

De Woongroep
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Chapter One
Translated from the Dutch by David Doherty

THE COMMUNE

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I feel like doing something crazy and we decide to grab one of those save-the-planet car-share deals and drive out to suburbia. Nieuw-Sloten to be exact.

Eric sees the fun in it too. He can just picture the look on Freddy's face.

'Should we bring a bottle of wine?' he asks.

'Wine? The perfect accompaniment to kiddie cupcakes with baby blue icing!'

'No cake for me. Freddy knows me. He's not going to fob me off with cupcakes. He'll have a lasagne in the oven or burritos with extra minced beef.'

I think it's sweet, the way he knows how Freddy thinks.

Eric switches on the radio to listen to the traffic news.

'Goodness me, we're off on a proper visit,' I grin. 'Are you sure they're going to feed us?'

'Of course,' Eric says. He knows Freddy and Freddy wouldn't have him turn up at seven thirty if it wasn't for something to eat.

'Us,' I said. 'He invited me too.'

'Yeah, sure. All I mean is, he doesn't know you. Not like he knows me.'

It's true enough. They were inseparable since the first year of high school, braved every new experience together. I've only known Freddy since Eric started experiencing things with me every once in a while.

'If you'd rather go alone, that's fine too,' I say. 'I can watch a film on my new plasma TV. Come to think of it, I'd have no problem with that at all.'

'Hey!' says Eric. 'Don't break the mood.'

I'd been seized by the urge to do something crazy yesterday too. At the shops it was a plasma TV that had suddenly fired up my fantasies and half an hour later I had replaced the

fantasies with plasma. Even now, ten years into the 21st century, my happiest moments are to be had on a good old late-night shopping spree. Pay the price and off I go, balancing the box on the back of my bike.

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The website tells us that the nearest Greenwheels car is parked near the Maritime Museum. But it's a Peugeot 107 and Eric decides he can't pull up outside Freddy's in that. After all, Freddy has got it made. We end up booking the 207 on the other side of the Nieuwe Vaart. That should get us out to Nieuw-Sloten okay.

'I mean to say, it's only Nieuw-Sloten.' I take a last drag on my cigarette and grind the stub into the ground.

Eric doesn't like the sound of that. What do I mean exactly?

He holds the card up to the scanner and the car door springs open. I lay a bottle of red on the back seat next to the two gift-wrapped, Facebook-blue romper suits.

'Would you like me to wrap these?' the woman in the shop had asked. 'Or are they for you?'

We head for the ring road. Even Eric, who's lived in Amsterdam all his life, has never been to Nieuw-Sloten.

We wind the windows down. There's a chill in the air, but the sun is still nice and warm.

The radio reports a tailback at Best-West. Whatever that is.

I remembered to bring a CD with me. We're well into Fleet Foxes these days. I got there first and after a while they worked their way under Eric's skin too. He hums along with the songs and I pound out the beat on his knee.

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'Your touch screen sucks,' I whine. 'I can't get the map any bigger.' The battery in my own phone is dead.

'Steer clear of the flats,' I say a little later. 'They don't live in satellite-dish alley do they? Let's ask somebody.'

'Nieuw-Sloten? No, this is De Aker.'

The looks they give us! Like we're a couple of Yanks who don't know the difference between Amsterdam and Copenhagen. I look at my phone. It's ten past eight already.

'You've got to be joking,' I say when we finally roll into Freddy's street after an endless round of searching and asking.

It's all canary yellow brickwork, except for the part of the street where the houses have three storeys. There all that yellow is topped off with a floor of grey concrete. Apparently nobody stopped to think what it was actually going to look like. Freddy and Caro live in one of those.

Eric eases the car into one of the parking spaces without saying a word. He's prepared to look kindly on everything of Freddy's, up to and including canary yellow. Perhaps he genuinely doesn't see how ugly it is. If you don't see it, you can't be embarrassed by it.

'The parking's ideal, isn't it,' hollers Freddy, beaming from his open door. He takes it completely for granted that we've come by car.

He drums his fingers on the doorframe. On his feet he's wearing slippers that might pass for clogs. Or clogs that might pass for slippers.

