

Sparrow Girl

Aletta Mes © 2005

Dedicated to all those who made life more interesting, since that's the stuff of stories, and I could not have dreamt this up on my own

The people who came before...



My maternal grandmother was one of several sisters of a Flemish family in Antwerp. They were a strange and dark lot. For generations the women were involved in dispensing herbal remedies, reading tarot cards and the like. Reputedly they were all psychic. Through personal experience they were with exception of one, my great aunt Anna, heartless. Some had made especially good money in the service of wealthy women providing them with morning-after-potions for which I still have the family recipe. They had also performed kitchen table abortions. One of my great aunt, who was childless, had remained so by drowning her own babies at birth. This same great aunt had an extensive library of children's stories kept around to amuse children of guests. All these books were stories of children dying and going to heaven. I hated going to visit at her house.

The sisters married strange men, quiet or cruel (perhaps both). Fortunately with one exception, I had only limited contact with them. All I know of my maternal grandmother's parents is they were Flemish and Protestant — statistically an oddity as most of the Flemish are Catholic. My grandmother outright hated Catholics, the father of her first (illegitimate) child was a catholic..

Oddly enough, my maternal grandfather, my grandmother's first husband was a Catholic. Grandmother became blind at age

fourteen. A few years later she became pregnant by her employer, a Belgian aristocrat. My uncle was born out of wedlock. Along came my grandfather, a Royal Hussar, fell in love with my grandmother, Adela, and married her. He also adopted my uncle, Gabriel and gave him his surname, van Dongen.

He entered the family's shipping business and captained a Rhine barge through Europe. He was sixty-two years old when he fathered my mother, Jacoba. The birth occurred in the Netherlands aboard ship in 1928. Gabriel was Protestant, Jacoba christened a protestant by her mother, to be taken in secret by her father and christened in the roman catholic faith. The marriage did not last long. Ten years later they were divorced. My mother was in the custody of her father, Gabriel remained with his mother. The very possibility that a man should be given custody by the courts of his young daughter says something of her mother. The family had by then moved to land in Rotterdam. The second world was about to start and my grandmother was now married to a German, Breuer, who during the war used Dutch slave labour in his furniture factory.

My mother was an unwanted entity in their house. Consistently my mother would try to extract love from her mother. For her trouble she was abused, rejected, and in her early teens raped by her stepfather, more than once. When the rapes resulted in pregnancy, my grandmother put her professional knowledge to use by performing abortions on her own daughter. Meanwhile my grandfather had become a lay monk in the order of Saint Bernard and worked in the underground in Rotterdam. This left little time for his daughter and she was fostered by a variety of relatives. Several times when she had run to mother, the police were

dispatched to return her to her foster family. For a brief time she lived in a convent school, until the German bombs levelled it. She spend several days buried underground. She struggled for survival, scrounging for food for herself and her cousins. The time she had spent in the convent were her happiest as a child.

When the war ended she managed to become employed as a nanny in a wealthy Jewish family. Still later she entered nursing school. While still a student nurse she was employed by a family where the father suffered from advanced Parkinsons and the mother was terminally ill with stomach cancer. The family's youngest son was smitten with her and she with him. His bothers and sisters did not like the infatuation and did what they could to discourage it. Several months later Mrs. Mes died of her cancer, her grief stricken husband followed within months of a broken heart. My mother was dispatched with not so much as a thanks and she did not see the young man again for more than a year.

My paternal grandmother, Mrs. Mes, was a forthright woman who had loved my grandfather and he her since they were both fourteen. Their family had been started much later in their life together and the last son, Leendert, my father, was born when they were in their forties. My grandfather was not compelled to work for a living, the family owned land. My grandmother was educated in engineering and helped run the family coal shipping business. The family also owned a ship building business. The extended family, lived in one of three small towns by the Lek (a major Rhine tributary south of Rotterdam). Not only did they live there then but had for over five hundred years (probably more) documented and inbred extensively the family surnames crossing over repeatedly.

The women in the family were of extraordinarily strong character. An earlier Aletta (the first documented in the family was in 1470), Aletta Jacobs, was the first female physician in the Netherlands and a well known feminist in the early part of the 20th century. She founded the women's health centre in Amsterdam that still carries her name. My great aunt Aagje, married six successive millionaire husbands. The first husband died when he was in his sixties and the others simply couldn't keep up with her. She lived a single life from her nineties onward, dying at the respectable age of one hundred and thirteen. She had shocked everyone by wearing a purple dress when she married her first husband in the 1880's. Considering her father, it shouldn't have been such a surprise.

Great-grandfather, Cornelis, landowner, had many passions, one was the cello and he reportedly played very well. In his enthusiastic manner he choose to leave the constraints of the symphony and tour. But not standard touring. He and his chamber orchestra were playing atop a flatbed cart drawn by horses, playing from town to town, Music for the masses. Ever interested in things new and different he was also the first photographer in his area and his concerts and the members of his family are very well documented. As with most of the men in my father's side of the family, second wives (after one died, no one ever divorced), were always exotic from other places, Micronesians met on a pirate mission, among others and in his case a Paiute Indian he met when buying horses in Germany. She trained horses for Buffalo Bill's circus and they happened to meet. He took her home, married her and her name became Cornelia Paardekooper (Cornelia as his counterpart and Paardekooper because it means horse buyer).

My father inherited this penchant for the exotic and his mistresses were exotics from Africa, Burma, Mongolia, Mexico and those are only the ones I know about. The mixed blood is apparent as most siblings are varied in complexion, hair colour and shapes. Most had extremely long lives, my grandparents might have lived longer without the starvation of the second world war leaving them malnourished and weak.

My grandfather followed in his father's eccentric footsteps. He was an accomplished organist, violinist and saxophone player. He had known the inventor of the latter personally, Mr. Sax, and another friend Camille Saint Saens who wrote a piece for my grandfather featuring the sax, his now favourite instrument. He taught music, played the organ in the local church and oversaw the raising of his growing family. My uncle Cornelis (Cor), the eldest, played the organ professionally, my next eldest uncle Johannes (Jo) played the organ as well but never made it a career, he was a mechanical engineer and designed diesel engines for sea-going cruise ships. My father, the youngest by ten years to his next sibling, was not competent with any instrument and struggled through the musical studies forced upon him by his father. He became an inventor of scientific analytical equipment and an analytical chemist. My eldest aunt Machteld (Mach), married an engineer and raised a family. My other aunt Ingelina (Inge), became a nurse, married a bureaucrat and devoted herself to her husband and volunteer work with the red cross, she never had children, but had the soundest marriage I have ever witnessed.

During the war my father had an entirely different experience with it than my mother. He saw it as an observer. Living in a small

agricultural town made his community not a target. He watched the bombs light up Rotterdam with the same detachment one watches a fireworks display.



Living on the land the food was less scarce until the very last winter. Leeuwgie (little lion) as his siblings called him also managed to make extra money fixing motorcycles belonging to the occupying Wehrmacht.

He found the relationship between him and the occupiers a jovial one. These Germans were farm boys much like himself, only a few years older, and the war had not exposed him to horrors as it did my mother, who bore witness to mass murders and her own father's death. When the war ended the soldiers left their BMWs in his care. Leeuwgie's brothers had been in work camps during the war, my father was spared because he was too young. My uncle Cor never spoke of the experience and my uncle Jo started stuttering upon his return and was according to all, never the same again. Jo suffered throughout his life from nervous breakdowns and was several times hospitalized as a result.

At war's end his parents were both ill and he fell for the young nursing student who provided them with health care. Perhaps it was the exotic dark look of this girl, or the allure of the sophisticated reputation of city girl, or just chemistry. He found her again years later at a bus station and married a little over a year later. His

siblings were not happy with his choice. She was odd, Catholic (dad was Lutheran), from the city and came from a broken home.

