussions after the night at the theater. I was the only witness to his fall.

The director leaned on my shoulder. He hopped on his uninjured leg. Get me out of here! he again commanded into my ear. Dammit, what are you waiting for?

I looked around. The main entrance was out of the question. Far too obvious. Near the cloakroom, I saw a side door, an emergency exit. I carried the festival director to that direction. He was heavy over my back. He limped on me the short way between the buffet to the door. We reached the side door without interruption. I opened the small emergency exit. Below us I heard, quiet and prominent, the river running along the city. Then we went through the small doorway and were standing in the outside in the thick, dark ink of the night.

Call me a taxi, said the director, almost ordering, still leaning on me. I fished my cell phone from my bag and pressed the taxi app. Three minutes I said to the director.

He let me go, turning himself to face me. I will have to somehow explain my black eye and my limp to the festival guests tomorrow. He was breathing heavily. By 6 p.m., Mr. Gardi, there will be a mail from you in my inbox with a good explanation. Have I made myself clear?

I decided to play it naïve. Please Sir, think about it, I said quietly and politely. It's not such a big deal. You know how polite people here are. No one will say anything about your face. And if they do, you tell the truth. People slip, people fall. It happens in life. We've all been in that film.

He stared at me, danger in his eyes. By tomorrow, Mr. Gardi. 6:00 p.m. Or you are no longer with us. Have I made myself clear?

In an almost perfect timing, the taxi stopped in front of us. I went near the car, opened the back door, and helped the director in. The taxi dissapeared.

After, I had no idea what I can or must do. It was all too much for me. Even worse, I have not yet indulged my need. My last cigarette was broken. On the table in the lobby, my beer was already flat and warm. Next to my beer stood my broken sandwiches—mayonnaise and herrings, pickles and tobacco crumbs. I did not feel like eating anymore.

I turned myself around and went back through the emergency exit door to the lobby. Inside, the evening was slowly getting warm. A DJ played music. The bar was full of people. I decided to go down to the lobby bathroom. There should be an automatic cigarette vending machine there. I will buy myself a new pack, get a new beer, and go to the outside again. Nothing can go wrong with a simple plan like this.

Downstairs in the bathroom I searched for the cigarette machine. Where my next disaster was waiting. I found the automatic vending machine. With a dumb blinking red light, warning the clients, signaling no change. All I had in my bag was a twenty euro bill. My cigarette withdrew. That was depressing.

Since I was in the area and didn't know what now, I went to pee. The toilets were shiny clean. Near the urinals, like so often, was the automatic condom machine and next to it one for portable vaginas.

Do they have vending machines for dildos in women's bathrooms? A question I did not yet have the answer to. In men's bathrooms, you often find a condom machine. The vagina machines are rarer, but no surprise. The two machines are always next to the urinals, at eye level for the standing, peeing, man. The logic of this positioning is clear: A man will be standing here. The man will have his dick in his hand. The man will have a quiet minute to think. The man is sure to

think what should I do now with this thing in my hand? The man will then raise his head. The man will see, in front of his two eyes, two answers, in the form of two automatic vending machines.

Condom and portable pussy machines are so often the most old fashioned automatic vending machines there is. A slit for the coins and a mechanical turning knob. Relicts from bygone days, when the café or the bar, the cinema or the theater was still the place for a chance romantic meeting, today usurped by so many apps. A digital vending machine for condoms or for portable vaginas, where you can pay with plastic or with a bill, that is, a vending machine that can also give change, is therefore a very rare find. But however rare to find they are, I saw exactly such a machine in the lobby bathroom, by the urinals. My dick in my hand. A quiet minute to think. In front of me two automatic vending machines. I stood there and peed and thought. The way my evening looked up to now, it would not be a night for exciting meetings. I choose loneliness. I saw before me an insular evening, left to myself.

A box made of thin cardboard fell into the vending machine drawer, and my change. I put the box in the bag of my pants, took my change, and went to the cigarette machine. Finally, I bought a new pack of cigarettes and went up to the lobby. I paused on the stairs. I was curious. How would something like that look? I took the box out of my bag and opened it. A pink silicon tube, pubic hair, a primitive drawing of a clitoris. That was it. I put it back into my bag and continued up the stairs. By the bar, I got a beer and went to the outside again, to drink and to smoke. So simple the wish, so winding the path.

Raden Saleh Syarif Bustaman came to the Netherlands aboard a schooner. Wooden boxes filled with spices were stored on the vessel's lower deck. The cabins were located on the middle deck, and the mixture of smells made it something like living over a market. He didn't get used to it until the end of the voyage, and then the cold came. Raden Saleh sat on his berth, pulled his dhole fur coat tighter around him, got his bag out from under his berth, and went to the upper deck to watch the approach of Antwerp.

