

THE OLD CITY

A STORY OF ROTTERDAM BY LÆRKE PHILIPSEN

Fischer thought that, even though the old world seemed so very fascinating, the most fascinating thing about humankind was their ability to adapt to new circumstances.

A loud, but far, crash sounded from the Old City. Fischer knew that around a minute later the wave would come, and the alarm in his pocket warned him milliseconds after the crash. They never knew just how large a building now had collapsed, and actually it didn't matter because the procedure was the same regardless the size of the wave. He looked for the nearest bench in the University Park and sat down and observed the water fence rise from the edges. Few minutes later the wave came from the Old City. It was a rather small one. The stability of the large University Platform made sure, that it almost didn't move.

In the later years the stability of the buildings in the Old City had really suffered from the water around them, and at the moment, a building collapsed almost every day. Of course this would happen – their foundations were made for dry environments. Not water, and definitely not sea water with large and constantly varying flow loads. Fischer had a hard time understanding why it was not prioritized to tear down the buildings in a controlled procedure, while they were still not under water. Everyone could see that this would happen – Couldn't they? Maybe the fear of the flooding were too big for people to admit the problem. Luckily, the politicians had been wise enough to make sure that the new society had been developed.

As Fischer sat on the bench, his mind drifted to the stories his parents had told him from their youth. When they were born, in the beginning of the millennium, it all began. That was, incomprehensible as it was, when the Netherlands still consisted of land; and land meant as real earth – rocks – fields – beach – forest – trees – huge trees – trees larger than houses. He had seen pictures from the times (even though those old-school 2D pictures seemed so unrealistic, of objects and landscape he never knew existed), and he thought it was the most beautiful thing. What wouldn't he give to be taken back to the times? But of course the past always sounded more romantic than it actually was.

His family fit perfectly into the pattern of the general academic family. His parents both went to and met at Rotterdam University of Applied Science, got educated, got a job, got a nice house and got Fischer in the age of 40. Many of his friend's families had the same characteristic. He had seen several pictures from the youth of his parents. It included lots of kisses, lots of clothes, lots of bicycles (with wheels to ride on instead of skis), and of course a landscape – a city which seemed much heavier and stable as the floating one he knew. The buildings he could see on the pictures was built of bricks, concrete and glass. Now they used recycled bricks and concrete from the exact same buildings, but it was only used in the more expensive part of the city, as the patina from the bricks was extremely popular and that those islands naturally got a lot heavier, and thereby more expensive, than the islands with modern, lightweight buildings. His parents, now, lived in one of those houses to be reminded of the city from their youth. When he visited them, he experienced that there was a definite different feeling in there. It was naturally cold and the smell was different. He really liked being there – it made him calm.

His parents, however, again and again, told him and each other how much of a nicer world it was then. They used to say, that the new world was artificial and shallow. He didn't always agree, he thought that people were still the

same kind of people. Changing the surroundings wouldn't change anything. On the other hand, maybe it wasn't all wrong. After all he hadn't experienced the transition – they had.

The alarm vibrated in his pocket – late again. Fischer always had had a tendency of daydreaming. The world had changed so rapidly since the large flood in 2035, and he couldn't help to think how the life had been in the past. It seemed almost ridiculous that just 250 years back, the steam locomotive was invented, with the car 50 years later. They had made a revolution. And now it wasn't even used anymore (since roads and rail tracks needed earth).

However, he couldn't go into another path of daydreaming, he had to go to class.

Five minutes later he stumbled into the lecture hall. A few people, he had seen before, turned their heads with a mix of annoyed and bored faces. Wilke luckily always sat in the back of the room, and Fischer sat down next to him. Even though Wilke was extremely different from Fischer, their friendship was stronger than the most. Wilke had another mind-set than the other students at the university. Maybe it could be explained by his alternative way of growing up. His parents never had a lot of money, so when people were forced onto the sea, they settled in one of the cheaper floating neighbourhoods. Despite their poverty, it was clear to Fischer that Wilke had had an amazing childhood with all the support and love he could get. When visiting Wilke's parents, Fischer was always welcomed with smiles and hugs, but he sensed behind the happy façade, it wasn't always easy for them. It was a luck for Wilke that the Netherlands had decided not to compromise with the educational sector when the large flood limited the economics of the country.

