

Nola – A portrait of a self-willed painter

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Preface

There were days when the word “negro” did not have the negative connotation it has today. It was then that the painter Nola Hatterman lived, who is the protagonist of this book and who was a passionate anticolonialist. It would be historically incorrect to credit Nola and her contemporaries with the current use of Afro Surinamese and Marrons. That is why you will find the controversial word “negro” in the following text.

From the end of 2006 I gathered as much information as I could about Nola’s eventful life. I spoke with friends and enemies, searched through archives, looked at the paintings she made, visited the houses she lived in, and walked the pathways she once walked. This is how I formed a picture of her life. The portrait I paint is, evidently, my vision of Nola Hatterman.

To further the readability of the text I have chosen to include the quotations and data derived from other authors, not in footnotes in the text, but in an account at the end of the text.

EdV

Wan de

Wan de mi sa dede

No wan sma sabi oten

En mi no sabi ope

Ma wi winsi taki

Te a de sa kon

Sranangron sa teki mi

En blaka anoe sa beri mi.

One day I shall die

No one knows when

And I don't know where

But I wish that

When the day is there

Surinamese ground will receive me

And black hands will bury me.

Nola Hatterman

Prologue

Paramaribo, 8 May 1984. A busy Tuesday morning. Everyone is in a hurry. Cars toot their horns when the driver before them does not immediately react when the traffic light switches to green. Mopeds zigzag between the cars; taxis wind through the traffic. The previous day a taxi has been ordered for Mrs Hatterman in Brokopondo Centre at taxi company Kentax at Weidestraat. It is 21-year-old Romeo's turn to pick her up. Brokopondo Centre is about 90 kilometres away from Paramaribo. Quite a long way to drive. The road towards it is partly unmetalled. Fortunately it does not rain. In the rainy season potholes in the red road fill with water in an instant. Because this is not the first time he drives her, he knows approximately how long the trip will take. At the end of the morning Romeo arrives in Brokopondo Centre: a charming civil service village in the middle of a tropical rain forest, where wooden houses appear to be scattered across the green hills.

Nola Hatterman lives at the beginning of the village on Mamadam road, near the Chinese shop of Tsai A-Jen, who is called Tai Sjoe by everyone, or in short *omu snesi*, Chinese shopkeeper. *Omu* keeps fancy pigeons. Nola likes to see how they rise in droves flapping their wings to alight again in the middle of the road. *Omu* and Nola do not speak each other's language, but are friends nonetheless. Nola buys her bread and other shopping in his shop. Once a year when the year closes, they dine together.

It is quiet in the village. The children are at school. The women rake the yard, work the vegetable gardens or cook rice in their kitchen. The men are at the office. On the road Romeo has met maintenance men of the government who strip the verge of excess weeds. As soon as they have turned their backs, it grows again.

Romeo parks the orange red Mitsubishi Lancer exactly in front of Nola's house, which lies hidden behind the green foliage. The villagers have often asked if they should not chop away the shrubs around her house. "No, like this it is just as if I live in the trees," Nola will say. She enjoys the hummingbirds who jump from branch to branch, and the small monkeys with their red handpalms – they are called *kusi* here – who clamber the trees before her eyes.

Everyone knows "Mrs Nola." Every day she goes for a walk in the village. She visits the district commissioner in his office or eats a plate of fried rice in the lodging house: the local inn. The large straw hat on her head protects her from the fierce sun.

After school hours little Dennis Boodoe and his friends often drop by to keep her company. They watch attentively how Nola, dressed in a white smock with large glasses on her nose, paints, takes a few steps back, squints and then walks forward again to add another brushstroke. Later on Dennis also wants to become a painter.

Romeo is waiting in the car. Nola's roommate, Stuart Manuel, puts her suitcase in the trunk and closes the lid. Nola walks down the pathway to the road. She is wearing a sleeveless white satin blouse with copper buttons. Underneath it a rustcoloured pair of trousers. She wears her hair in a bun, has used black eyeliner on her eyelids, like she used to do when she was young, has put rouge on her cheeks and red lipstick on her lips. The dogs are just as excited as their owner. They bark incessantly. Shhh, she says soothingly, and accelerates her step. She looks forward to the exposition in which she is to partake with six other artists and for which she will now make the last preparations in Paramaribo. Among the artists are some former students of the School for the Arts which she has presided over for years. In addition, she will finally see the film about her life made by Frank Zichem, which was shown on Dutch television.

Nola has been very ill. Fortunately, the shingles are under control. "But this illness is so unpredictable, after months the pain may return as in the case of neuralgia," she writes to a friend earlier in the month. She recovers gradually. "I have also picked up some overdue correspondence and so gradually life is assuming normal proportions." The exhibition is a diversion. "Of course it does me good to work on several paintings: cleaning and varnishing frames, these are activities which help me."

Nola gets into the car with her favourite painting in her lap, a portrait of her friend Maud de Lang. "If anything should happen, at least this painting will be saved." Against her habit, she leaves the key under the doormat. She does not really know why; Stuart has his own key after all. Together with him she works on the drawing lessons for the children in Brokopondo. His dreadlocks shake when he raises his hand to wave goodbye. "See you on Friday, " she calls enthusiastically. She gives Lyanda Kent, who works in the guest house, a lift. The three of them take to the road: Romeo, Lyanda and Nola.

There is hardly any traffic, but just beyond the border of district Brokopondo near *Lantiman Kampoe* – kilometre marker 56 – an oncoming car rushes by which shrouds the taxi in an orange cloud of dust. Romeo loses sight of the road and loses

control of the wheel. The car shoots into the verge, collides with a boulder and overturns a couple of times. Nola is flung out of the car. According to the police report which is made later on, the car lands on top of her. The painting of Maud de Lang is found a little bit further on, with Nola's blood spatters on it. Lyanda Kent is let off lightly. She is admitted to hospital with a pelvic fracture, but she survives the accident. The driver sustains multiple grazes. Nola – 84 years old – is dead in an instant.

Paramaribo is terribly upset. The exhibition is postponed. Nola lies in state in the wooden St Peter and Paul cathedral in Paramaribo, which offers a sad view if only because of the flaked yellow paint. The newspapers print large headlines: "Mrs Nola Hatterman dies in car crash" and "*Rostoe switi wi Nola Hatterman*" (Rest in peace, Nola Hatterman). Foster son Armand Baag leaves Amsterdam for Paramaribo in a hurry. The funeral will be held on Thursday afternoon the 17th of May. The inhabitants of Brokopondo Centre have travelled to Paramaribo in buses and cars. The village is deserted. The cathedral is packed. Father Baneke leads the service. Prime minister Udenhout, minister Maynard, minister Li Fo Sjoe and other dignitaries are seated in the first row. "*O bone Jesu,*" booms the Maranatha Men's Choir, which is dressed in white jackets with black-lined lapels for the occasion. Father Baneke sprinkles holy water and spreads incense. The poet Albert Mungroo recites the poem *Wan de... One day...*, which Nola wrote in Surinamese before she had ever visited the country. In it she writes that she wants to be buried in Surinamese soil by black hands.

And this is what happens. On the copper tones of the music the *dragiman* carry her coffin to its last resting place: the roman-catholic cemetery on Schietbaanweg. All four foster sons are there. Armand Baag, Jules Brand-Flu, Stuart Manuel and Ruben Karsters, with whom she has fallen out. She had hoped for a reconciliation. "Goodbye miss, goodbye," says Doelmadjid Soekinta on behalf of all her former students at the grave-site. As of old.