The happy couple...



Leo (dad) and Coby (mom) married in Amsterdam in a civil ceremony on December 5, 1952. My mother worked at a vegetable market, took singing lessons and tried to adjust to living a “normal” life, something she had certainly never had. My father studied at Leiden and washed bottles part-time at Shell Oil Laboratories in Amsterdam. They became interested in alternate philosophies, tried moon cults, the occult, and finally settled into

Buddhism and Taoism. My parents were suddenly vegetarian, beatniks, following their creative tendencies, singing opera for mom, painting for dad. My mother wanted to start a family, my father, by his own admission, could have gone a lifetime without it.

*Once my heart was captured, reason was out the door,
deliberately and with a sort of frantic joy, I accepted
everything, I believed everything, without regret, without
false shame. How can one blush for what one adores?*

George Sand



After the rabbit died...

Early in my first pregnancy I read a study paper on the importance of physical contact between parent and child. I cannot recall the methodology that led to the conclusion which was, that in order for a child to truly thrive, the child needed minimally eighteen hugs a day until the child is school age (5-6).

For someone who cannot remember any physical contact with either parent this was both shocking and fear provoking. My own deprivation had resulted in an awkward adult where hugs were concerned. Some forty years plus into my life I am still anything but at ease with physical displays of affection. I have developed solid defence strategies against hugs and other routine socially acceptable, sometimes even required, physical contact with others.

There I was about to have a child and wanting to give him or her every advantage in life. Somehow I would have to find a way to get beyond the awkwardness and come up with the requisite eighteen hugs. You might think as I hope that once the child was in my arms it would easily and naturally be accomplished. It was not. Eighteen was a lot and they had to be actual expressions of love, not just a pick up and put down.

To this end I carried around in my pocket a check off list to keep track of each hug. For a year every day I carried the and checked

off the list, by then at last it came naturally — for me and for those on the receiving end.

To this day it is easy to hug my children, my sister's children, but beyond that it is trying, even painful to partake in physical expressions of affection. This is, I realize, my loss, a loss I feel acutely sometimes manifesting itself as a physical stinging pain across my chest. Obviously I have not managed to grow beyond being deprived of this physical contact. I find myself recoiling, as though threatened with great harm, by the attempt of others to hug me.

Table of Contents

The people who came before -i-

The happy couple... -viii-

Table of Contents -xi-

The Sparrows -1-

The Great Ape -5-

Bandages and Red Tulips -10-

A Sunday Walk in the Polder -14-

Saturn -19-

The Sinking Man -23-

Can't Ether -28-

To Be Believed -32-

There are no small floods... -38-

The Tree of Many Souls -41-

Meeting Death	<u>-48-</u>
Tonni's Yellow Frilly Dress	<u>-53-</u>
Overnight in the Country	<u>-58-</u>
First Snow	<u>-63-</u>
The Taai Taai Pop	<u>-67-</u>
Being an Only Child	<u>-70-</u>

The Sparrows

I am the sparrow girl once more. Back is the open honest humanness in touch with some of my feelings, feelings good or bad, as it should be. She is me again after a lifetime of timidly hiding amidst the pain inflicted by my history. For a very long time I experienced only the awareness of the feelings others had. I grieved their losses, shared their joy. My own blood ran tepidly through my veins, just barely keeping the sparrow girl alive so she might re-emerge later. Emotionally numb, she disappeared at age seven. No smile or tear on my face without her.

I began smiling again upon becoming a mother. Tears I still struggle with. I cry now, a little, over what happens in the present. I am still unable to face the stored losses and excruciating pain hoarded from the past. I fear if this beast were to barge through the defenses it might kill me. The last time the beast stirred, I had a heart attack. It is not safe to let him escape. I also know that I cannot restrain the beast forever.

Several weeks ago, acting out of some deep urge, I brought tree branches into my apartment. They had blown off during a winter storm, off the chestnut trees that line the street in front of my apartment building. Their shape twisted intricately, meandering from side to side, twisting backward in elegant curves, at every change of direction rounded knots. A light moss covered the widest part of the branches.

The first branch I mounted in the long narrow hallway, letting it curl and arch overhead. The next day I strung transparent little

Christmas lights on the branch. A few days later I added some sparse silk leaves. To have it there made me feel safe, happy even. A few more branches found their way into the living room, arching from the wall over my favourite spot on the couch. More little lights and some small yellow silk blossoms. At night, since I sleep on the couch, I can look up and see the branches, I feel safe, as though in their embrace, a patient calming embrace.

While browsing in one of my favourite dollar stores, my eyes fell on a decorative little nest with two life-like little sparrows, one perched and the other nestled. A flood of what I can only describe as warm flooded me. I could not move or think. Then I knew where my obsession with the branches came from, the sparrows. I was re-creating the last time in my life when I could truly feel. The last time I could honestly express how I felt, the anger, the pain, my desires.

In detail I remember. I remember the red wine-coloured winter coat with the loops and ivory buttons. My fingers gently moving through the mess of bread-crumbs held back at breakfast for the sparrows. It was a daily ritual. Save the bread-crumbs, sneak them into my coat pocket. Leave a little early to school. One block from our apartment building, set in the middle of a desolate new polder, there stood a single young tree. Its branches spread widely overhead. In it, a multitude of loquacious little sparrows chirped merrily on my approach. They never flew away. They knew about the bread-crumbs. It was just me and the sparrows. If I fed them, they would listen. A flock of therapists, fees paid in bread-crumbs. When they listened, the pain and isolation of a lonely, hurt five-year-old would

lift. The spring in my step returned, and my day was off to a good start.

My cold little fingers would find every last crumb as I chatted eagerly to my little friends about bad people and what they had done to me; how I missed my father; how I was scared at night; and the recurring dream of the tiger chasing me from grandmother's all the way home where I would find my father dead.



The downstairs neighbour, Mrs. van der Linden told me years later, at age eighteen, that I had been the subject of talk among the neighbourhood women. It was they who gave me the nickname sparrow girl. Some thought how sad and lonely. They never saw me playing outside or walk to school with a friend. Others simply saw it as sweet and amusing. Myself, if I ever see a little child having lonely discourse with little birds, I will have to speak with him or her. I need to think I can spare that child the grief of disappearing in a sea of life numbing isolation and despair.

Today, forty years since the sparrow girl stopped sharing her feelings with the sparrows, she is back. She can again feel. She can share those thoughts and feelings with her dog, cats, therapist and in a slightly censored way with those humans who are able to create a place of safety. One day, hopefully soon, there might even be someone providing safety and support sufficient to tease out the beast and no grievous damage will result. Sometimes I have the

pessimism to think that this will coincide with my last breath. Other times have the optimism to think that it is survivable and beyond it lies a life where shapes and colours are more intensely beautiful, sounds sweeter, touch more profoundly stimulating, taste more delicious, smells more evocative and my feelings wonderfully intense. Then, finally, I will be fit enough to have a healthy, rewarding relationships. My achievements will serve to make me feel good about myself instead of merely being useful for my resume. I will no longer be looking aimlessly for some way to feel satisfied with myself, but revel in being, achieving a constancy and contentment I see in others but cannot create for myself. There is nothing I envy more than those who are content with who they are, what they are doing, not seeking to please, but simply in a state of being pleased. I envy their constancy, never changing to suit others as I have always done, in the desperate attempt to be loved and cared for.

It took forty years to return to a place from where I can see the state of being content for myself. Glimpses of it flirt with me, teasing me to keep trying. And I do. I have, at last, people who are willing to help me, and I am finally learning to gracefully accept the help. I say gracefully, because in the past, my mistrust of people made me throw off the offers of help. I can and do trust again, skeptically and somewhat cynically perhaps, but that will fade in time. It has faded with those to whom I desperately need to confide. Not all has be confessed. I am weary of letting anyone know everything about me. It is the journey, and it needs to be travelled, I've chosen which way to turn, it has begun again.