Otherwise he would not have had the possibility to study at the university and they would never have known each other.

"10 minutes break!" the lecturer said after half an hour of not listening.

They went outside to get some air. The garden outside was very well planned. There were a mix of open and closed spaces, manmade installations and natural vegetation. They went to one of the benches.

Wilke looked excited. "What is it?" Fischer asked, and knew that Wilke just waited for him to ask the question. "I went into an old church yesterday! It was beautiful!"

Wilke was diving in his spare time. Diving was one of the most common hobbies, but of course Wilke had to take it to the extreme. Eventually, now he was only diving in the Old City, which of course was illegal since it was extremely dangerous. When Wilke started this bizarre hobby, Fischer got mad with him, but gradually he learned to accept it since Wilke would never change his mind anyway. And of course Fischer was fascinated by the thought of going to the Old City, and see the world he had seen on his parents' pictures.

"Fischer, it was the most beautiful thing. I was instantly back in the old days to a ... Whatever it was called, those séances where people were listening to a man telling about Jesus and stuff. I entered, by the altar, this huge hall. All walls and the floor were made of stone. It was so massive. So heavy. Yet quite light because the room was so large. And in the end of the room, an enormous instrument was placed, with hundreds of wooden tubes. It must have sounded impressive!"

"It sounds like," Fischer replied dryly. He still wasn't fond of the hobby. It didn't help that he knew Wilke would always push the envelope as much as possible. "You know, the day it goes wrong, it goes very wrong", he added.

"I know, I know. It hasn't yet. And I have the best odds that it will not ever", Wilke told him in a charming tone, "but doesn't it sound fascinating?"

Fischer had to admit that he was eager to get to see the Old City that he had only seen on his parents' pictures. "It's time to go in again," he reminded Wilke.

They walked with the rest of the group into the lecture hall again. Just as he realised that the lecture was about "biofuel production from algae", an arm grazed his. He froze. Natalie Kroes knew full well which effect she had on him. She turned her head saying "hi", and he mumbled "hey". She laughed. He wondered if fascination towards the other sex had always been like that. It felt so horrible, but at the same time kind of nice.

After the lecture Wilke continued his talk about the church. "Actually, you should forget all your constant sanity, and come with me. Just one time. I know how fascinated you are of the past."

It was true. Fischer really was fascinated by the idea of seeing the old world.

"You know, the other day, I went by my parent's old house. Even though it must have been really different from then till I was there, I could really sense that they used to live there. The wind turbines on the roof, the flowered curtains, and the many colours on the walls. Not much else was left. I guess, they took most things with them. Outside though, the cars was left behind, and they had a charming playground in the neighbourhood. You should really come and see it all!"

"I don't know..." Fischer doubtfully said. "Come on, just this once!"

"But I don't have the equipment ..."

Wilke laughed loudly, "I have all we need! Great, I'll see you at 5 o'clock at your apartment." Before he knew it, Wilke was gone.

Fischer started home. He always walked, since he had gotten an apartment just next to the university. If going further, he usually took his watercraft. After the city got more and more densely populated and the technology developed, people started to prefer aircraft towards watercraft, because the waterways got congested. When the population moved from the Old City to the new floating one, quite many people chose one of the two other emigration possibilities – Either the mountains, often the Alps, Swedish mountains or Pyrenees, or to space stations. But as the floating cities grew popular, because of the successful cycling system, more and more people had moved to the Netherlands. Time had shown that people preferred staying at earth towards going to space. Even though earth had gotten much rougher with larger areas of desert and larger areas of sea, all the fundamentals for humanity still remained on earth, whereas the production and treatment of food, fuel, water and oxygen were much more difficult in space. The mountains had grown extremely popular as well as the floating communities. They had advantages in the physical stability and beautiful view the different building levels gave, but they had limited space and inflexible space management, whereas the floating cities still had plenty of space outwards and the platforms actually could be moved if detecting a smarter city layout.

