

Kapper Who?

Her comb is definitely as sharp as her scissors but her tongue is sweet. All the more for her lilting Chinese accented Dutch - '*Zo kort*'? , *kapper* Hu wants to know.

Which was the exact day I became a '*Nederlander*'? The day I got my Dutch passport or the day I let *kapper* Hu give me a haircut? A passport looks like a little book. The kind of thing that changes when one changes passports is that one doesn't any more have to stand and shiver in line in December on the footpath outside the British Embassy in Amsterdam. All for the sake of a visa. These days, Dutch passport in hand, I also don't have to stand in a separate line from my Dutch family in airports, and be asked separate questions. Besides, I've saved some money on visas. These I consider convenient truths. It was *kapper* Hu who started the questions of identity rolling. When she had finished with me, one acquaintance asked '*Voel je jij een beetje Nederlander geworden*'? Another asked, '*En wat vinden ze van je nieuwe kapsel in India, dan*'? The questions surprised me. Hair, cut above the neck keeps one quite cool in forty-five degrees centigrade. My short hair brought me closer to feeling like a *heel gewoon* Punjabi, urban woman from New Delhi than anything I ever did, wore or was.

Within weeks of my first arrival (with my then long hair), in the Netherlands, I learnt the word *kapper*. After *fiets*, *ouders*, and *gezellig*. *Kappers* windows seemed to be everywhere and going to the *kapper* was *heel gewoon*. All the women I knew seemed to do it. One of them told me, she paid her *kapper* a handsome sum to get the feeling of being spoilt and looked after. She was served tea. Her hair was washed, combed and colored. When she left the place, she was lighter, more beautiful and had had the attention given to her that she deserved. This sounded familiar. My mother, who went to the hairdresser back home in India to have her hair dyed jet black felt the same. So when Hu asked me on the phone what I wanted, I *Nederlander* for the last five years, said '*haar laten knippen*'. I didn't say, 'and please make me feel like a princess by the time you are done'. I left that to her to decide.

Kapper Hu looks over my shoulder at the small document I place amongst her *flesjes* and *potjes*. 'Passpoort?', she asks surprised. 'No', I say. It's actually my Mumbai railway pass with a passport size photo. In that photo, my hair is short and that, I point to the photo and say, is what I want to look like. 'These days my passport is Dutch', I add, rather matter of fact. 'Mine too', she says sounding victorious and breaking into a broad smile. 'I got a Dutch passport last year after paying four hundred euro and my daughter in law paid eight hundred euro to get hers this year'. 'Why did you have to pay so much', I want to know? 'I don't know', she said. 'It's expensive'. She told me that she went to a Dutch language school three evenings a week to get *ingebughered*. I have heard her giving instructions to her elderly male secretary who is considered *autochtone*. So, I've already heard her speak Dutch as soon as I walked in the front door, unlike her younger Chinese colleague who tends to communicate in sign language. *Kapper* Hu did the Dutch exam four times – speaking, reading, writing and listening. Why four times I want to know? It was so difficult she says that she failed thrice. 'The fourth time I succeeded', she says, really sounding triumphant.

I point periodically to the photo before us trying to draw her attention to the haircut I want. I'm afraid *kapper* Hu's enthusiasm over our shared Dutch citizenship is going to be at the cost of my hair and my scalp. Her comb is as sharp as her scissors but her tongue is sweet. Someone told me that another Chinese expat who chose to live in India three centuries ago worked in a sugar factory and that since then, the Hindi word for sugar is 'Chini'. But that's another story of changing lands, languages and identities.

Later, at my children's school as I pull my warm wooly winter cap off my head, a bunch of mothers will look in wonder. 'How lovely!' they will exclaim. *Het staat je goed. Wat leuk!* Who did it one will ask? A Chinese lady, I will say. And then I will think to myself – because they know about cutting hair. In the India of my childhood, there were three vocations linked to the Chinese who lived there. 'Chinese' – that word spoken alone immediately meant a treat. It invoked a most special evening – a visit to a restaurant that my parents and all my family gifted themselves and each other to; the sauce, with tomatoes as in Indian style curry with pork, beef, fish or chicken to suit Indian tastes and castes. *Kulfi* – an ice cream that the lactose intolerant Chinese made especially for the clients of their adopted land. We also went to the Chinese when we wanted good shoes just before a trip abroad for instance. They made them by hand. And we went to the Chinese when we wanted to cut our hair. You could say they provided the services that upper caste Hindus left to those they considered lower in the hierarchy – handling the meat from animals, the hide of animals and human hair.

I hear the crash – a glass containing tea falls and breaks from the table before me as I walk into Shanghai Beauty Parlor. On a day when the snow is thick, I arrive in my big black boots just in time to hear *kapper* Hu in her lilting Chinese Dutch request her secretary to offer me tea as he sweeps the razor sharp shards from the floor. The first person I allow to touch my hair with a pair of scissors in a new land is *kapper* Hu. Am I still carrying some of that old baggage around several decades later? It's not about the caste system I try to convince myself. It's about trust. The Chinese – they know about real haircuts.

How far is India from here, *kapper* Hu wants to know, as her hands seem to fly around me. I say it's quite near China actually and try to explain graphically their positions by drawing a map in the air in front of me for her. Oh, she says surprised. What does a ticket to India cost from here? If you go this month it's about five hundred euro I tell her. And to China? I ask. She says this month would be about six hundred euro. In this way we try to understand how far we are from home, even as I watch the transformation taking place before me.

More excitement over haircuts ...have you seen Jessicaand Linde says she has also got into the mood. Apparently *kapper* Hu started off a chain reaction through me. A couple of ladies had asked me before the time of *kapper* Hu why I never went to a *kapper*. I didn't have any one proper answer. '*Te duur*' I said once. 'I like long hair', I said another time. 'It's against my religion', I said a third time, 'to cut hair'. I said this on the sidelines of the football field, while our eight year olds were passing by us. And still later, I would hear one of these boys tell another – 'the Indian girl in

our class has a mustache but she's not allowed to take it off. It's against her religion'. To which I would laugh whole-heartedly.

'More pointy', I say, terrified of the even fringe I see on my forehead. '*Ja, ja ongelijk*', says *kapper* Hu. Uneven. *Maar waarom zo kort?* But why so short, she wants to know? 'Are you a man'? Another of those questions. The hair drops off me to the floor as I stand and *kapper* Hu steps back to marvel at her work. 'You look ten years younger', she says. She's happy and so am I.

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Translation to the Dutch words and phrases:

kapper – hair cutter

Zo kort – so short

Nederlander – Dutch

Voel je jij een beetje Nederlander geworden? - Are you now closer to feeling Dutch?

En wat vinden ze van je nieuwe kapsel in India, dan? And what do they think of your new haircut in India, then?

heel gewoon – very ordinary

fiets - bicycle

ouders - parents

gezellig - cozy

haar laten knippen – get my hair cut

flesjes – little bottles

potjes- little pots

ingeburghered- integrated

autochtone – someone whose parents are born in the Netherlands

Het staat je goed – It suits you

Wat leuk – How nice

Te duur – Too expensive

Ja –Yes

Ongelijk - Uneven

Maar waarom zo kort – But why so short?