The Great Ape

I must have been just shy of four years old. We lived in a modest apartment, in a very working class neighbourhood. You could tell a Dutch working class neighbourhood because the buildings were devoid of any character. Built just post war to quickly house the citizenry made homeless by the second world war. The nation was still poor from putting all collective resources into rebuilding it's cities and infrastructure. Wen by then, a decade or so after the war, certain goods were rationed. I would stand in line with my mother while she haggled with other women exchanging tobacco and sugar for coffee etc. It was nothing I was an part of. It was often cold, it rains a lot where I cam from.

We lived in a polder. Disconcertingly below sea level. Ours was one of the older apartment block, Bahrain Street. Much of this outlying area of Rotterdam was built in partnership with Shell Oil one of the larger employers. My father worked for Shell, first as a bottle washer in the labs, and at this time as a lab technician. He attended classes in Leiden. My dad was a tall lanky Dutchman. He suffered from baldness. This was not a natural baldness but one he had as a result of a refinery explosion at Shell. I did not know that or need to when I was only four. I thought that all fathers were bald, that how you could tell fathers from other men.

Other than Robbie Ringeling, the little boy who lived downstairs I had no contact with other kids. I lived my own little life close by the adults, I observed. I suppose I always felt removed. My dog was my good close friend. Cerbie was half chow, half wolf. He was noble and fiercely loyal. My father most especially loved

animals, he was a farm boy and stayed a farm boy at heart. After the war he had maintained a volunteer status at the Rotterdam Zoo. The zoo was bed and needed foster homes for some of their inhabitants as well as the manual labour and fund raising. Dad occasionally brought one exotic creature or another home and I had almost limitless access to visits (as determined by my parents). I'd played with animals most kids only read about. Large tortoises, strange birds, meerkats (love those).

It must have been early spring or late winter. I was wearing a new pair of mittens. Red mittens with kittens on them and real bells that made a lovely cling-ting sound as I walked. My mother had put them on an idiot chord. She was phenomenal when it came to sewing, her stitches could hold a battleship together. My mother had handcrafted bras from old clothes at the end of the war, for herself and sold some others for food money. You have to admire the resourcefulness. My dad was always in charge of sewing on buttons, something he became very adept at while in the army, he'd done a two year stint as an army medic.

My father had talked excitedly about this zoo trip, the ape exhibit was opening and the zoo now had a resident Mandril. He had shown me pictures. I understood that these "apes" were very large and came from the jungle, in Africa. I was happy to hear that these awfully large fearsome looking beasts were not native to where I lived, otherwise I doubt I'd have been able to sleep, ever again.

It was one of those guided tours, the insider gala to open the exhibit. It all looked very barren, painted freshly white not at all like a jungle. It smelled a lot like my grandmother's chicken coop.

I wondered naively if anyone every cleaned the place. I buried my face in mother's coat.

"Kijk Aletta (Look Aletta)", my father pointed at a very large cage on the right hand side. I sighed, this meant I had to look, even though I'd rather stay looking at the five or six meerkats playing "now you see me" behind a pane of glass. I thought I recognize one of them as a house guest we'd had.

It was hideous, I'd no idea why my parents would be so damn thrilled to see this big, albeit colourful beat. Its nostrils flared, it paced about nervously, knuckle dragging. Occasionally it would storm towards the cage wall and glare at the VIP crowd. The crowd was thrilled, nervous laughter, and big pompous men giving explanation. I was utterly bored. I hopped at bit foot to foot. Standing still is very hard on little children. I could have stood still, if I had meerkats to watch, but I'd as soon not look at the mandrill. My mind was quite made up that all such animals should stay in Africa and for my side of the bargain I intended never to venture into a jungle.

I'd made no note of the cage next to the mandrill. Many of the cages were still empty or animals were back in the private rooms at the back where they were fed, out of the public eye. So it neither came to my notice or anyone else's.

The large red ape had sidled right up to the cage wall virtually next to the small crowd, still sharply focused on the noisy, larger than life antics of the mandril. It says something that it did not set off my fear alarm at all. My face was buried in my mother's coat, it

filtered out the stink, and the mandril could not see me. My little fingers played with the bells on my mitten, I found the sound soothing, helped tune out the snarling ape.

There was the moment I was safely tucked into the coat, and then the next moment where I found myself righting myself, by myself, in the cage. The dirty stinking rotten ape had hold of my mitten, and managed with great force to pull me into the cage. I reached back. The crowd was gasping and shouting. My mom had managed to reach my hand, she held onto it firmly. She was brilliant. "She likes your mitten", she told me. Here you see the value of growing up in the midst of a war. She knew there was no ignoring this, and it was counter productive to raise my fear above what it already was.

I could see, looking at the great ape's eyes, that she did, in fact, want the mitten and not me. Unlike the mandril, this primate had kind eyes, and except for harshly pulling me into the cage with her, she meant no harm. lovely mitten.

"It is my mitten", the ape tilted it's head, trying I suppose, to understand. It stopped for a second. Then gave the mitten another tug. My mother was ready, she had my arm up high enough that the mitten could fly straight through, idiot chord and all. It was a good plan, but I was not having it. It was my damn mitten and she could not have it. My mother plead with "She wants it for her babies". Well, I could see she might have babies, she had breasts alright, so she was a mommy ape. With all my might I held on to the second mitten, the ape was walking away with the first one. Finally the chord snapped. I jumped back to my footing. I can quite recall exactly how it felt. My feet firmly planted, my little

hands on my hips. I now yelled "that's my mitten, I want it back....NOW!"

I think I could have got the beast to comply, I was absolutely certain of it. I could have, but a zoo keeper cam in and snapped me off my feet and carried me out. Just one mitten left. I spent some considerable time in front of the orangutan cage, a safer distance away, both parents trying to make me feel safe. Actually I was not feeling unsafe at all. This ape was a sweet animal, a mommy, who wanted something nice. I'd noticed none of the zoo animals had toys and thought that was sad. The Orangutan was contentedly taking apart my mitten.

My mom couldn't find another mitten with bells on it. Mom also never put idiot chords on my mittens. I always have bells in my sewing kit. Every once in a while, some child dear to my heart receives a pair of mittens at Christmas, with little bells securely sewn on. I love the sound they make.

Bandages and Red Tulips

My father, the devout pacifist that he was nevertheless had his duty as a Dutch citizen to spend at minimum a year in the service of his country. Mostly Dutch conscripts served within the country, disaster relief, that sort of thing. Because my father had a family and a job to support that family. Secretly my father had hoped to be sent away to Indonesia. Pirating ancestry had given him the wandering gene I suppose. To him the world outside Europe was one great Tarzan movie. He drew fantastic comic books of adventures through jungles meeting exotic tribes-women. I wasn't supposed to leaf through them, but they were just so marvellous and I was very careful.



Maybe he had thought they'd toss him out for being a pacifist. The very beginning he had already been thrown in detention for refusing to carry a loaded weapon. My father had an uncanny way of making everyone he met bending over backwards to make him happy. It was really quite beyond belief what he could get away with. Obstinate he refused again and again until finally it was negotiated that he carry an unloaded weapon and go from

regular army to medic. this was particularly laughable since my father fainted at the sight of even a little blood. In battle I could only imagine him utterly useless passed out somewhere, swooning on waking to find his bloodied comrades.

