

Jaap Scholten

Sugar Bastard

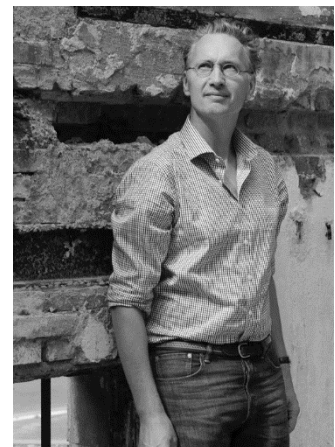
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When Frederik is eight years old, he is allowed to travel with his grandfather Dupont to Abyssinia. The family company has built three sugar factories there. Emperor Haile Selassie is coming to open the last factory, accompanied by a large entourage, the imperial musicians, and his dog Lulu. Forty years on –

Grandpa Dupont is dead, Frederik is living in Eastern Europe, and Emperor Haile Selassie is encased in cement in his palace – Frederik sees a man on television who claims to be his grandfather's son. He is so disconcerted by this report that he decides to return to the country to look for possible Ethiopian family members. The journey takes him back not only to Ethiopia, but also to his childhood in the Dutch countryside, to his grandfather, and above all, to Mila, his first great love. *Sugar Bastard* is a novel about family, loyalty, tradition, belonging and not belonging, and the eternal question of how to do what's right.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Dutch manufacturer Stork built three sugar factories in Abyssinia. Young unmarried men from the factory in Twente went along on three-year contracts to assemble and maintain the machines. The strapping young men from the provincial towns of Hengelo and Overdinkel inevitably came into contact with the beautiful women of Ethiopia. Three years ago, Scholten was told about the children who had been born out of these relationships, and it was suggested that he might have relatives there too. In 2017, he travelled to Addis Ababa.

Jaap Scholten (b. 1963) has lived in Hungary since 2003, alternating between Budapest and the countryside, surrounded by wild boars and jackals. Scholten made his debut in 1995 with his novel *Eighty*, which quickly found its way to the longlist of the AKO Literature Prize, as did *Morning Star* in 2000. In 2008, *Spengler's Law* was chosen as Book of the Year by bookseller chain Selexyz. His book *Comrade Baron* won the 2011 Libris History Prize. Scholten's book *Horizon City* was published by AFdH Publishers in 2014. His work has been translated in multiple languages.



Sugar Bastard

by Jaap Scholten

Translation by Jane Hedley-Prole

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The viaduct near our house was under at least a foot and a half of water, and only intrepid drivers dared go through it at top speed, throwing up a wave three feet high. I was kneeling on the sofa in the living room, my nose pressed against the window pane, hoping that in Africa the rainy season would be over. The rain splashed down in our narrow front garden. A small suitcase stood ready beside me. I'd borrowed the grey trousers and blue blazer from Engelbert for the occasion; they were a bit too big really, but Mummy said I looked very nice. I was going to meet the emperor, and thanked my lucky stars I wouldn't have to appear before him in that embarrassing sailor suit, which made me look like a girl.

I had solemnly swallowed a malaria pill. Now I jiggled up and down excitedly. I was going on a journey with Grandpa, all by myself. He'd chosen me, not one of my brothers, not my cousin Tijn. Mummy reminded me of the five rules I had to follow in Africa. Mummy was a stickler for clean hands and clean nails, and we weren't allowed to go to

the loo in trains or service stations. If she'd had her way, we'd have done our business in the woods, like animals, squatting down, at a safe distance from plebeian germs. Holding up five fingers one by one, she drilled it into me: 'Always wash your hands properly, take a malaria pill every day, only drink bottled or boiled water, don't eat uncooked vegetables and don't swim anywhere!'

This message was also conveyed to Grandpa at the front door, without the fingers; he didn't take it too much to heart. Four days later, under Grandpa's watchful gaze, I would swim at a little beach near Wonji, in the poo-coloured waters of the Awash, fearful that crocodiles and flesh-eating fish lurked below the surface. It was only after my return that I found out there aren't any piranhas in Abyssinia.

When the Mercedes appeared, Mummy put an arm round me and squeezed me tight. From the little cupboard under the washbasin in the bathroom she had taken two toilet rolls, which she brandished triumphantly in the air like a magician before stuffing them into the corners of my suitcase.

'I don't know if they have them there.'

Boele, wearing his peaked cap, got out, walked to the boot of the Mercedes, opened it, and unfurled a big black umbrella. Then he went to the rear passenger door, from which Grandpa, in a gabardine raincoat, had meanwhile emerged. Grandpa walked up to the front door, followed by Boele with the umbrella. They reached the door at the same time. I jumped off the sofa, grabbed the suitcase by the handle and ran into the hall. Mummy was already coming out of the kitchen.