'See that house over there with the Golf out front?' He lowers his voice and waits till we've taken a few steps closer.

We follow his finger pointing across the street.

'They're swingers,' he whispers. 'I've got them sussed. Don't tell Caro. She's already acting a bit jealous.'

I'd have given a tenner for that look, one of those looks you hope you'll never catch yourself giving. Hope all you like, it could still be part of a phase you haven't hit yet.

Freddy and Eric whack each other on the shoulders. Both of them are now a doorstep taller than I am and can look down on me from on high. I stand on tiptoe and give Freddy a fleeting kiss. After all, I don't know him the way Eric knows him. But he presses his lips warmly against my cheeks. I feel a wave of sympathy wash through me. He's all right, Freddy is.

'Caro's inside,' he says.

On the doorstep I take a deep breath and hold it. I've never been fond of the smell of other people's houses.

Inside the curtains are half closed. We gaze around for a while to get used to the almost hallowed half-light that hangs there.

'Wow!' we exclaim. They've really done the place up nice. A wooden floor, a long table with one corner reserved for a baby-change mat, pale yellow tubes of cream, a stack of pampers. There are two big Swiss cheese plants and framed art on the walls. One side of the room is chock-a-block with books. In his spare time, Freddy likes to dip into a good book. The bottom shelf is home to a twenty-five-volume encyclopaedia.

And then, behind us, in the pale yellow glow of a standard lamp, there's Caro, sitting in a beige lounge holding a baby. She's radiant, smiling.

I would gladly have kept on looking, but she gingerly puts the child down next to her on the couch, lays the bib on top and gets up to greet us. She presses Eric to her and kisses him as if he's returned safe and sound from an ocean voyage.

Freddy has grown a little pudgy but Caro is rosy-cheeked, the picture of health. She has a strange odour about her. A hint of sourness. Perhaps she's not washing herself too thoroughly these days. Perhaps she's got more on her mind than sponging herself down all day.

They inform us that they have two bathrooms, one just upstairs and one on the second floor. The second floor is still completely empty. They don't even know what to do with it yet. A studio for Caro perhaps, but right now there simply aren't enough hours in the day.

Caro decides it's time for us to devote some attention to the babies. One is upstairs in his cot, the other won't sleep. The infant insomniac stares at me blankly. Apart from a shiny outbreak of blackheads, he's a fine specimen. He has Caro's forehead, which is fortunate. Freddy's forehead doesn't have the customary dome of an awning. His is more of a sloping sunscreen, like in those pictures of prehistoric people. This baby is blessed with an awning.

'He looks good,' Eric nods. 'Well done.'

'Doesn't he just?' says Caro.

'Is the other one his spitting image?' I ask.

No, that's not the case. They're not identical. The parents wouldn't have it any other way. You have to see them as two separate individuals, not as more of the same.

We have to take a look in Freddy's shed. Or rather, Eric has to and I don't want to be left alone with Caro the baby. I need all the fresh air I can get.

Freddy slides a big glass patio door to one side and we step straight from the room into the garden. There's a swing seat.

It's a lovely evening. The first of the year when you can sit outside, as long as you put on a sweater.

Children's voices can be heard in the distance, high and shrill. A woman shouts: 'Joachim, do as mummy tells you.'

I look over the shoulder-high fence. The neighbours have a swing seat too. A woman is sitting in it, her long legs dangling as she flicks through a women's magazine.

Doesn't anybody need to eat around here? When the hell do they eat?

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The kitchen is spacious and fabulous: built-in oven, dishwasher, empty worktop. The best of everything.

Eric wants to know the bar pressure of the espresso machine and is duly impressed by the answer.

I sniff and I sniff, but there's not a whiff of extra minced beef. I pick up the scent of rotting fruit. A bin bag in need of emptying.

'It didn't need anything doing to it,' explains Freddy when we're back on the couch with Caro. 'The floor had already been laid when we bought it. The kitchen was exactly what we wanted. I said to Caro, we have to do this. The paintwork was just perfect. If we'd had to do it ourselves, we'd have gone for white as well.'