My father was however unaffected by notions of inadequacy. Instead he threw himself into all facets of being an army medic. And my life as a four year old became infinitely more interesting. Every weekend when he was allowed to come I would wait on the balcony for his slim, fatigue clad body to come from the bus stop, pulling along an oversized duffel-bag and in his arms a generous bouquet of bright red tulips. I jumped up and down until he saw me, then ran down the stairs to meet him. I knew I was not allowed to cross the street, but I had the routine fully times just so. With magic only fathers have he would scoop me up, keeping stride and not dropping a single bloom.

The first hour I had to keep my mouth shut. That was understood. Daddy would hug mommy and I would drag his duffel-bag to their bedroom. As tempted as I was I did not open it. I did not have a clear notion of just exactly what soldiers did. soldiers wore uniforms, itchy woolen uniforms. They carried guns, and they were apt to get injured. That's why my daddy had a duffe-bag with lots of different bandages.

After mommy and daddy had finished their hugging and chatting I would implore him to show me the bandages. Now it was my time. Mam would obligingly stay in the living room and happily play the piano or sing, and we would sit on the floor and play with the contents of his duffel-bag.

No one in the world could bandage body parts faster and better than my dad. He would practice on me and then I'd get to practice on him. He was massively entertaining, he would limp, and collapse and I got to fix it all up. In between he would tell one of

his delightfully silly jokes: "Aletta, how does a cow catch a bunny rabbit", this was my favourite...

"Dunno."

"The cow sits behind a blade of grass and makes the sound of a red cabbage"

and he would leap out and grab me over his shoulder.

"Do you know why a red cabbage and not a green one?"

"No."

"Green cabbages", and here is where he would shake with laughter and he had to be prodded to finish the sentence "don't make sounds, you silly girl".

In silliness he would bandage my feet together and have me hobble around being just as silly as he. Quite the feat really, I was always painfully self-conscious, that was my natural state, only with him could I be so silly. My mam was completely devoid of silliness. Neither of us was comfortable being silly when she was in the same room, a strange sobering effect. Mam walked in and a quiet matter of fact mood suddenly predominated. Neither of my parents was very physically demonstrative with their affections. Affection in our house was mostly verbal. I was told they loved me, I did not lack compliments, there was lots of attention, easy as I was really an only child for seven years of my life.

The times he was on call to go to Indonesia he took weapons home as well. A machine gun and a sidearm. This is when I learned all about keeping guns clean and oiled. In time he came to like his guns, but not to use against people, just inanimate targets. I don't think my dad had it in him to shoot another human being to save himself, but easily would have to save others.

Some weekends army buddies would gather for coffee just before they all took a train back to base. Huge bonus for me, most did not have children, I reasoned that is why brought me chocolate. If they had their own children I would not have got all that much. Mam would collect up the chocolate so I could have a piece each day that week. diving in and finishing the lot was not an option. The whole lot of them would clown around as they left. They disappeared in the shimmer of the sunset, laughing loudly, and our evening at home would be terribly silent and sullen. Every night I would think of dad as I bandaged my dolly Maggie as dad had taught me. One day I could be a medic, after all I had the bandaging down to an art.

A Sunday Walk in the Polder

Some families spent their Sunday's going to church, we didn't, we took a long walk. If the weather was particularly good we would bicycle. Well, more specifically my parents would bicycle, to some new place to explore at leisure. This was a particularly bright and sunny day in the middle of summer. A real scorcher by Dutch standards. I rode with my father in a child's bicycle seat, one that would have been met with gasps of disapproval by today's standards. It was black metal and red vinyl and collapsed when not in use. Mom's bicycle had a large wicker basket in which the family dog rode. Not one person we knew well owned a car, there was always those days a very small number of motor vehicles comprised mostly of the cheapest of Citroëns and Volkswagen bugs.

I could smell that we were coming closer to the sea, it was in the air. Sea gulls screeching with delights as their extended wings caught every warm air current, endlessly gliding along. Everything here was either sand coloured or sea green. Only tall patches of grass broke the very flat landscape, all of it an extended quilt of sandy lifeless polders and squares of grass, just occasionally a patch of houses.

One such patch of houses was Spijkernisse. There were no new buildings like the ones in Hoogvliet where we lived. Here the air no longer reeked of the refineries. The quiet here was quite shocking to the system. Our normally chatty family was just now silent, we were blending in, at one with the calm.

We came to the very edge of a brand new polder, not a building, a road, or even a blade of grass, nothing. There was only packed sand dotted by small stones and decaying jellyfish. Seagulls were diving for any small thing that moved. As I was being lifted out of my kiddy seat I could see my dog Cerbie running as fast as he could in a straight line, running back after seemingly hitting the "limit" and repeating, over and over. By the time we started walking away from the bicycles the dog was already panting.

To my little girl mind this place looked as though it needed Bedouins on camels crossing the sand. If I squeezed my eyes and imagined I could see them as a mirage at the horizon. Here and there I found a seashell. I kept as many of the nice ones as would fit in the pockets of my bright blue knee pants. Some of these shells would walk away, dad told me to put those back. Taking them would be like stealing a small animal's house. Clearly, that was a bad thing to do.

"Look Cobie" my father beckoned to my mother who was busy throwing a stick for the dog to fetch. He showed her the small treasure he had found was a perfect bleached bird skull. Absolutely white and perfect. I thought it was a little creepy, wondering if that meant people's bones could be found here as well. Could we find our way back to the bicycles?

Judging distance as a child does, by how tiring the walk and if familiar objects are still in sight or not, we were certainly very far from where we started. My father lived for these treasure hunts, a stone, a bone, and old magazine, everything was a great event in his life. Then as now, I marvel at his capacity for finding great

excitement in what others might have found utterly mundane. It was catching, he could make anyone with us, excited as well.

On the far horizon we could now see the tall grasses marking the polder's edge. At one end of the very straight horizon was the dyke at the other in the distance, the small town of Spijkernisse. It was obvious by how quickly my father started to walk that he had spotted something. "Come", he smiled from ear to ear, he looked back to where my mother had come to a full stop. The wind was playing gently with her skirt, her dark red hair glowed in the hot sun.

It was easy to understand looking at her standing there, why my father had abandoned his family to pursue her, marry her, and ultimately have me. She was beautiful. She used her very considerable skills as a seamstress to turn the hand-me-downs from more well-heeled friends and relatives into stunning clothes copied painstakingly from the pictures in the latest fashion magazines of the day. He announced back to her "I think there is a German Tank back there!"

I did not know exactly why, but I had clued in for some time that "German" was not a good thing. Four year olds have limited concepts of history and the world, but I knew in our house, German was bad, especially for my mother. The sound of the word would make her blanch, her eyes would become glazed and sad, she would retreat. I think my father regretted saying just as soon as it came out of his mouth. His smile faded. Only the seagulls had something to say.

This was my cue to zone out. This was adult stuff I wanted no part of. This was a good time to spin, and spin and keep on spinning. Everything was a sea green and sand blur. The soles of my feet were burning inside my jellyfish sandals from rubbing the grains of sand deep into my skin. I was still turning until I fell back into the sand laughing, giggling, unable to get up.

"Would you like to come and see it?" My father stretched his long hairy arm out to me. How could I refuse. I mean really? He might feel hurt and rejected, he was so excited, how could I refuse? My mom looked so alone back there. I bit my lip, said nothing and raised myself up. Daddy dusted the sand off me. I held to his shoulder as he took off each sandal and shook out the grains of sand, he brushed my feet clean. I had to go, I would be extra nice to mom later. Even if it was "German" I knew my dad would make sure I was safe.

Mom and the dog worked their way back to the bicycles by the road. It was a big, ugly broken thing. It sat angrily staring at us from out of the long grasses. Most of the remains of the war had been put to scrap, somehow this beast, this great metal dragon, had been missed. The metal was hot, I could feel it as we came close. My father explained how it would be like an oven inside the tank. He was practically jumping up and down with excitement. I thought it might be just the sort of place you'd find human bones. "Is anyone in there?" I asked nervously. "No, wanna see? Before I could answer, or even come up with how I felt about it, dad disappeared in the belly of the metal dragon. It was half on it's side, the small trap door to get in faced away from me. Slowly and with

great trepidation I walked around. My father's extended arm poked from it.