Fischer was pleased to be part of the knowledge community in the development of the floating city. He wanted to contribute in the search for possibilities of cultivating many different sorts of food in the floating communities. It was easy enough to take the production of root vegetables and grain with them to the platforms, but, with respect to crops, the tree-bound crops were challenging. And then it was hard making space for animal production. They researched quite a bit in artificial meat production at his institute at the moment.

He arrived home and went straight to the fridge. He had some leftovers, which was easy to heat. He couldn't believe that Wilke talked him into going to the Old City. Did he ever actually say yes? He couldn't remember. Maybe he could still sign out. On the other hand, he was tempted. And it was true that Wilke never got caught or

hurt. Even though Wilke was crazy, Fischer knew that he would research on everything needed when doing all the different activities he was into. Screw it, he'd just do it! This one time. They'd probably not get caught or hurt.

The doorbell rang, and at the same moment Wilke came in the door. "Are you ready?" Fischer looked at him "I just persuaded myself." He was ever astonished of his unremitting friend. Seconds later Wilke had projected a model of the Old City on Fischer's dinner table with his phone. "Are you ready to explore more in one afternoon than you have your entire life?" Fischer was about to protest, that was a bit of an exaggeration, but Wilke didn't wait for Fischer to answer, "We're going to take our scooters to the potato field platform, to the very southeast of the city. Remember your student ID – we have to tell them at the entrance that we are Artificial Agriculture Students. Then we go to the very back, right corner of the field, where I have a hole in the fence I use. From here we are hidden from the City Guards. We have to drop quick and silent into the water, and sink as fast as possible to the bottom of the sea. We need to wait with the security check till we get to the bottom. Otherwise we risk that they see us." He grinned, "But my equipment always work!" Fischer right eye nervously ticked.

"Anyway. When we have done the security check, we swim to the western part of the Old City boundary. As the buildings are getting taller and denser, the city guards will not have a chance seeing us. The first part of the city we have to go through, is the old harbour." He pointed at the projected city model. "It is still full of old containers, old oil refineries and other factories. So spooky. Then we get to the river, and follow it all the way to the city centre, where I will show you the church I saw yesterday. When we go home, we'll just go the same way. I think we will get back before it gets dark."

Half an hour later they stood by the gate to the potato field. It was unproblematic to get in. They walked to the end of the field, and Wilke pulled out in the fence to show the hole he'd told about. Quickly they slipped into the diving suit and Wilke gave Fischer the diving mask (a mask covering all of the face with the ability to extract the oxygen in the water). They also both brought their cell phones to record, light up and in case of emergency. "Let's go!"

Everyone learned to dive in elementary school, and diving was therefore not new to Fischer. But just like everything else, also in diving, the memory had to be refreshed when not have been doing it for a while, so when they dropped in the water, Fischer focused so much on dropping elegant, silent and quickly into the water, that he forgot to take on the mask. He didn't realize it before the salt water got into his eyes, nose and mouth, few seconds after going under. He stopped up, confused, to take on the mask after blowing the water out. Wilke was already 10 meters under him, and Fischer made his body as slim as possible to get down to the bottom quickly.

"You are such a moron!" Wilke said with a twinkle in his eyes. The full-face masks allowed the divers to speak to each other. "But I'm pretty sure the guards didn't notice us. Does your equipment work?" They checked it, and as Wilke had promised, everything worked as it should.

First now, he looked around. They were at the edge of the floating city. Towards the city, the several ties to the platforms could be seen. In the other direction, the open seabed continued as far as they could see (which was not very far in the unclear sea water). "This way." Wilke said, and pointed towards the seemingly endless seabed.