‘Go and get your coat.’

I put the suitcase down in the hall and ran back through the kitchen and the scullery to the coat stand. Which coat? I could only see one of mine, the shabby-looking pale-blue windcheater that Julius, Balthasar and Engelbert had all worn for at least a season. I grabbed Engelbert’s dark-blue loden duffle coat: *that* was a coat you could appear before an emperor in. I put it on and fastened the three middle toggles through the loops. You had to push hard, because the toggles only just fitted through the loops. I inspected myself in the narrow mirror next to the scullery door. The coat fell below my knees. Feeling like a general, I strode through the kitchen with big strides, picked up my suitcase and headed for the front door.

When Mummy saw me she passed a hand through her hair and smiled rather artificially. She crouched down in front of me.

‘That coat’s far too warm.’

‘Oh, it’s fine,’ Grandpa said. ‘Very smart, and it can get cold at night in the mountains. Keep it on.’

We got into the back of the Mercedes, with its smell of leather and cigars. Boele started the car, the windscreen wipers began to beat back and forth like swans’ wings. Turning his broad head round, he gave me a big grin.

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In Granny and Grandpa Dupont’s dining room, on the wall opposite the massive Empire cabinet where the drinks and the crystal whisky and

cognac glasses were kept, there hung an oil painting called The Negro. A portrait of a boy of about eighteen, on the verge of adulthood, with downcast eyes and a forlorn, orphaned look. He has strong features and short frizzy hair, and is wearing a white, collarless shirt. The background is grey. It is signed by A. Legras. Shortly after Grandpa died, Granny gave me the painting, because I was the last person Grandpa saw. Typical Granny logic, and I'm sure she meant it kindly. When I thanked her, she said, 'Oh, don't mention it, I never liked that painting.'

Sometimes you stray from the straight and narrow. That's something I can understand – after all, nobody's perfect. But what I don't understand – and it's been bothering me since seeing that episode of Spoorloos – is how you can abandon a child. I can't see Grandpa doing that. Not at all. He just wasn't the type. In my book, you can only call yourself a father or mother if you take responsibility for a child. You have to devote yourself to its care, no matter what, to call yourself a parent. In the months that we lived at The White Elephant, Grandpa took on that role for me, and in the years that followed he did so from a distance, I just didn't see him very often. The lack of a father is something I made up for much later, compensating for it, as it were, through my own fatherhood.

In the evenings I surf the internet. Search for terms like bastard son, Dawit Balthasar, Ethiopia, Abyssinia, Wonji, Haile Selassie, sugar factories, Handelsvereniging Amsterdam, Amsterdam Trading Company, Dupont Machine Factory, Balthasar Dupont. Mr Balthasar at the factory, aka The Sower, Balt to his friends, Grandpa Dupont to us. Dawit is conspicuous for his online absence, just like Grandpa. Like

father, like son. I try all kinds of search combinations, come across photos of Grandpa and stories about sugar factories in Ethiopia, including photos, but absolutely nothing linking the two. There's no digital trace of his presence at sugar factories in Abyssinia, or of his involvement in their construction. And nothing at all about a bastard son. Dawit is nowhere to be found, so my hopes rise that we're dealing with an imposter.

After the Spoorless episode we were deluged with congratulatory messages and demonstrations of fellow feeling. A few expressed concern, but the majority were jubilant little texts peppered with red hearts, encouraging us to get to know our new uncle as soon as possible, in keeping with the bleeding heart mentality all around me, the hippie notion that embracing the entire population of the world will solve all problems. On the evening the programme was broadcast, I'd read the latest messages.

'Good luck!'

'You must go to Ethiopia!'

'What an incredible turn of events...'

'How exciting: family in Ethiopia!'

'Ooooooh...'

An avalanche of smileys and hearts. This was something we just needed to cover with the mantle of love. Love is seen as the answer for everything since God abandoned us. The hearts on Facebook are the main way to show that you're a good person and that you mean the

whole world well. Something that used to be the preserve of priests – giving their blessing – can now be done by anyone at the press of a button. And it doesn't cost anything. Humans have a great need for social recognition. These days, very few of us belong to an old-fashioned church where, under pastoral guidance and in the sight of the whole community, you try to do good. So people are thrown back on their own resources. They demonstrate their virtue by dishing out 'likes' and making a great show of denouncing every injustice.

My generation got to know about Facebook through our children and mainly used it as a tool to monitor their doings. We read their posts, checked who they were friends with, and what times they were online. Facebook brought out the latent KGB agent in concerned parents.