It had an odd smell inside, a little like the refinery and the damp in the basements of old houses, and old sweaty things in the laundry basket, a little like that. It was barren except for some metal boxes, and it was these that my father was completely absorbed in. He held up each of what he found, hammers, wrenches, pliers, all kinds of tools. "These are wonderful" he exclaimed. Apparently the "Germans" were nasty buggers, but they made the best tools. Certainly a boon to dad, on his salary tools were something he could rarely indulge in. He put them in a satchel. Before putting me outside the beast, he did give me a fine show and tell about the technical advancements of tank building, and the painstaking attention to making it last, something I could sense from my father was an exceptional trait peculiarly common in all things "German".

To this day these tools are still in use in our family, I have the hammer and one wrench, my mother pliers. My mother cherished the small bird skull for years until we moved to Canada, there was a very small limit for what we could take with us. My father would occasionally note with some regret that he never did go back, there was certain to have been more in the way of tools. I think he let it go and we never went back because he could not bear to see my mother in pain.

Saturn

According to my mother, my first visit to a museum happened on the very day I was released from hospital a few days after birth. My father triumphantly carried me from room to room through the Rijksmuseum. Rarely did a week pass by that we were not in one great museum or another. One of the perks to being an Amsterdammer.

My father had inherited the painting gene in his family. He did for a time when I was about three try supporting us on the sales of his paintings. He had also luckily inherited the sales and marketing abilities which had long kept generations from having to pursue "real" jobs. Collecting rent is a long cry from a real job. It must have been a crushing brush with reality, washing bottles and lab equipment at Shell Oil's laboratories.

Both my parents had been cheated of a high school education, both were just 17 when WWII ended. Dad took night school and worked to bring himself up to where he could attend University, nothing was handed him. My mother either, she worked as a nanny and private nurse to underwrite her nursing studies.

On this particular day I was the daughter of the Artist. I had no notion, no idea if we were rich or poor. I knew I was loved and cared for. My parents took a great deal of time to point out the wonders and beauty of the world around me. I hung on every word, I was a sponge. I loved everything about my parents' interests, it was our bond. I shared painting with dad, opera with mother. I studied every stitch my mother performed with her

patient and talented hands. I sat excitedly by father as he painted, I can see them still if I close my eyes. It explains, perhaps why my paintings, without any intent, look so much like his work.

Rotterdam, was and always will be my favourite place on this earth, my holy place, it is in my heart even when I cannot get there myself. That is where my tiny hand touched the bronze foot of Degas' ballet dancer. It is where, in my opinion, the most beautiful clocks ever made, tick harmoniously now as in centuries past. These are the survivors, valuable enough that war and fires did not destroy them. Nothing chronicles history as well as paintings do. There for me to see in one room the Armada fights at sea, and in another, Bosch's Tower of Babel's staggering detail (the painting is barely a square foot in size) speaks of an artist sparing no amount of his very spirit to put on canvas (actually I believe it is on wood) all of what one moment in time could possibly mean. Within the one story of the painting there are dozens of smaller stories. I've spent hours with this painting and still have not fully taken it all in.

Of course little girls cannot keep up with adults, their legs will get tired. This day there were paintings on loan from another gallery -- the specifics I do not know, just that it was very special -- with a great deal of excitement my parents had gone room to room. When I became tired the first time I was allowed to lie on a bench in the grandfather clock room. My parents could then spend some time in the adjoining room which had remarkable seascapes.

My father's and also my mother's family had been in the shipbuilding business for centuries, it follows they had some considerable knowledge and interest in the subject. At age four or so the details

of one ship versus another are not terribly interesting. It was by far my favourite place in the world to take a nap, watched by the timeless timepieces, hearing them tick tock with a sense of the infinite.

On the second floor in the room with the blue walls I did my best to show how tired I had again become. Why? Because I still did not like mandrills, and in this room there was an intimidatingly large painting of a mandril by Kokoschka. Daddy picked me up, while he admired the Kokoschka I looked out of the window, where below in the courtyard large zaftig bronzes looked pensively at each other. The window was a welcome view, I did not like blue walls, I still don't. The next room had green walls. Some very nice landscapes.

I lay down on the bench in the green room I imagined myself walking through each of the landscapes. I was very tired, there had been a lot of walking, my shoes pinched. I sat up to look for mom and dad. I was alarmed when I could not find them. Maybe they had gone for another look in the blue room, being how fond they were of those awful mandrills. I turned my little groggy head around. There, directly behind me was the most ghastly nightmarish sight I gasped, gurgled choked by the fear of what faced me. I let out a scream. I think I had everyone's attention. My dad swept me up, my mother grabbed me.

An apparent lapse in parental judgment had put me down for a nap facing away from Goya's "Saturn Eating One of His Children." I loathe that painting, even more than a mandril. How could a father eat his child, or any child. What monsters were there in my world? I held on very tightly to my mommy. That was the very last time

-22-

that I ever took a nap anywhere at Boymans' other than the clock room.

The Sinking Man

In most children there is a recurring image of the parent, dead, forever gone. Overwhelmingly this seems to be mother who dies horribly leaving the child alone in the world with little or no hope of surviving. We are as children all potential Bambi's.

All through my childhood as early as I can remember there was the nightmare of being chased into a basement by a tiger, to find my dad dead, the wall splattered with bits of him. Little me standing there utterly without the ability to escape, the great cat's breath steaming the back of my neck. I'd wake up the sheets drenched, clammy, shaking. Those dreams stopped, just after my father died when I was twenty. Dad was more than a parent he was always, without question, an ally in life, the only person in whom I had total trust.

Several times a week my mother and I made the trip into Rotterdam. Mams had her voice lessons and rehearsals. Mams had an incredible mezzo-soprano voice, warm, agile without any affectation. When I was two she had applied for national audition and won a place on scholarship at the conservatory, her private lessons were also on scholarship. since my father was also a student there was a scarcity of monies which necessitated taking me everywhere rather than parking me with a baby sitter. What luck, limitless concerts by the best opera had to offer. Some very impressive divas sung me lullabies, and some of them seemed to be nice people (I said some!)

This particular time it was a very overcast and rainy day. On the way to rehearsal Mams took me to the nearby bakery for a fresh buttered bun with brown sugar. It was not good to have me become fussy from hunger part way through rehearsal. It was not difficult to be completely amused during rehearsal, the music was wonderful. Spectacular drams took place between the director, conductor and cast. There was a great deal of huffing and puffing and ruffling of feathers. There were not dull people here, many of them found time to focus on me, I was allowed to browse through purses and many chocolates were employed bribing me to silence during their arias. During lunchtime we would walk to the walking malls where the most beautiful parrots perched, occasionally screeching insults at passers-by. There was a second buttered bun in Mams' purse for having as we'd sit on a bench while watching traffic pass by.

Around three we would pack it all up and rush to the bus-stop. I would take my nap on the way home. It wasn't worth fighting sleep based on the scenery. Only what seemed like many miles of polder landscape, one long horizon with dirt on the bottom and dark grey sky above. The only wildlife was the occasional gull. I'd seen it all before.

I was half dazed stepping out of the bus. The brick lane atop the dyke was glistening with rain. A light fog billowed up from the ground at the bottom of the dyke. Not all of this polder was ready to build on yet. The ground could be very unstable, especially after a long rain. We stayed on the roadway, walkway really there were no cars, this was foot and bicycle traffic only. We would take the stairs to the walkway and then walk straight ahead until the

buildings of Hoogvliet appeared. The first few buildings were stores, not many, it was all very new here. Most shopping was done at the weekly market or on the other side of Hoogvliet where there were shops who accepted the rationing coupons. To make the walk more enjoyable Mams and I would sing and skip.

