TOUCHED BY DUTCH

Something gewoon

Karina Hof

Throughout the two decades I travelled between Amsterdam, where I lived, and New Jersey, where I grew up, I stayed a nervous flyer. Moving to Toronto provided relief, since the airtime to reach my parents—their home still a short ride from Newark Airport—is just one-sixth of what it used to be.

Yet to this day, flying doesn't feel *gewoon*. This word is standardly translated as 'ordinary' or 'normal,' though its English equivalent lacks the emotional baggage that makes me reach for it in Dutch.

Before my most recent flight, sociopolitical strife on the ground was pouring fuel on the embers of the usual airborne anxiety. Following a government shutdown, news reports showed massive lines of stressed-out passengers among ICE agents at US airports. An Air Canada flight had crashed in New York, resulting in not only a binational tragedy, but a national controversy over the airline CEO's monolingual condolence speech.

Nonetheless, the upcoming long weekend was a vital time to be with my parents. That Monday, a funeral director would be visiting. Thankfully, it wasn't because my father or mother was dying. Having worked for decades as international civil servants, they were accustomed to meeting the deadlines of life's most consequential paperwork and wanted to plan the last logistics for their existence.

Learning '*gewoon*' came by way of a common saying. A classmate and I were preparing a first presentation in our master's program at the University of Amsterdam. The topic wasn't simple—the philosopher Foucault's analysis of how shifting human perspective can change reality's representation—and public speaking was another source of unease. My presentation partner had jitters too, though, like many Dutch students I met, she was at her core admirably self-possessed.

As we finished rehearsing in the bright room that I had rented, a five-minute bike ride from the *Rijksmuseum*, I shared my last worries. She replied with words of encouragement in English, none of which I remember, and three in Dutch: "*Doe maar gewoon*."

The phrase frequently gets glossed as 'just act normal.' That's the message in '*doe maar gewoon, dan doe je al gek genoeg*,' a proverb cautioning against tall poppy syndrome that essentially says: 'Stick to the status quo because it's wild to begin with.' But as my classmate, who would eventually become a close friend, explained it, her usage had little to do with Dutch conformity norms. Instead, she hoped I could embrace my ordinary, normal self, since—even with all the high-strung hand-wringing—it would prove to be enough for our presentation.



MACLEAN WESTBEEK

When the funeral director arrived, it was not in a hearse with the Grim Reaper riding shotgun, as the child in me could envision. Instead, he showed up, young and sunny, in a white SUV, and before inquiring into our family, shared details about his own. He identified as a fifth-generation Dutch-American who hadn't yet been to the Netherlands, although seeing the tulips there and tracing his precise genealogy were on his wish list. I suggested he consult the Amsterdam City Archives and—in between questions about cremation versus caskets, an obituary's pros and cons, and how many death certificates to order—told him about my connection to his ancestors' country.

My longest-running Amsterdam address was in Buitenveldert, which I'd heard referred to in gallows humour as the neighbourhood where people go to die due to its many senior facilities. Before moving there, however, I'd registered that the Dutch attitude towards death was to treat it as something gewoon, in all senses of the word.

Amsterdam's *Museum Tot Zover*—the name translates to 'That's It'—shows exhibitions on mourning rituals, encouraging visitors to reflect on how the living deal with mortality. The *Eenzame Uitvaart* is the civic practice of holding, as its name indicates, a 'lonely funeral' for people who die unclaimed; at each ceremony, the city invites a poet to write and read for them. And it was in that same room near the *Rijksmuseum* where my landlady told me about the physician-assisted suicide of an ailing loved one that she and her young son attended.

By the time the funeral director left, my parents had detailed programs that I knew they'd be satisfied to place in their filing cabinet's bottom drawer, in a folder with a tab reading "Final arrangements." Meanwhile, I wondered if I could have been as self-possessed in that almost two-hour conversation without all the Dutch cultural conditioning. Discussing the practicalities of something that had always seemed taboo-level tragic was freeing.

As for my discomfort with flying, I look forward to someday when cross-border drives can become *gewoon*.