A week after the broadcast I get a Facebook message. I take a deep breath. I haven't heard from her for over twenty years. I didn't even know whether she was still alive. It knocks me off balance. Heart, shoulders, legs – they suddenly seem mere components, as if the link between them has fallen away. As if the system that, day in day out, without me realising it, had been keeping everything connected and functioning has abruptly faltered.

Hey, Frederik darling, how are you doing? I live in Italy. I saw the programme about Ethiopia and your grandpa. We need to talk. Importante!!!! I have to speak to you. Urgent! Via Facebook? Or are you maybe somewhere near Italy? If so, come by. Love, Mila

Mila's acquired a new surname: Capitani. Mila Capitani. A name to conjure with. So that's why I never found her. Instead of searching for Dawit Balthasar I spend the rest of the evening Googling Mila Capitani. It seems she taught yoga in Tirol some years ago. The privacy settings on her Facebook page prevent me from seeing her full profile. The only photo I can see shows her sitting cross-legged, a sturdy figure, gazing into a room with the air of an oriental princess. From her self-confident, commanding pose you can see she's leading a workshop or class of some kind. I whisper her name as I send a friendship request that same Sunday morning. I need a bit of time before I can answer her email.

Six days later, she accepts my request. Now I have access to her entire profile and can see more photos. She lives in Italy, in the mountains – at least I can see blue peaks in the background. From her posts, I piece together a fragmentary picture. She seems to live her life at nights, at least the life she shares on Facebook. She has a son and a glamorous existence which she displays with nouveau riche enthusiasm. Must have a wealthy husband. She stamps divots into the turf during a break in a polo match. She smiles sweetly and alluringly in profile, bronzed, dressed in a white bikini, from behind the wheel of a yacht. She raises a glass somewhere on the edge of a lake, seated at a table covered in starched linen. Twenty years ago, when she danced, this would have been quite unthinkable. Back then she followed a strictly macrobiotic diet and shunned alcohol.

There must have been a turning point in her life. This was not the Mila I knew: a principled, teetotal, ambitious, somewhat severe dancer, who retained those qualities even when she could no longer dance. Her taste in books and films hasn't changed much, though. They still reflect the old her, I guess - a disturbing amount of oriental wisdom. Books that tell you how to live. I don't want to know how to live, I want to muddle along. The best bits, as so often, are the mobile posts. Pictures that have been posted without too much thought, often when tipsy. Night-time photos in which most of the people look red-eyed because of the flash, and the women blow kisses at the camera with puckered lips. Mila has loosened up, grown more frivolous, but her appearance hasn't changed much: an oval face, big brown eyes that stare into the world in amused wonder. Scrolling through the photos I see she still has the proud posture of a dancer.

That night it rains ice. As if the gods want to shake me awake. A tropical downpour of drops that freeze in their fall to earth. I've never experienced such a thing before. I hear the ice rattling down, get up, slip on a robe and go out onto the patio. Gabriella sleeps on. I stand where the patio's roofed over, you couldn't walk on the open bit - it's like a skating rink. Long icicles dangle from the plants in the flower pots, the smallest branches are encased in sleeves of ice. Hundreds, thousands of kilos of ice bear down on the trees. A monster prowls around the dark gardens, every few seconds tearing off a big branch or pushing an entire tree over. Cracking, banging and smashing sounds come from the park at the back; the noise is constant, like a giant locomotive hissing and thumping rhythmically as it gets up steam. Nearer by I can hear

branches splitting, snapping, then sighing as they fall. From the front of the house comes the hysterical screeching of car and home alarm systems, and the sirens of emergency vehicles rushing to saw up trees that have fallen across roads and houses. The sirens wail all night long. A farewell serenade for this house and this garden.

The next morning the street, the park and the garden look as though a bomb has gone off. The ground is covered with severed branches and chunks of ice. I clamber through the wreckage to take stock of the damage. In a single night the garden's been transformed into a fairy tale setting. Crystal bushes and trees, as if crafted by Bohemian glassblowers. Branches and bushes bend under the weight of a thousand icicles. Twigs two millimetres thick are encased in a layer of ice a centimetre and a half thick; fallen, shattered timber lies in a fan of ice splinters. It's as if nature's done a big spring clean: any branch that's no longer strong or supple enough lies torn off on the ground. The dead wood's been cleared up. It's the kind of purification I could do with. I've got to an age when I've started holding on to the banister when I go downstairs, and taking off my watch and underpants before standing on the bathroom scales, so as not to make the result any worse than necessary. I'm nearly fifty. The children have left home, they don't really need me anymore. Statistically, two-thirds of my life lie behind me. I've still got about a third to go. What should I do with it?