Suddenly there was a lot of fuss and screaming. Just directly ahead there were people standing just off the road. It took a few hard looks to notice what was up. It is very hard to focus one's little eyes with raindrops falling in them and mother pulling you along. Although I could not see the man clearly, I was instantly convinced it was my father. He was tall, lanky and had a balding head. His coat was long and dark. Of course that description fit most every second man living there. Reason, if I'd been old enough to have reason, would have cast considerable doubt. After all my father did not come home for some time. At age four, most kids are a little fuzzy about where fathers spend those hours. Work can simply be defined as something father did when he was not at home.

New polder was quicksand in places. That's why the buildings here were erected on the most enormous pylons hammered into the soft near liquefied ground by pounding machine you can imagine. Most of my morning started out with these hammering machines pounding pylons at daybreak. Day by day the giant orange and black hammers would move a little further away. All of Amsterdam is built on pylons, one marvels how this was achieved without the use of combustion engines. These were not a little noisy, these were very angry monsters and the earth would lightly shake so we could feel it living on the second floor.

On this day a man had gone off the walkway, trying to cut some time off his daily commute. On this day it did not take a great hammer striking him to get the man started sinking into the ground. I saw him second by second, sinking. And no one could do anything. A few of the bystanders had linked themselves together trying to reach him. It was not possible. Before his outstretched arm could grab theirs the earth had swallowed him up whole. I yelled, I don't know what I yelled, I just remember yelling and my throat hurt I yelled so loud. My screams were only part of the cacophony emanating from the polder. My mother grabbed me and pulled me away from there as fast she could. Just as the men with stretchers and digging equipment were coming down the walkway. I cried, sobbed. My mother did not make a sound. Five years of living in the middle of an urban war zone had made her very efficient at dealing with moments like these. I can only imagine now how she might have felt. I only remember how silent she was and how quickly we got home.

I was put on my little box by the stove my coat left on until the coals got hot enough. Mams who had still not said anything was already clanging teacups and putting on a kettle. Stressful moments at home always involved some hot sweet beverage. As I warmed up I heard nothing but the reassuring rush of her skirt brushing back and forth behind me. We sat and had a little sweet tea and a cookie. She kept telling me dad was going to be home for dinner. I doubted her. I'd seen him swallowed up by the ground, with my own eyes. Still I wanted her to prove me wrong. She was making dinner, peeling potatoes. Now I was starting to think maybe she knew better.

I was still sad, if it was not my dad, it was someone's dad (since it follows all balding men were dads) and children want their daddies. I was warming up, and it was a very good cookie. I watched as each coil of potato peel fell to the floor.

My father had a distinctive walk. I always listened for him, if the dog made his way toward the door it was a very good bet dad was nearby. I could hear his "pet, pet, pet" sound in the stairway, I could hear him brush the soles of his shoes as he always did against the doormat. She did not lie. He was home. I clung to his corduroy padded legs and my mother very quickly told him how the man had sunk into the polder and how I had become certain it was him. I don't know for certain if this was the day the nightmares started, I do know I never took parents for granted. I did not tell them how scared I was and how sad because he was probably someone's dad. That kind of thing was not encouraged. It was all made out to be not quite so important. In the scheme of things, since they both had grown up in the middle of a war, perhaps it was not devastating anymore for them, and perhaps they could not remember back to a time when death was not part of the daily landscape. I was terrified for a very long time. Certainly I never wandered off the path, I am still very much a between the fences sort of person. That was a very costly shortcut.

Can't Ether

I was born in mid-winter, and by all accounts an exceptionally cold winter. Most babies in the Netherlands, were and still are born at home. Only pregnancies designated as high risk were birthed in hospital. By virtue (we'll let my mother debate whether it qualifies as virtuous) of being post mature, and because in that tenth month I had decided to come forth in reverse my mother was given consent to have me at the hospital, Het Wilhelmina Gasthuis in Amsterdam. All efforts to cajole me into a somersault to face round had failed. It was cold, can you blame me wanting to stay inside?

On my own terms, as always, I arrived without the doctor being present. I've been thumbing my nose at doctors for as long as I can recall. Must be genetic. Central heating was not something there was lot of back then, and the Netherlands normally has an unvaryingly temperate climate. I developed my first case of pneumonia before leaving the hospital. No doubt terrified my parents. None of my childhood housing had central heating, there were several more bouts of pneumonia and dreadful respiratory infections. In the fifties this had but one outcome, the tonsils and adenoids would have to come out. Happened to almost everyone, a rite of passage usually before the first grade. I was four.

My father had one set notion about doctors, they were all useless charlatans, not to be trusted. His parents were dead in their early fifties and although it most likely had more to do with the lack of medications during the war, he blamed doctors who were impotent to stop his parents dying. My grandmother died of stomach cancer and my grandfather died several months later from Parkinson's. My

father was their youngest of five children, he had never seen his father healthy and his mother around whom his world revolved became ill when he was about eight. My mother had been their private nurse, this must have had something to do with his utter devotion to her, he could forgive her everything.

My parents had a naturopath but after no dietary changes and potions had kept me falling ill again and again a pediatrician was consulted and of course, the predictable outcome. Even at age four I knew something was terribly wrong for my father to be acting that way. He was silent, not funny, his eyes were vacant, my mother just the opposite, she was trying too hard to be entertaining. Parents did not confide much in their children. I was told "it" would hurt only a little, I would go to sleep and on waking would get ice cream. I'd only had ice cream only once before, and I very much like it. Still, it felt wrong, this was much more serious than they were letting on.

It was a very noisy and confusing place. There were very few colours, everything was white or grey or sickly green, save for some red crosses here and there. My father had one of those on his army gear. The hallways were very long, the floors were slippery and nurses were walking by crisp skirts making starched crinkly sounds. The sisters did not have an elegant gait like other women in their street pumps, these sisters walked with angry resoluteness. My father always stumbled when he was stressed, he was bumping into every wall and gurney. My mother finally gave him a task to fetch a snack and he was happy to be able to leave the hospital for the store. Whatever I was there for was taking a very long time and we had to stand in queue to boot.

Our name was called at last and we were ushered into a darker room, people were piled against the walls, children in mother's arms, stony faced fathers looking as though they'd rather be shot than spend one more moment. Periodically a rather mannish nurse came in and picked from the crowd the next child to come in. I did not like the look of this. The chosen child was draped in a white sheet with nothing on but panties. I dreaded the cold. Each one was taken alone without their mom into? Some children screamed, others cried. My parents told me it would be alright and I should not be afraid, be brave. Yeah, like they were going in!

Eventually that horrid woman took me with her. The operating room was small, dark with one light glaring above a single chair, I was handed to a smaller nurse sitting in that lone chair. The big one picked up a cone shaped thing which was coming towards my face. I was told to take very deep breath. I saw no point arguing, clearly I was outnumbered. There was one psychedelic swirl and that was all.

That was all not just for that moment but for several days. The magic potion was ether and I had been allergic to it. They were unable to do the procedure and I awoke with all parts intact some days later. It took many days to be able to walk again. As devastating as all that was, finding that I had not even been given any ice cream after all that was even worse. When the error was pointed out my very relieved parents forked out the funds to fetch some ice cream right away.

Of course there were no options to the ether unless my parents could afford the high price for a private procedure with a general

anaesthetic. Trust my dad to find an alternative. One of his school chums had been dabbling in the art of hypnosis, largely as a parlour entertainment. As a favour he'd managed to arrange to hypnotize me at the hospital and without any other medications both tonsils and adenoids were removed without any fuss at all. There was almost no recovery time and my dad's friend even sprung for celebratory ice creams for all of us afterward.

