

On The Water
by
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Based on the novel *Over het Water* by HM van den Brink

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FADE IN:

1

EXT. AMSTERDAM/OUTSIDE OLYMPIC STADIUM - DAY (1940)

1

A large open square spreads in front of the imposing bulk of the old Olympic stadium. The square is edged by typical Amsterdam canals and bridges.

A crowd of sombre Dutch civilians watches the triumphant arrival of the occupying German Army.

It's a sunny day in spring, but any birdsong is drowned out by crunching footfalls, and the diesel engines of Wehrmacht trucks.

The crowd is silent and still. Among them are three athletic young men. Two of them - VAN ZUYLEN and HESSELING JR - are well dressed and prosperous-looking. Standing slightly apart is ANTON, his clothes patched and worn.

Anton looks at the inscriptions on the stadium facade.

ANTON

This is as close as I'll get.

VAN ZUYLEN

To the Germans?

ANTON

To the Olympics. Two months today was to be the opening ceremony.

VAN ZUYLEN

After the war -

ANTON

- will be too late.

A heavily laden car, crammed with people inside and luggage on top, crashes its gears as it heads along a side street.

HESSELING JR

Look at them. Rats leaving a sinking ship.

Anton glares angrily at him,

ANTON

They stand to lose a lot more than a race or two. And it's too late for them already.

HESSELING JR

Do rats speak Hebrew?

Anton rounds on him, pinning him against the facade.

VAN ZUYLEN

Anton!

Van Zuylen calls Anton off. Anton lowers his raised fist and looks at van Zuylen, to his right. A woman's voice calls from his left.

FEMALE VOICE(O.S.)

Anton!

He snaps his gaze round, and suddenly it's...

2 **EXT. OLYMPIC STADIUM - DAY (1928)**

2

.... the opening of the 1928 Olympics - as proclaimed by huge banners and the flags of many nations. The stadium's in its heyday, brass bands play, and the crowd is excited and happy.

YOUNG ANTON (age 7) stands below the facade, gazing upward, holding a balloon. Standing off to his left is his mother, MRS. DIJKSTRA - late thirties, anxious, frumpy, poorly dressed.

MRS. DIJKSTRA

Anton!

A firecracker goes off, sounding like a rifle shot. Anton, startled, lets the balloon go. His father, MR. DIJKSTRA - early forties, thin, nondescript - makes an ineffectual grab for it. He misses, and it rises into the sky.

Up, past the Olympic statue, with its laurel wreath.

Up, over the heads of the crowd streaming to and from the stadium.

Up, over the stadium roof, and all the athletic activity in full swing before a packed crowd.

Up, towards the Olympic flame in a bowl at the high point of the stadium.

3 **EXT. OLYMPIC STADIUM/ TITLE MONTAGE - DAY (1928)**

3

A montage of Olympic events.

A) TRACK

The steeplechase enters its closing stages. Four runners, with vests identifying them as German, Dutch, British and French, contend the medal positions.

B) FIELD

A Russian hammer thrower winds up his action.

C) LONG JUMP PIT

A black American athlete steadies himself on the run-up.

D) MEDAL PODIUM

Athletes gather for a medal ceremony.

E) WARM-UP AREA

Canadian relay team practice a baton change.

F) JAVELIN RACK

Finnish javelin thrower takes his javelin from the rack, runs a finger over the sharp point, and balances the shaft in his hand. The javelin appears to point at the Russian as he releases his hammer.

G) FIELD

The Russian's hammer flies through air then slams into the turf like a bomb, spraying earth around, as white-trousered officials run up with the urgency of paramedics.

H) LONG JUMP PIT

The American soars above the sand in beautiful isolation;

I) MEDAL PODIUM

The medal winners accept laurel wreaths as their nation's flags are raised behind them.

G) TRACK - THE WATER JUMP

All four runners go for the jump together, jostling for position. Two of them - the Dutch and the French athletes - tangle up and crash into the water. The German and the Brit get over the jump and race on, shoulder to shoulder, onto the finish straight. The French athlete struggles to his feet and struggles on in their wake, obviously injured. The Dutch athlete slumps in the water, his chest heaving. He's been spiked, and blood from his wounds curls in the water of the jump. For him the race is over.

4

EXT. CANAL-SIDE ROAD - DAY (1928)

4

Olympic flags adorn the lamp-posts, and banners cover the walls. Young Anton looks about with curiosity, as his parents thread their way through the excited happy crowds, towards a bridge.

Anton looks over his shoulder, to see the stadium again. His father takes his arm.

MR. DIJKSTRA

Come along, Anton. Your balloon's long gone.

MRS. DIJKSTRA

Please let's get home, Edwin. These crowds!

One side of the bridge - the one they take - is unaccountably empty, while the other parapet is packed with cheering people. Anton peers across, but can't see what's so exciting. His father hurries him on.

There's a rising roar of noise, and suddenly the crowd on the opposite parapet race across the road, hemming Anton and his parents in against the rail. Cheering people on either side wave US and UK flags wildly.

