



The Night Watchmen: Hustling in a Time of Coronavirus

By Perceval Wright



“Big man, they killed our little brother.”

“Who?”

“Amanuel.”

“Who is, Amanuel?”

“Your friend. They killed him.”

“Who, are you talking about?”

“Amanuel-Maantje!”

“You mean Little Man? The little light-skinned guy?” I asked now, linking the messenger to a fresh-faced kid I had met at the beginning of the first coronavirus lockdown some nine months ago in March 2020.

“Yes My brother! They killed our little brother. I knew I had to come by here and let you know. You

know I always saw he liked to talk to you.”

All of a sudden I felt my heart drop, I didn't want to accept that he was gone. I didn't even know his name. All I knew was that he was a really nice guy.

So reading the [news report](#) literally broke my heart.

“Between late night Tuesday the 18th and the morning of Wednesday 19th November 2020, a 30-year-old man was severely wounded in a shooting incident on the Krugerplein in Amsterdam's eastside. The victim was rushed to hospital. His outlook is said to be 'critical'. 'He had to be resuscitated before they took him,' said a witness at the scene.”

I called him “Little Man”.

It had been weeks since I had seen him. Our first meeting was purely by chance. I was doing a job providing security in the heart of Amsterdam's red light district when our paths crossed.

My task was to position myself in front of the establishment at around 1.40 a.m. and provide a physical deterrent for loiterers, vandals and robbers.

“It's a breeze, all you got to do is stand here. Make sure no one messes up the place. You don't have to fight with anyone. All you have to do is let them see you.”

Motivated by an immediate financial need, I agreed to give the job a shot.

To be honest, I just didn't have the luxury of saying no; the offer was a godsend given we were entering a lockdown. Upon accepting the job, the most wonderful things began to unfold.

He was a “hustler”, a “kid from the streets”, but I didn't know that at the time, or really what a hustler or kid from the streets really meant. All I knew was that he was a nice guy who confessed to me that his “gangster” persona was just an act.

I had spied him coming down the street. It was already well after 2 a.m. but the streets were still busy with the throngs from the pubs, bars, cafes that were now closing. I heard him shouting as he walked, parting the crowds.

It was during that random encounter that I realised the importance of not condemning the young.

“I'm famous in these streets, nobody messes with me around here, not even the cops. They all know me around here, Opa.”

I wanted to know what he was doing out in the streets knowing we were suffering a pandemic.

“You either play football or you hustle Opa. You know how it is!” he said with a big cheeky grin on his face. I could only manage a forced smile, understanding the struggle to survive.

Thirty-year-old Amanuel Nelson Cornelio was a cheerful young man who grew up in one of Amsterdam's poorer neighbourhoods.

“Americans say soccer, right Opa? But we here in Dutch, say football. You know, I played in a league for ten years”, he said before adding earnestly, “I call you Opa from respect. You are my elder, I could be your son,” he said, and this unsolicited admission made me feel good.

“I used to be real good, I was fast,” he continued. “Look at my legs, they're strong,” he said and I

had to smile. This exchange between strangers under the lamps on the Plein in the wee hours of the night felt like it was the middle of the day.

“But I messed up Opa. See, I come from these streets, I was born here. These streets raised me”, he said, then he paused, causing me to wonder if his last statement was an excuse or an indictment on society. I suspect it was the latter.

When he first called me Opa I had to laugh not to feel insulted. I am only fifty-five years old. It seemed like only yesterday that I was out there running the streets carefree like he was, filled with fire and wonder for everything new.

I was 28 years old. Back then life was so different. For a while I thought the parties would never end. It was heaven on earth and I was as free as the breeze. Every day was an adventure. Everyone was an artist or a visionary and we all had big, big dreams for the future.

There was no European Union. The Dutch had their own currency. People were happy and connected in what was truly the most tolerant city in the world. It was truly unreal. A mother's love reigned over the land, a stark contrast to the patriarchal system I had escaped from in America.

I remember when we danced all night in the streets. When peeing in the canals was a rite of passage. You hadn't really lived until you sent one downstream. Today, it will cost you a 90-euro fine if you're caught.

When the Dutch became a part of the union, switched to the single currency and opened their borders, life changed. A global economic crisis that left five of the 17 member-nations in need of financial aid and a mass influx of migrants to European shores in 2015 kept jobs and progress at a slow pace.

Coincidentally, that same year I hit two milestones in my personal life. I turned 50 and I was made redundant and seemingly unemployable, forcing me to face the fact that my time had come and gone.

Which is why I was standing out in the night air at 2 a.m., working as a night watchman surrounded by sex workers and the traffic that visits the infamous red light zone.

In this new, unique position as a casual observer I learned that no matter their position, everyone is only trying to be their full complete self. Straight across from the Royal Amsterdam Palace adjacent to the Bijenhof building on the Damstraat is a quote placed on a street tile that marks the beginning of the red light district. The quote is from John Locke, and it states, “Inside every person, is a part of himself that is only his property and belongs only to him”.

“It's an easy gig, all you got to do is stand there and watch the place. You don't have to engage anyone. You are not there for that. If something happens call me. You have the police station right across the Plein but they usually ride by every 15 minutes to check.”

I had to admit I was a little nervous, performing a job that until then I thought was beneath my previous social status.

After leaving a military career spanning over a decade and relocating to Amsterdam in 1993 with a small severance package, I was able to carve out a pretty successful life for myself here in the Netherlands.

Things began to fall into place almost immediately upon my arrival. I had an advantage in the

workforce; I was a native English speaker in a new Europe, a more united Europe that was beginning to raise its head. I was able to jump from one opportunity to the next until the economic crisis that swept across the globe in 2008 hit, changing everything as jobs became harder to find.