Antwerp. It's hard for me to get used the idea that the city belonged to the Netherlands back then. We learned something else in geography.

One hundred and thirty days previously, the Dutch sailors had pulled anchor and rigged the sails. The wind's energy was transformed into movement. Raden Saleh had stood on the upper deck, watching the island on which he had been born recede. Then he'd turned his back on Java and faced the open sea, whence Holland wafted. He stared out at sea and tried to imagine how the ship on whose deck he stood might look from the side, from the angle at which the Dutch Masters portrayed sailing vessels and oceans in their classic paintings. He was only eighteen, but already an accomplished artist. At the time, he had not yet dared to attempt an oil painting of a seascape, those mysterious alchemistic meetings of oil and water. But at that moment, there on the deck of *Raymond*, he wished, without being aware of it, for something that was the mother of all failure, the mother of many a violent tragedy

that ends in lamentation. He wanted to see himself from a perspective that he could not take. Wanted to draw his ship, sailing away from the island on which he had been born, and himself, standing on just that ship.

One last look at Java, then he left the upper deck and went down to his cabin. The smell made him dizzy. He was a sensitive young man, and from the cavernous belly of the Dutch trading vessel drifted the scents of cinnamon and black pepper, cloves, vanilla, and nutmeg, mixing in the hot, humid tropical climate with the odors of seaweed and the sweat of Northern European sailors.

He entered the cabin that was to be his swimming home over the months to come. The room held his bed and three other, empty, berths. The man he was travelling with, Jean Baptiste de Linge, was in the cabin next door. Nobody, that went without saying, would have ever entertained the idea of putting the Colonial Secretary of Finance in the same cabin as a small, dark-skinned, young native from the island of Java. On board, alongside sixty Dutch crewmen, Raden Saleh, and Mijnheer de Linge, were four other men of varying ranks who also worked for the colonial power. Saleh was the only Javanese native. He took his pencil and a new drawing pad out of the bag next to his bed. His uncle, Sura Adimanggala, had given him the pad, an empty, white souvenir for his long voyage, so he could capture his memories in charcoal, page by page.

Naturally, there was a story behind this voyage.

Sura Adimanggala was the bupati of the city of Semarang. In the old days, bupati had been local regents, but after the Dutch occupied the islands that today make up Indonesia, bupati became more or less employees or, more accurately, marionettes of the colonial government. Semarang was at the time and is to this day the capital of Central Java. Java, you must know, is much more than just a cliff rising out of the water. Java is part of an awe-inspiring archipelago that makes it seem as if God in his mercy had decided to plaster the seas with safe harbors.

In the city of Semarang, two sons were born to Sura Adimanggala. When they came of age, the bupati sent them from those safe harbors deep into the Indian subcontinent, to study at the English seminary in Calcutta. It was Sura Adimanggala's way of creating bonds of friendship and trade between his family and the emissaries of the British imperium. Sura Adimanggala was the uncle of young Raden Saleh, and when the boy's father died, he went to the child's mother, Mas Adjeng Zarip Hoesen, and offered to adopt him. He had already chosen a suitable profession. Raden should found a new division and make connections to the lords of the Dutch imperium, an adopted complement to his first two sons, as it were. For the Dutch colonists from across the seas required more than just administrators, military men, and experts in agriculture and trade. They also had need of good draughtsmen and painters. Someone had to map the estates for the island plantations, someone had to make drawings of the excavations for the new mines, someone had to draw the blueprints for the packhouses, the expansion of the harbor, the administrative and military buildings. And not only that. One can trans-

port spices from southeast Asia to Antwerp or Rotterdam, and from there to the European markets. But how can you transport an entire forest, or a mountain? How to convey an endless plain, with one solitary coconut palm reaching for the sky at its center? How can a Javanese fishing village in the evening make the long journey to the Netherlands, or a group of women picking tea on a green hill?

Jannes Bik and Antoine Payen had come to Java with a large colonial delegation. Jannes Bik was a sketch artist, responsible for the cartography of agricultural and mining areas. Antoine Payen was a painter, responsible for naturalistic reproductions of the colonial landscape, flora, and life of the natives—to be sent back the homeland as picturesque proof of the places the Netherlands now called her own. As a child, Saleh had his first drawing lessons with Jannes Bik. He was eight years old and extraordinarily talented. His little drawings went from hand to hand among the handymen who lived in the colonial delegation's settlements. Soon after he had begun learning under Jannes Bik, he was transferred to the accomplished painter, Antoine Payen.