Mrs. Dijkstra closes her ears against the racket, while his father ineffectually tries to protect them from the crush. Anton doesn't mind. He looks down at the water, unaccountably still and quiet with all the hubbub above.

A shiny brass ball shoots out from under the bridge - the bow ball of a racing eight. The rest of the boat bursts into view behind it, raising a wave on the water and a renewed roar from the crowd above.

Some yards away, on the other bank of the river, another racing eight appears, urged on by the cox.

The two crews - USA and Great Britain - race flat out, side by side, towards the finish line in the distance.

Anton watches them in wonder, his hands gripping the railing. He looks up at his father, a question on his face. His father shakes his head.

MR. DIJKSTRA

Don't get ideas, Anton. That game isn't for people like us.

5

INT. ROWING CLUB/BOARD ROOM - DAY (1937)

5

Anton(now a teenager) sits at a desk, dressed in his office work clothes, opposite two blazer-wearing middle-aged men (VAN DER KAMP and HESSELING).

A workman screws the latest in a line of framed and dated photographs to the panelled wall. Each shows the club's members assembled at a major championship event, with that season's haul of trophies laid out before them. The new photograph is dated 1937.

Near the door stands a large, heavy-set man - DOKTOR SCHNEIDERHAHN. As the workman finishes and leaves, Schneiderhahn steps over to look at the photograph.

VAN DER KAMP

You have your father's permission?

Anton shakes his head.

ANTON

I'm sixteen today. I no longer need it.

There's an awkward pause. The two blazers exchange glances. Hesseling leans forward.

HESSELING

Where are you from, son?

ANTON

Not far.

HESSELING

Yes, but where?

ANTON

Emerald street.

HESSELING

Emerald street? Do we have any members from that part of town, Pieter?

Van der Kamp shakes his head. Hesseling closes a ledger on the desk in a clear signal that the interview is over. He looks across at Anton.

HESSELING (CONT'D)

Very well. We will let you know.

Anton hesitates, then gets to his feet, slowly. He turns away towards the door, but his way is blocked by Schneiderhahn, still studying the newly added photo.

Anton's attention is drawn, via Schneiderhahn's steady gaze, to the photo. He sees the large rowing lake in the background. He turns back to face Hesseling, pointing at the photo.

ANTON

This is the Bosbaan, isn't it?

Hesseling nods.

HESSELING

Yes. What of it?

ANTON

My father dug that lake, Heer Hesseling. And you won't let me row on it - because of where we live? He was right: this game isn't for people like us.

He reaches for the door, but Schneiderhahn does not stand aside. Instead he places his hands on Anton's upper arms. When Schneiderhahn finally speaks he has an accent.

SCHNEIDERHAHN

Eine moment, bitte.

Anton looks down as Schneiderhahn's hands assess his muscles.

SCHNEIDERHAHN (CONT'D)

Sixteen today. So you were seven years old when the Olympics came to Amsterdam?

Anton looks back up and nods at Schneiderhahn.

SCHNEIDERHAHN (CONT'D)

A long time to wait, when you are a young man, yes?

Anton nods again.

Schneiderhahn removes his hands from Anton's arms, then pats him on the shoulder and stands aside, allowing him to exit. Anton chooses to stay, and watches as Schneiderhahn strides up to the table to confront the two blazers.

SCHNEIDERHAHN (CONT'D)

You're going to let him go?

HESSELING

We've taken a lad or two from that part of town before, but they all had family who knew the club... And who would ... fit in.

SCHNEIDERHAHN

Fit in? *Fit in?* How many Olympic rowing medals has the Netherlands won in the nine years he's been waiting?

HESSELING

I don't know -

SCHNEIDERHAHN

I do. And I am not Dutch. Amsterdam, 1928, your home games - none. Los Angeles, '32 - again none. And at last year's travesty in Berlin - Holland did not win a single first round race.

VAN DER KAMP

How is this relevant?

SCHNEIDERHAHN

An absence of ambition, gentlemen.

He indicates Anton.

SCHNEIDERHAHN (CONT'D)

He waited till he didn't need his father to agree, because he hoped you might. He's tall, he's healthy. He's not strong yet, but he could be. And you're turning away ambition like his...because he won't *fit in?*

Hesseling musters his dignity.

HESSELING

I said we'd let him know.

SCHNEIDERHAHN

Then let him know *now*.

He stares at Hesseling, who holds his gaze for a time, then falters and looks aside. Sensing victory, Schneiderhahn persists.

SCHNEIDERHAHN (CONT'D)

Tell him he can join the novice squad for an assessment. If he makes my pair, he's in. If not, you can keep him for your eight.... or send him back to Emerald Street.

Hesseling exchanges glances with Van der Kamp, then looks back at Schneiderhahn. He doesn't look at Anton.

6

INT. ANTON'S HOUSE/KITCHEN - DAY (1937)

6

Anton and his father, both in their work clothes, sup the last of their breakfast coffee at the kitchen table. Anton stands first. His mother smiles at him.

MRS. DIJKSTRA

One more day of work. Then we'll go into town to spend your birthday money.

Anton pauses, not knowing what to say.

ANTON

I'll be busy tomorrow, mother.