To Be Believed

There is always a pivotal moment, the day or moment everything changes, in all truly broken or damaged people this happens before age six. since it is pretty much a given that the central character in your life before age six are relations, these people into whose life we found ourselves without any control of our own have extraordinary power. They can break, mend, destroy or empower us. While events in later life may give us neuroses events in our very early years set the stage for full-blown madness. It is therefore completely such that madness is never our fault, but the fault of those early relationships marked by abandonment, terror, manipulation, betrayal, incest and so on.

My early years were spent almost entirely in the company of adults. It was not a matter of preferring them, merely, that is what was. I was an only child until my sister was born when I was already nearly seven. My mother has to this day very poor social skills, sooner or later she alienates everyone. As a small child we depend on our parents to arrange friendships and social contact for us, especially if one lives in a city. My father had friends at work and at university, but they rarely came over and none had children. My mother's social contacts were either through my father's friends or had to do with her operatic career. I am completely uncertain why there were no children for me to play with except on very rare occasions.

My mother had no family to speak of. her mother was still alive, in this case not a good thing at all. My grandmother was the most evil person I have ever known, her husband (not my grandfather) came

a close second in the evil category. You might notice here and there while recounting this that I become vague and expect you to fill in the blanks. I need to be a bit vague, there is much pain associated with all this. The passage of 45 years has not lessened the pain a bit. I will make a few statements which will allow you to more easily fill in the blanks. Firstly, through no fault of my own I lost my virginity far ahead of puberty. Secondly because of all this I lost favour with my mother, for the most part I became invisible to her.

Over the last few years I've learned a lot about my mother's own experiences, and how she most definitely earned her madness. My sister attended our grandmother's funeral not out of love or respect, but to be absolutely certain the bitch was buried good and deep. As I learn even more about my grandmother and her husband I respect my mother more for surviving and not modelling parenting after her mother. My mother was physically, emotionally and sexually molested by her stepfather, and her mother had enabled him to do so. My grandmother had aborted my mother's pregnancy when she was only eleven. The second world war did not hold a candle to the damaging effects of my grandmother.

My grandmother was Belgian born, the fifth daughter, I am not entirely sure why but at age 14 she became blind. This limited her choices in life. She did not hold marriage potential and ended up cleaning homes to make a living. As was often the case she found herself pregnant with the bastard son of her employer, my uncle Gabriel. If life was not hard enough she now had a son to care for. The baby's father was a Catholic, my grandmother was Protestant. She then met an older man, he fell in love with her, and my

grandmother opted for the security this much older man had to offer her.

My grandfather, Hubertus van Dongen, was also a Catholic, he cheerfully adopted Gabriel and shortly thereafter my mother was born. She was born on a barge on the river, my grandpa was the captain of his own ship. My mother spent her first few years travelling Europe's river system. Eventually my grandmother became impatient with the lifestyle took her children and moved to Rotterdam. She divorced and married a German furniture manufacturer he did very well during the war using forced labour to make his bottom line very attractive. It did not bother my grandmother that this man was the enemy. In a highly unusual move the courts had given custody of my mother to my grandfather.

Just imagine for a moment how bad the situation had to be to award custody to the father in 1940. There was a constant tug of war with my mother running to mother believing this time mommy would want and love her, repeatedly she would be abused and tossed back into the streets.

No matter how dreadful mother is to a daughter, the daughter will not ever be whole unless she has some sort of normalised relationship with mother. No matter how wonderful, even saintly the foster mother or adoptive mother might be, it cannot ever substitute for the love of the biological mother. There is not time limit on this, the only other chance at the wounds healing is the death of mother. My now relatively normal relationship with

mother only started after my grandmother died, Mams started healing at that point. In a nutshell, this is how it all was.

It happened only rarely that my mother could not take me to classes or rehearsal, or perhaps it was just simply that my mother wanted to forge a relationship with her mother. I suspect that it is a matter of using sparrow girl as barter for her mother's affection. Here is your grandchild, are you happy, can you love me now?

Perhaps because in general people knew or understood very little about childhood sexual abuse. It always seemed to make sense that as people became elderly they'd stop raping little children. That's something we are now a lot more clear about. Rapists don't stop, ever. My mother needed to believe it had all changed these were now elderly people, and who could hard such a sweet little child? Seems hard to grasp that the victim now brings her own child to the home of the abusers and leaves her there to be babysat. I'd like to think that there was no malice on the part of my mother, extreme denial, naivete, but not malice. I don't expect to ever know either, this is not a topic I can discuss with her, nor do I want to.

I'd been to see my grandmother several times. She had chickens in her back yard. I loved chickens, they were every bit as affectionate as cats. She also had a seeing eye dog named Hermina. The husband, Breuer, hated the dog, she was not allowed in the house and was kennelled in the back yard. I loved that dog, always felt safe in the kennel with her. We both hated him. Some years later Breuer beat this beautiful dog to death.

They hurt me. I had no way of understanding what was going on. I hated the coarse washcloths my grandmother would use on my private parts, the soap made me itchy. She was anything but gentle. Breuer always reeked of tobacco and alcohol. He wheezed as he spoke. That's as much detail as I can bear to offer up. Unless you've lived your life in a cave, I think you can fill in the rest perfectly.

My father was my hero. He had an incredible passion for people, he was entertaining, kind and empathic, with everyone. He loved me, I knew it, there was never any doubt. He spent time with me, sometimes just watching the clouds roll by making up stories as the shape of each passing cloud dictated. He would tell really absurd jokes. he always laughed before telling the punch-line. If there was anything in my world which did not make sense, he had answers. I trusted him and he respected me as a person, a very young person. My mother had not made me feel that way. I was never quite sure where I fit into her world. I knew she loved me, but the relationship between us was shaky, often I was completely invisible to her. I think I was a trophy more than a daughter.

I had been traumatised but I had no concept of shame, thank goodness. The beauty of a Buddhist upbringing. My father had noticed I was withdrawn and unhappy. So he took me for a walk, and we talked. I had no secrets, I just simply told him what was bothering me, very concisely. My father was brilliant. He did not jump to anger, he listened, he consoled. I felt loved and cared for. He did not question my veracity. He had brought me up to believe that truth was all important. Aletta means truth. I did not cry, I simply told the truth. Dad told me I'd never have to go back there.

That ended it for me. I was ok, I did not have to go back. I was only a little sad about not seeing the chickens or Hermina anymore.

When we got home I was told to go to my room and play. My life was not going to be the same. It was the first time I had ever heard my father yell at my mother. My mother cried. This was very bad. I was at the centre of an argument. This would seriously harm my standing with mother. She would resent me, I just knew it. That is all I will tell you about it. It had to be said, otherwise you might not understand why this little girl had such problems being happy and fitting in. My age of innocence had ended at age five.

There are no small floods...

Most morning I would awake to the sound of the pylon drivers at the end of our street. Those were familiar sounds the kind you can easily sleep through. This particular morning was devoid of the usual loud banging which would start at 7 am. I heard voices in the apartment and not my parents voices either. This was highly unusual, people never came calling before 11 am, and those occasions were very few indeed.

There was something very strange about the voices. I tried very hard to listen to what was being said but I could not make it out. I was very unsure that I should come out of my room. Why were there people in my apartment? Why had the pylon drivers not started their banging, and -- this was important -- why had my mother not come to wake me with my morning kiss and take me to have breakfast?

I tried pulling myself up to the window frame in my room, but it was too high up and I kept falling down. It looked like another rainy day. Between tries at listening through the door and pulling myself up to the window I crawled back into bed, my feet got very cold very fast. I would risk mother getting angry if I came out before she came to get me, those were the rules. So I waited a little longer, until I could not longer stand it.