'The only thing we did ourselves was paint the boys' room blue,' adds Caro. They put their heart and soul into those blue walls, she says. As soon as they'd finished, the house was that little bit more their own.

I hear a robot voice answering Caro, one of those female sat-nav voices. It spouts platitudes about feeling at home. About how important that is. No one looks at me like this is the least bit odd.

'Everyone who comes to visit is thrilled about the free parking,' says Freddy, still thrilled himself.

There's also a little park nearby. Only grass and trees, no shrubs and bushes, but that's just fine by them. They can do without shrubs and bushes. Sure, they keep the wind off but they also give paedos a place to lurk. You tell me what you'd rather have.

'Now, now, what do I smell?' says Caro. 'Has this little man done a poo-poo?' She picks up her child and strolls over to the baby-change mat.

We all watch her walk away. Her buttocks sway. Big buttocks. Does Freddy ever lay a hand on them these days?

'Remember Linda?' asks Freddy. 'Linda with the barking cough.' He's already started imitating Linda's barking cough. 'Like that, only worse,' he adds.

Eric laughs. 'Much worse.'

'Every student in the Uilenstede flats knew that cough,' says Freddy. 'But she was a nice lass. Pretty with it.'

Caro pricks up her ears, keen to hear how her boyfriend talks about other women.

'She had that kiss curl she plastered together with gel, hair by hair, followed by two minutes' worth of hairspray to keep it in place. Pssssssssss,' Freddy imitates the spray can. 'Pssssssssssssssssssss. As you lay there in bed waiting for her cough to start up again, you could have strangled her. There was no escape. Even earplugs didn't help!'

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There's a family photo hanging in the toilet. It shows Caro lying in a hospital bed, looking pale and anxious. In each arm she holds a baby wrapped in terry towelling. Freddy is leaning in with one arm around Caro's neck. Below in a calligraphy-style computer font it says 'The best things in life aren't things'.

I take another good look at Caro's face. She looks solemn and loving at the same time, as if she fully understands and fully embraces life. They'd never be able to take a photo like that of me.

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Caro's left the room. The baby is lying on Eric's lap. There's a camera on the coffee table.

'How are you getting on in that dump of yours?' asks Freddy. 'Still got mice for company?'

'I haven't seen a mouse in at least a year,' says Eric.

'Caro wants a cat,' says Freddy. 'I told her, when the boys are a little bigger, I'll get you a cat.'

'We brought a bottle of wine,' I announce. 'It's still in the car.' I pluck at Eric's trousers until he understands that I'm fishing for the car keys.

The sun has gone down. It's still not cold out. There's a second Golf parked in front of the swingers' house. A yellow one. You never see a yellow car nowadays. This is the one street where a yellow car still makes some kind of sense.

I light a cigarette. If I suddenly start screaming, will they all come rushing out?

*

'It was actually to go with the meal,' I say. I look straight past Eric and hand the bottle to Freddy. 'But it would also go well with cheese and biscuits, olives, something snacky...'

Freddy bats back an absent-minded thank you. He puts the wine on the floor, next to a pile of unread newspapers and continues to fill Eric in on the neighbours. They're on good terms with the neighbours on one side but they keep the other side at arm's length. A single woman of around forty-five. What's a single woman doing living in a house that size?

Caro enters the room carrying a tray.

'Are you talking about "that woman"?' she asks. 'Curtains closed till ten in the morning.'

'She does nothing with the garden,' says Freddy. 'Unless you count hanging up seed balls and bags of nuts to win over the birds.'

'She's making herself indispensable to birds,' says Caro. She thinks it's awfully sad that someone has to rely on birds for comfort.

She looks every bit as serious as in the photograph in the toilet. Again it strikes me how healthy she's looking. All milk and blood. At night she dreams of little lambs.

'Would you like coffee too?' she asks me. 'Or tea? At this time of night, I always have tea myself.' I suspect she doesn't want to disturb the man talk, as she whispers this in my ear like it's our little secret.

On the tray there are cups and little desert plates. On each plate there is one cupcake and on each cupcake a dollop of baby blue icing.