Payen and Saleh spoke with one another in Dutch, a language Saleh had learned growing up. He spoke with the typical accent of Javanese natives, accentuating his 'l', drawing it out like taffy, and almost singing the vowels skipped over so impatiently in the European fatherland. The guttural Dutch 'g/kh' he borrowed from the Arabic he had learned at Koran school. He knew the language from accompanying his father to the mosque as a young boy, and heard it whenever the people of Semarang were called to prayer by the muezzins. These men, permeated by song, stood high on the minarets, their faces turned towards the center of the island and then further,

across the sea, where, rumor, tradition and science had it, the holy city of Mecca lay, the birthplace of Muhammad, rasool Allah.

– Saleh, do you know the story of the *Flying Dutchman*?

– No, Mijnheer Payen.

– A sailor I befriended told it to me one night on my voyage here. Would you like to hear it?

–Please, Mijnheer Payen.

– The *Flying Dutchman* was a ship. Like the big schooners in the harbor here. One night, not far from the Cape of Good Hope, a ship sent a signal of distress to the *Flying Dutchman*. It was a gloomy night, a dangerous storm was afoot, and the *Dutchman* was carrying a large load of coins and gold, and so the captain ignored the call for help. For that, he was cursed. Him, and everyone who had been on board with him. The ship would continue to sail forever, with no beginning and no end, without ever arriving at a port, without rest. Only every few years, she lays anchor to remind the lost sailors of what they will never have: the smell of cooked food, a house, a wife, children, land beneath their feet. But in no time, Saleh, the power of the curse draws them back on board and the ship moves on And so she sails until the end of days, until the end of time.

– Is that a true story?

Payen just smiled. On stormy nights, Saleh, you can see the *Flying Dutchman*, lost forever on the waves. If you ever come to Tournai to visit me, my boy, and you catch a glimpse of her on the way, then draw her for me, will you? I'd like a painting of her, a painting by you.

Saleh said yes, he promised, but deep down he was afraid. What if he truly sailed across the ocean one day, how would

he know he hadn't accidentally landed on board the cursed ship and was now, once aboard, doomed to never leave again?

Saleh liked Payen very much. He liked the long hours painting together, the strange stories of faraway places that Payen told him. He liked painting in the style the master taught him. The style the colonial painters had brought with them to the distant colonies, a style that aimed to transform those who saw their works into witnesses, into people who had been to places they had never seen.

Two or three years later, Antoine Payen boarded a ship to Antwerp and from there went on to his home in Tournai. After Payen left, Saleh continued painting using the techniques his teacher had taught him. He continued practicing, improving his art. He was a talented painter. All the distinguished European visitors to Java wanted to see the boy. The bupati's strategy had been successful. And so, after three more years, Saleh had been introduced to Jean Baptiste de Linge. The high-ranking colonial officer was called back to Holland shortly after the two had met, to report on the financial situation of the colonies. A friend of his, a government official from the fatherland, had asked if he would be willing to use the occasion to accompany Saleh on his first long sea voyage from Batavia, as Jakarta was known at the time, to Antwerp.

And so it came that on a hot humid day in September 1829, Saleh met Jean Baptiste de Linge at a small teahouse near the harbor. Two days earlier, Saleh had gone to Batavia's main post office to pick up a package that Adimanggala had sent by coach from Semarang. It contained three presents. The charcoal and drawing pad from his adoptive father, three ancient Javanese scrolls sent by his mother, Adjeng, and the

dhole fur coat that Jean Baud, a prescient former colonial officer, had once had made for Saleh.

Three presents and one voyage. It's like the beginning of a naïve picture book. Or the opening of a myth of total destruction, smoke-filled and bloody.

De Linge and Saleh drank their tea and went to the schooner. Around midday, the Javanese dockworkers finished loading the crates that had been filled with the products of the island, and the great ship was ready to sail. In the humidity, sweat dripped from the Dutch sailors. Finally, they pulled anchor and rigged the sails. The wind's energy was transformed into movement. The sweat on their bodies evaporated. Behind them, Java receded. On *Raymond's* upper deck, Saleh stood and watched the sea opening up before him, whence Holland wafted. He took a deep breath and went down to the middle deck. The scent of the spices bit into his nose. In the cabin next to his, Jean Baptiste de Linge must be unpacking his things. Saleh went into his own cabin and pulled the pad from Adimanggala out of his bag, and a pencil. He was, without being aware of it, searching for something that was the source of all tragedy, the beginning of all quests for truth, and nevertheless doomed to failure. He wanted to see himself from a perspective that no human can take. He wanted to stand on the upper deck and draw the ship receding from the island on which he had been born, and himself, standing on the deck of just that ship.