

The First Two Pages: “Soul Mates”

By Christine Otten, translated from the Dutch by Josh Pachter

From *Amsterdam Noir*, edited by René Appel and Josh Pachter (Akashic Books)

I was approached with exactly the right request, and it came at exactly the right moment: write a dark story that takes place in your own neighborhood.

Tuindorp Oostzaan—which is where I live, in what’s called Amsterdam-North—is on the other side of the wide river that flows behind the city’s main train station, and it’s always been seen as a “behind the times” part of town. In earlier days, the residents were blue-collar laborers—shipbuilders and their families—and people who’d moved across the river from the poor and overcrowded 19th-century neighborhoods like the Jordaan to the unexplored wilds of the empty North, where they could afford larger, better places to live. At that time, Amsterdam-North was a kind of Dutch “Wild West,” with open fields and meadows, where you got your drinking water from a well. It was a rough-and-tumble environment, with street gangs always at each other’s throats. In the prison where I conducted writing workshops, I met guys from the neighborhood who would tell me their stories, share with me the scams and cons they resorted to in order to make ends meet.

Today, gentrification has come to Tuindorp Oostzaan: housing prices are on the rise, luxury apartments are being built. But for me it remains a folksy oasis, a retreat from the trendiness of central Amsterdam. I feel at home there. I

grew up in a working-class community, and Tuidorp Oostzaan has the same familiar feel.

I take kickboxing lessons, and I wanted to write a first-person story in which Armin, the narrator, would be loosely based on my instructor: a kid from the streets, a mixture of North African and Amsterdam descent, ambitious, a smooth talker, born and raised in Tuindorp, tough yet sympathetic. And I found myself thinking about the gruesome murder of a Chinese snackbar owner that happened soon after I moved into the neighborhood. His remains were found in a trash can, drenched in coagulated fryer oil.

My story begins at 6:10 a.m., when two detectives ring the doorbell of the apartment Armin shares with his single mother. Armin is the Chinese snackbar's delivery boy. This opening scene came to me organically, giving me the opportunity to establish the sassy tone of voice I wanted for Armin right away. Readers find themselves dropped immediately into the heart of the action, the heart of the neighborhood, the heart of the relationship between Armin and his mother. You see how the boy dresses, recognize his self-confidence, feel the tension *he* feels when he finds two cops at his door.

I knew that, in addition to writing a legitimate crime story, I wanted to open a window onto the social problems of my neighborhood, assuming that the people who would read *Amsterdam Noir*, the anthology for which I was invited to write the story, would want to be immersed in something *real*. The frictions between the “new” middle-class Tuindorpers and the “old-timers,” the poverty,

the racial profiling experienced by black kids and anyone with a North African appearance. That's why I created Miriam, Armin's wealthy, married, much older girlfriend—they met when he delivered takeout food to her fancy McMansion on the edge of the neighborhood—and her husband Ed, a doctor, who's having an affair with a much younger colleague at the hospital where he practices.

Somehow, I had to find a way to bring their two worlds—Armin's on the one hand, and Miriam and Ed's on the other—together, and to weave in the story of the murder of the Chinese man. I had no idea how things would end. That was the challenge and the fun of writing the story: how do I fit these characters *and* the murder into a single plot? What would be the logical, inevitable outcome when such divergent life stories and environments cross paths? Plus, of course, who committed the murder, and why?

I wanted to write a raw story about believable people, but at the same time a story too grisly and absurd for words. A story, in fact, that just maybe echoes the grisly absurdity of real life....

The First Two Pages of “Soul Mates”

They were on our doorstep at ten after six this morning. I know the exact time because a fraction of a second before the bell rang—one short, two longs—I woke up and looked at my iPhone. Six-ten. It was just getting light. I knew it was the cops. I mean, you just *know*. I heard Mom's bedroom door creak, her footsteps on the stairs, the murmur of voices. So I splashed some water on my face, sprayed my pits with Axe, and got dressed. I was calm. At times like this, my emotions just sort of freeze. I grabbed the Prada jacket Miriam gave me, slipped my bare feet into my Pumas, and went down. I'm a good boy, I am. I tried to ignore Mom's expression; if there's one thing I can't stand, it's that exhausted,

disappointed look she gets in her eyes. *Can't I ever have a moment's peace?* Instead, I focused on the crew-cut heads of the two detectives standing in the doorway, their hands deep in the pockets of their ugly cheap H&M jackets, and said, cheerfully as I could manage, "Good morning, gentlemen, and what can we do for you today?"

You could see them thinking *this is one polite Algerian*. You always gotta stay a step ahead of them. Be the strongest, the smartest, don't let them figure you out, and most important: keep your anger under control. I learned that at kickboxing. Not too long ago, I got pulled over on my moped on the Meteorenweg because I was supposedly driving too fast. I was heading to the Mandarijnenstraat to deliver six frikandels, three croquettes, a deep-fried bami slice, a couple of kebabs, and fifteen Euros worth of French fries with mayo. I guess they were having a party. So, anyway, I was in a hurry, nobody wants soggy fries and lukewarm frikandels. I don't understand how anyone can stomach that disgusting *haram* shit in the first place, but whatever, ours not to reason why. The point is, I got pulled over. Must of been the cop's first week on the job. "Sir, you're driving much too fast." We both knew it was bullshit, I wasn't doing more than fifteen miles an hour, twenty tops, we both know the only reason he flagged me down is I look like a Moroccan—a Marrow Khan in Tuindorp Oostzaan, I'm a poet and I don't know it!—but whatever. He whips out his little citation book to write me up, and I say, "I'm terribly sorry, officer, but my gramma is sick, she's in really bad shape, and I don't want her to be alone, that's why I was in a rush."

When he hears me talking in complete sentences without a hint of an accent, his eyes practically pop out of his head. "Oh?" he says.

"She lives right around the corner here, on the Zonneplein." Which is one hundred percent true: Mom's mother lives on the Zonneplein, upstairs from a Turkish grocery.

So the cop waves me on, and that's the end of it. Which is why I say: you have to stay a step ahead of them. Don't give 'em the chance to fuck with you.

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Christine Otten is a Dutch writer, journalist, and performer. Her book *The Last Poets* was nominated for the prestigious Dutch Libris Literature Prize, and has been adapted for the stage. Otten regularly performs at literary festivals and in theaters. She holds writing workshops in Amsterdam for the homeless and for prisoners.