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'Aren't you two starting to get a bit broody yet?' Freddy asks. 'You'll make a good father, you will. I've always thought so.'

Caro agrees wholeheartedly.

We all look at Eric. He gives a bashful smile and looks at the baby fast asleep on his lap.

'What do you mean, you've always thought so?' I ask.

'Just what I said. He's learned from his old man how not to go about it,' says Freddy breezily. 'They make the best dads.'

Meanwhile Caro has unwrapped the romper suits. 'Adorable! They'll be able to wear them straight away. They've already grown into this size.'

I ask her whether it's true that as a young mother you sometimes feel the urge to throw your baby out of the window. It's in a book that's just out.

'I can't say I've read the book,' I add. 'But I have read about it. They say it can be a very powerful urge.'

'Oh joy,' says Eric.

Caro's face is frozen in a grin of politeness. No, she's never heard of it. Never heard of the book or that thing I just mentioned.

'They write all kinds of stuff these days,' says Freddy. He stifles a yawn.

'There's a market for it,' says Eric. 'Always a market for drama.'

'Next to the article I read, there were a couple of short interviews with women who had experienced it first hand,' I continue. 'They said they wanted to throw their baby out of the window. They dialled the emergency services themselves.'

A silence follows in which birds can be heard cheerily chirping and tweeting as they flutter from branch to branch.

Everyone looks straight ahead and clearly thinks: Eleanor has lost the plot.

'The patio doors are still open,' Caro says to Freddy. 'You've left the patio doors open.' She gets up to close them. As she walks back towards us, her head appears to have detached itself from her body, hovering just above it, like modern art.

'How much maternity leave do you have left?' Eric asks Caro.

'Oh, I've given up the job,' says the head. 'At first I was planning to go back, but we've been doing the sums. Day care for two kids is so expensive that I'm better off looking after them myself.'

'You used to teach, didn't you?' I ask.

'Yes, arts and crafts. Three days a week but I couldn't keep the kids under control.' She can't explain why, she just couldn't.

'Yes,' says Freddy. 'I said to Caro: we'd spend as much on childcare as you earn in a month. Look at it that way and it's a done deal.'

'Thankfully we don't have to start paying back the mortgage for the first two years,' says Caro's head, taking on that irritatingly earnest expression again. It has settled back onto her body. There she sits on the couch, neatly reassembled.

I feign the need to stifle a yawn.

The money that is getting me down and the times are depressing enough as it is, what with all that talk of crisis and war.

I stroke the baby's foot and contemplate doing so another once or twice. It feels warm through the little white sock.

Caro is watching me like a hawk.

'And how are things with you?' she asks me. 'Are you still...?'

The baby wakes up with a throaty gurgle.

'Come to mama,' says Caro at once. She takes the baby from Eric, presses him to her and kisses the top of his head. 'Hey there little man!'

'Come on, love,' I say to Eric. 'Time to go.' I get up and zip up my sweater.

'But you haven't even eaten your cupcakes,' says Caro.

'It's a lovely cupcake,' says Eric, spraying crumbs. He holds the plate up under his chin. Munch, munch, munch. The whole cake is gone in seconds. 'Best cupcake in ages.'

There's a clear point being made with that cupcake, as he rounds up the last of the crumbs with a wet finger.

*

'What were you *like* back there?' asks Eric, as soon as we've left the street. He shifts gears too late and hits the accelerator way too hard. Fleet Foxes are silenced with a furious stab after a note or two. He fixes me with a sidelong stare.

He thinks I was impolite. No, impolite doesn't cover it: downright offensive! Freddy had given him a couple of odd looks too.

'What *were* you like?'

'Uh... I was like... hungry,' I said.

Eric can't raise a chuckle. He thinks I should apologise.

He's right and I apologise.

His tone a little milder now, he says it's Freddy I should be apologising to.

While the sky rumbles and flashes in the distance, we drive back to the city in silence.

'Sorry,' I say once we're off the ring road, 'but could you stop at the nearest roadside cafe? I've got this blinding urge to eat the weight of two small babies in hot dogs.'