She frowns, trying to hide her hurt. His father - in the middle of putting on his coat - is oblivious to it at first.

MR. DIJKSTRA

Never mind, dear. We'll go next week.

MRS. DIJKSTRA

You haven't spent it already?

Now Mr. Dijkstra *does* see her hurt. He looks at his watch, and ushers Anton towards the door, pausing to kiss her on the cheek.

MR. DIJKSTRA

We'll see you tonight, dear.

Anton and his father leave the kitchen for the corridor to the front door. Once in the corridor, his father opens his mouth as if to speak, but Anton gets in first.

ANTON

I'm sorry father, but I'll be busy every Saturday.

Anton's at the front door, his hand on the latch. He turns.

ANTON (CONT'D)

And I have spent the money.

7 INT. ANTON'S HOUSE/BEDROOM - DAWN (1937)

7

It's still half-light outside, but Anton's already up, though still dressed in his pyjamas. He kneels in front of a small dresser, opens a drawer and removes a garment, still carefully wrapped in tissue paper.

He places the garment on the bed, and unwraps it reverently, to expose a simple cotton rowing shirt, short-sleeved, with a collar and a two-button V at the neck.

He stares at it, then removes his pyjama top to reveal an adolescent body, not yet toned or athletic. He puts the rowing shirt on. He smiles.

He looks at his watch, then completes the rest of his dressing quickly, before bustling down stairs, past his parents at the kitchen table, and out to the street without a word.

8 EXT. ROWING CLUB/THE HARD - DAY (1937)

8

Anton stands amid a gaggle of boys crowding around a bank tub - a crude wooden training rig, floating on the water but fixed to the bank. Anton's rowing vest stands out in its crisply-pressed freshness: all the others wear old hand-me-down vests.

Two boys - DAVID and FRANK - stand slightly apart from the eager throng. Frank points out Anton's vest.

FRANK

I don't know why they bother.

A boy sits in the tub, clumsily rowing an oar blade perforated for this shore-based practice.

Van der Kamp crouches beside the boy, correcting and encouraging him. Schneiderhahn stands in the background, observing. Hesseling watches too, from the balcony above

VAN DER KAMP

No, no, hands away *before* you break your knees.

He succeeds only in making the boy more frustrated, his movements more awkward. He looks at his watch, and at the other boys waiting their turn, then lays a hand on the boy's oar.

VAN DER KAMP (CONT'D)

Enough for now. We'll practice this more later.

The boy gets up, disappointment creased across his face. The coach scans the waiting boys, and picks out one of the less obviously eager ones: David - tall, curly dark hair, languid in his movements.

VAN DER KAMP (CONT'D)

You next.

David gives a slight smile, and steps smoothly into the tub as if he has done this many times before. He sits down, takes up the oar, and starts rowing, without waiting for Van der Kamp to say anything.

Van der Kamp is briefly irritated by this presumption, but he can't find any faults in David's smooth, easy action: he's a natural.

Van der Kamp stands and turns to look over the heads of the waiting boys to Hesseling on the balcony above. Van der Kamp nods at him: Hesseling acknowledges.

Schneiderhahn sees this exchange of gestures, but his face gives nothing away.

VAN DER KAMP (CONT'D)

(to the boys in general)

That's all for bow side.

David steps out of the tub. Van der Kamp lifts out the seat and turns it around to face the other way, so the boys assigned to row on stroke side - with the oar out to their right - can practice.

VAN DER KAMP (CONT'D)

(to the boys in general)

Who's first on stroke side?

The boys hesitate, looking at each other, Anton among them. Anton steps forward. Feeling their eyes upon him, Anton gets into the unfamiliar seat and takes up the oar. He waits to be told to start.

VAN DER KAMP (CONT'D)

Whenever you are ready.

Anton's first efforts are awkward and clumsy. Van der Kamp watches for a while then starts firing orders at him.

VAN DER KAMP (CONT'D)

Head up! Back straight! Hold those knees down!

All this does is make Anton tense up and his action gets worse. Schneiderhahn decides to intervene.

He steps forward, lays a hand on Anton's shoulder, and speaks to him, rather than shouts.

SCHNEIDERHAHN

Ignore all that. Just do two things. Close your eyes, and loosen your grip.

Anton complies and immediately his action improves.

SCHNEIDERHAHN (CONT'D)

Gut, Sehr Gut! And now one more thing. Listen. Listen to the water drip off your blade. Listen to the wheels of your seat. Listen to your own breathing.

Schneiderhahn stands up and steps back.

SCHNEIDERHAHN (CONT'D)

You can stop now.

Anton stops rowing, but keeps his eyes closed.

SCHNEIDERHAHN (CONT'D)

And you can open your eyes.

Some of the other boys snigger, Frank prominently among them. But not David: he eyes Anton curiously.

9

INT. ANTON'S HOUSE/BEDROOM - NIGHT (1937)

9

Darkness, except for the flickering light of a single candle. Anton sits in a chair by his bed. He grips his mother's rolling pin, and practices the rowing movement, over and over. His shadow flickers on the wall beside the bed, but he doesn't see it: his eyes are closed.