In the Netherlands, one is employed on a contractual basis that ensures that the rights of the worker are at all times respected. If an employer takes you on, they cannot break the agreement without respecting the law. Now, the downside to this system is that employers are less likely to take on new senior staff whose contracts are more expensive and harder to break than those of younger, inexperienced workers.

This dynamic has left many senior professionals marooned on the island of ageism, forcing them to find new avenues to earn a living.

“No sleeping, eating, drinking or gathering in front of the shop. Don’t engage with them. If they come under the awning just direct them to keep it moving. Don’t argue with them, if something happens, call me but you have the police station right in front of you. You can go just across the Plein.”

Those were the instructions.

“Ok, I’ll try it,” I said with only one thought in my mind: I needed the money.

My shift started at 2 a.m. Travelling across town was surreal. It was as if this legendary city of chestnut trees, gabled rooftops, fairy tale bridges and winding canals belonged to only me. Until I learned who really owns the nights. The nights belong to the young and the restless.

It was just supposed to be me and my thoughts out in the open air when suddenly, from around every corner, every bend, as if an alarm had gone off forcing them from out of their holding places, young people emerged from everywhere I looked, at a time when we had been instructed to maintain social distance. I thought no one else would be out. It was the first weekend of the public restrictions to curb the pandemic.

I was supposed to be the only one on the streets, but when I arrived the scene was a circus. Bars and cafes with outside table service were jam-packed, my work station was right in the middle.

Everyone seemed to have ignored the warning to stay indoors; the young and the old, Black, White, Asians and Browns. Day-trippers, transients and party guests, hustlers and dealers all moving among streetwalkers and foolish hearts looking for a good time. It was a completely different eco-system.

Maantje means Little Moon, but the pronunciation is similar to *Mannetje* which literally means “Little man”. I gave him that name when we first spoke but what I learned after his death was that he was a street hero. I just hadn’t known it. All I knew was he was a really nice guy.

“Where are you from, I mean, your people?”

“I was born here but my family comes from Curaçao. But they are all here now. I stay not too far from here with my grandma. These are my streets, I’m telling you. You know what? My Uncle used to run these same streets back in the day. He was one of Amsterdam’s original gangsters. He died right there,” the young, talkative kid said, extending his arm out to show the spot where his uncle took his last breath, across the empty square close to Nam King, the iconic Chinese restaurant famous for its oysters.

“That’s sad,” I said. As I stood there searching for what to say next, a darker, older man came

cycling around the corner, an apparent acquaintance of Little Man.

Little Man waved him over.

“Tell him who my uncle was. Tell him he was killed right over there,” Little Man said to his friend who I had determined had Afro-Surinamese roots. The darker guy looked closer to my age than to Little Man’s. He greeted me unceremoniously.

“Yes, my brother, he was a serious gangster,” he said, his voice thick.

“Really?” I said, which gave me away.

“Where are you from Big Man?” the darker man asked, but Little Man answered before I could.

“He’s American. Man, I would like to go there, not to live there but to see it, Opa. I listen to a lot of music from America, rappers out of Baltimore. You know Baltimore?”

It just so happened that I did. “I used to live not too far from Baltimore, before moving here,” I said before adding, “Maybe one day, after this coronavirus is over and travelling begins again, you’ll get the chance to go?”

To which he replied, “Nah, Opa, they are never going to let me in. I have a record. I just got out [of prison]. I tell you I’m known in these streets, but I’ve been trying to turn that around. Now this lockdown.”

Listening to him and his story I knew how it felt being stuck, being trapped, your ambitions fading from you and you being unable to do anything about it. But I was pressed to know his age.

“Little Man, how old are you?” I asked. To look at him you would have expected to find him kicking football around the Plein, or sitting under old trees with a pack of other kids, talking loudly at one another, just having fun.

I couldn’t see how a kid like him could have committed a crime that would warrant a prison sentence. Not here in the Netherlands. The Dutch have one of the most civilised judicial systems in the world. When I first got here, you could kill someone and the most you would get behind bars was four years, but even that had changed over the years.

“I want you to know, because I saw you looking at me, what you saw, what I do out here is just an act.”

The entire time we spoke, he wanted me to know he respected me ticking the box in the code of a thinking man, and if “Opa” was another form of that code of brotherly love, I wanted to encourage that because in all aspects he could have been my son. I was his elder and could imagine that all he really wanted, like everyone else, was better.

“I’m thirty.” He said smiling while handling his phone which must have showed an incoming call.

“I got to go now Opa,” Little Man said, jumping on his bike and waving as he rode away into the night, to which I could only offer, “Be careful out there.”

I watched him riding away and I imagined he was off to be with friends. Little did I know.

“To say that he will be missed is an understatement,” began the follow-up headlines. “The 30-year-old victim of the shooting on the Krugerplein in Amsterdam’s eastside has been identified as local

street hero 'Maantje'."

The article went on to describe how much loved he was. "Maantje was known for his enthusiasm and his spirit. He was also loved on the sporting field having played ten years for an indoor club." The article went on to say that Maantje had lived a street life which was first immortalised in 2011 when photographer Paul Blanca put him in front of the camera for a series of photos of Amsterdam's street gangs. Blanca remembers Amanuel quite vividly and recalls one particular photo of a younger 20-year-old Maantje staring deeply into the lens of the camera with the most menacing look on his face. The series of photos was titled, "Mi Mattie," a phrase borrowed from the Surinamese language which means "My Friends".

To say he will be missed is a serious understatement. It's a bloody shame. When I asked what actually happened, I was told that it was due to the many months of lockdown. The two assailants arrested for his killing were young people aged 21 and 24.

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