



MOSS

WIM CARPREAU

Excerpt from 'Moss' by Wim Carpreau

When we arrived at Scheveningen, we found an empty table on the south side of the promenade. The loudspeakers were pouring out Viennese music as I watched the sun set through my glass of beer.

The lights on the promenade went out. A murmur of approval came from the crowds on the terraces. From the darkness over the sea came the regular booming sound of the waves hitting the beach like a slow heartbeat.

“You’ll have a hard time finding a nicer place than this,” Steve yawned.

“But if you go abroad,” Antonio said, “you’re free. Nobody knows you and you can please yourself without people reminding you of your family honour all the time.”

The whole of mankind was reshaping the rules of living together. Surely there’d be lots of interesting new work to sort out all these new set-ups?

“Not for bums like us,” said Antonio. “For the Africans and the Indian, yes. For us no. We’ve had it. All there is left for us to do is to make friends with the Germans and the French and the English, and make Europe safe and comfortable to live in. It’s only a matter of time before the Africans and the Chinese have a go at making us do as they say.”

We shifted uncomfortably in our seats and ordered some hot pies.

“You mean we need a United States of Europe?”

asked Steve. "I suppose it'll come to that."

"I wouldn't mind. Europe would just be big enough not to feel you were living in a cage," Antonio said, waving at the waiter. "That's how we see it, living in this over-populated garden that is Holland. But the French and the English probably don't feel they are living in a cage at all. So they won't be so keen to let each other run each other's countries. I can't honestly blame anybody for objecting to the Germans running the shop though. They've had a go at it here so we know what we're talking about."

"The Germans can be a bloody nuisance, as rivals. But the way to render them harmless is to join them. All of us. The whole of Europe. That'd fix them. As long as they are on their own, they can do as they like. But if we become one big happy family, we can mess up their silly schemes much more easily."

I wanted to know what we could do about it all. Something constructive. The nations of Europe mustn't be childish. They should swallow their national pride. And foster a European awareness. But how to do it?

"I've got it," Antonio said. "We must all become travelling salesmen and sleep with as many innkeepers' wives as possible, all over Europe. So that lots and lots of babies are born everywhere with a subconscious understanding and insight into the needs of Europeans."

"A sound idea," Steve said. "I'm going home."
We paid the bill then sauntered back to the

square. We passed queues forming at tram stops and as we stood with them we saw a poster. Every Friday, it said, there was a lecture at the town hall for would-be emigrants.

“Let’s go and hear what it’s like,” I said. “How about it?”



Wim Carpreau in 1984

Home had been Anemone Street in The Hague. By 1946, however, it had been demolished to make a giant tank trap, and Laburnam Street had become a minefield to delay the Allied Invasion. Europe was recovering from the devastation of six years of war, and reshaping the rules of living together in peace. There was nostalgia for the old colonial days; there was hope for a United States of Europe.

Rootless young people were on the move, looking for a purpose, and a fulfilling life. There were hundreds of them on the roads, slogging along the highways of Europe, yet going nowhere.

Wim Carpreau came to England in 1953 and lived his dream of becoming an artist. Fifteen years later he wrote this autobiographical novel about his journey.