They started swimming near the seabed. The first couple of kilometres, there were only sand ground, but suddenly they came to the first house. It looked like an old farmer house. The roof was gone, and only a ruin of raw bricks was left.

"The buildings are much more worn down out here than in the city. The sea streams are stronger on the bare seabed, and in the cities the buildings act as a struggle for the free flow."

Not a lot further they came to the old port. The heavy steel containers raised before them. They were very rusty, and some of the stacks of containers had collapsed, if the lower ones had bad rust damages. They swam through the container city, even though Fischer didn't like it too much. But, as Wilke said, it might be scary, but better than getting caught by the guards. After the container city, they swam through an oil refinery. It was very monotone with hundreds of cylindrical containers, and was actually a bit recognizable, because some of the apartment platforms looked like this.

They came to the river, which was a groove into the ground. As he looked down into it, he realized that it was actually naturally used by the marine life as a transportation way. Clusters of fish and single fish swam outwards, and on the seaweed, the stream looked very strong. "I see you noticed the strong flow. As you can figure out, it is a bad idea to swim down there. Let's stay up at the shore, but follow the stream to the right." Wilke told him.

As they swam by the shore, the industry city transformed into a more old school city. Fischer noted, that the buildings in here was less worn down than the farmer house was. They quickly crossed above the river, and moved into the real city by one of the streets. Towards the water the buildings were tall and simple. This was the style of the late part of the 20th century, he'd learned in history once. He imagined busy streets with cars on the wide streets and tons of people on the sidewalks. This was also, because of the tall and heavy buildings, an area of a lot collapsed buildings, which reminded Fischer of the danger they actually exposed themselves to here. "Can we swim somewhere with a bit lower buildings?" he asked Wilke. "Sure, the church is just around the corner."

They swam in between some lower buildings and around a corner. In front of them raised the church. The top of the tower was above the water surface. It was enormous – massive – heavy. "It was built in 1450." Wilke told him, "and still standing." "That's impressive!" They swam in through a broken window. Fischer had never seen anything like this. The pillars continued all the way above the water surface. The arches over the windows had so much elegance, but at the same time the building screamed of robustness and grandeur. The room felt extremely large. "I have a feeling that this is the building which has been here the longest, and will stay here the longest in the future." Wilke told him. Fischer silently agreed.

Suddenly a crash sounded and the room immediately got filled up with sand. "What is happening?!" Fischer almost screamed nervously. Wilke instantly put his hands on Fischer's shoulders to calm him down. "Okay, listen to me carefully. A building has collapsed outside. Luckily, we are inside the church, which, as we just talked about, is a durable construction, and will not crash. If we are quick, we can take advantage of the sand fog, and swim back above the roofs, which is much quicker. I have this rope with me. If you just hold on to it, I will lead the way. Alright?"

Fischer marked that he understood everything, and grabbed the rope. Immediately Wilke swam forward. He was a well-trained swimmer, and Fischer could only just keep pace. The next 15 minutes they went through a jumble of sand, emergency light flash and sea streams in different directions. They came back to the potato platform breathless, but unharmed.

When Fischer got his breath, he looked at Wilke, "You are my craziest friend, Wilke. I thought that we were done."

Wilke looked at him with his most slanted smile, "I have tried this so many times. It is actually quite convenient when going back. Much easier to hide. But of course I knew you wouldn't come if I told you about it. And now you experienced the Old City, which you would not have had if I told you all the details."

Fischer didn't know if this made him mad or not. Wilke of course had a point that he would not have come if he knew the real risk, but what if it had went wrong.

“Anyway – it was a great experience. Thanks for taking me.” “You are welcome!”

They walked silently through the potato field. The sun was about to set, which took the temperature a few degrees down. It was nice being up in the cold and fresh air again. They came closer to the field border and could see their present world. It wasn't half bad. Fischer thought that, even though the old world seemed so very fascinating, the most fascinating thing about humankind was their ability to adapt to new circumstances.