There were even more voices once the door was opened, exited voices, new voices. Those were people I did not know. I was becoming a little more frightened now. I shuffled my way to the living room. I noticed the coat rack was completely full and there

were shoes parked by the apartment's outer door, shoes that did not belong to either me or my parents. I hesitated to come around the corner, but I did.

There were a lot of people in my apartment, looking out of the large picture window in the living room. There were many teacups on the table. I had not idea we even had that many tea cups. My mom was not in the living room. If there was tea, maybe she was in the kitchen. I was torn, do I look out the window and find what everyone was so terribly interested in, or, do I go to find mom? Just then I heard her laugh in the kitchen. so she was there, and she was fine. I could assume then, that these people were permitted entry. that left me free to go to the window. Whatever it was so absorbed everyone that no -one took any notice of me being there.

It was gloomy, barely any daylight, the endless horizon streaked across the back of the landscape, dreary, grey. So what was the excitement? I drew nearer the window, we were on the third floor, single family dwelling, just completed a little while ago were across the street and behind them, nothing, just polder, field, some sheep, and cows. When I got to the window I suddenly found the reason for this early morning gathering. This must actually have been going on for a while as I slept. The whole of the polder was flooded our building was all that stuck out above the water line. Dead bloated cows were floating quietly back and forth on the water.

These people were from below. We were fortunate to live above the flood line. Nothing of ours was caught under water. My bed was dry and warm and safe. some of these kids now drinking milky

tea in my living room were not at all so fortunate. This is why they were here. I spent most of the rest of the day helping out as much as a four year old can, with bringing tea, toast and cookies to those who had no place to go but the homes of neighbours above the flood line. There was no telephone, we did not have one, and most probably the lines that other neighbours had were not working. so there was excited shouting back and forth down the gallery lane. Strangers flitted in and out all day with snippets of what was going on.

Terribly exciting. It took the scary bits out of the day, the scary bits that were floating bloated and dead on the water. By supper time the water had started to recede. The Dutch are very good at dealing with floods on polders. A very industrious few days followed, the cleaning up.

I don't remember much about the cleanup, after all it was not our apartment getting flooded, that goodness. The occasional neighbour would still drop in, exhausted and telling my mother how it was for them, working their way through soaked belongings. Eventually the pylon drivers started up again first thing in the morning. I still live in apartments, never at ground level, and always on top of a hill. There is nothing so secure living below sea level, even with scuba gear under the bed. Being Dutch there is tremendous respect for the sea, it represents the force of nature which challenges man or drives them off. I can swim, and row a boat, and I am smart enough to live well away from it's reach.

The Tree of Many Souls

Out to the country, that's where we were going, again. I wasn't fond of "the country". There were nasty insects and outhouses instead of washrooms. Mams must have sensed I was displeased. I'd rather have spent this afternoon, at home, warm, playing with Lego. So she spiced it up a little for me. We're going by car.

Only the wealthy had cars. My parents had their educations cut short by a war. Upgrading was done in their adult life. My father held down a job at Shell Oil full-time and attended university on weekends and in the evening. In the midst of it all he also twice served in the military as a medic (as a pacifist/Buddhist this was agreeable). My mother had been a nurse and studied opera after I was born. At this point my father was at the end of his studies and my mother just starting her performing career. I can only imagine how tired they must have been. Most of our travelling was done on foot or bicycle or public transit.

Neither of my parents could drive, nor did they see a particular need to have a car. To want one would have gone against their deeply socialist sensibilities. Just occasionally we were offered a ride by someone more fortunate in their circumstances. To be so fortunate quite often meant that during the previous world war you had retained your considerable wealth by selling out your own countryman. This is another reason that wealth was a source of embarrassment to many, and probably should have been.

My parents were devoted Buddhists with considerable interest in the paranormal. Their interests involved hypnotism, seances, bio-

feedback, meditation and all other manner of psychic phenomena. My father's friend Wim was a respected psychic and hypnotist from Utrecht he and my father attended the University at Delft together.

He was a tall lanky dutchmen (as if there is any other kind), he had pale blue eyes and no eyelashes, his skin was very pink and he had waves of reddish blond hair. I suppose he'd not have been considered handsome, but certainly he was striking. He had inherited a home and some monies from his parents and could afford to live on his eccentricities. Occasionally he would buy one of my father's paintings and pay my mother to sing at his soirees. He had an old home built with six outside walls. He had a moat, which was filled in, to keep it stocked with ducks and such was too costly. Only part of the small castle was useable most had bomb damage or was run down. His soirees were events to raise monies for rebuilding his home. Other aristocrats in the same shoes also held these events, communist sensibilities amongst the upper classes only. I've no desire to be harsh, likely they had no notion that there were other classes.

The car was an old Citroen circa 1948, a ten year old car. It was enormous, not by American standards but by European standards where the average car was smaller than a Volkswagen Beetle. The leather seats were dark red and slightly peeling from age. Likely Wim had no nothing of maintaining the leather, servants would have done that, servants he could no longer afford. We arrived at his home by taking a bus and walking some distance. Wim would have picked us up from the bus but my father was always most insistent we do a good bit of walking each and every day, for our health, and because he was a socialist.

We were greeted by several small Scotty terriers bouncing happily up and down and then chasing one another round the small castle. My mother admired the roses while my father helped Wim peel the canvas cover from the car. It took several tries to start the car, as soon as it did we ran into the back seat. Mams gave me a sandwich wrapped in a tea towel to keep the crumbs from messing up the car. The tea towel had hundreds of waffle squares which kept crumbs from just rolling off. I appreciated the towel, I was a clumsy child, it embarrassed me when I made a mess, this I could manage. I love tea towels, especially the blue and white ones. Food looks better on a blue and white towel.

The adults were deep in conversation, about ghosts and spirits and what happened when the body died. I wondered about that too. Great Aunt Sien had books about children dying and getting wings. I knew I did not want wings, I did not want to fly. I liked walking, and I could not imagine how a coat would fit over wings. I also did not want to die. I didn't think dying was a good thing. Every time someone we knew died everyone cried and cried. If dying was a good thing no-one would cry. It must be scary even for adults if all they want to do is talk to the dead just to make sure it is ok where they are now. It was a bit of the shock to find out the people we were visiting turned out to be the principal of my kindergarten. I had just been pulled out of kindergarten because my clumsiness was making other kids hate me and hurt me. Next year I would go to another school where they could teach me how not to be so clumsy.

The house stood aside a dyke edged by farmland and tidy rows of poplars to break the wind rushing in from the North Sea. The sky was dark with large heavy clouds. Fog was forming over the lower

farmland, I could hear the screeching sound of the windmill's sails. It was warm inside. The van Antwerpen's had large heavily stuffed chairs with an abundance of pillows. The walls were lined with dark wooden bookcases stuffed with books and in front of the bookcases and in every corner of the living room stacks of books.

The walls had portraits filling up all wall space and the walls themselves were covered with tapestries of birds and game and large bowls of fruit. The fireplace had on it several sculpted gargoyles with impudent smiles. I quite liked them. I'd have liked to see them more closely but the coal furnace which was now housed in the fireplace itself was dangerously hot, so I had to be satisfied with seeing them from a bit of a distance. The room, and the rest of the house was filled with every sort of display, wonderful treasures. Their very large striped cat followed me everywhere and the loud purring was gre4at incentive to just sit, stroke the cat and admire all the wonders I could cast my eyes on.

We were served a dinner of red cabbage and potatoes, and stewed pears for dessert. The adults sat by the hearth with a brandy and I was put to rest on the fainting couch, so comfortable I'd have been happy to spend the rest of my life on it. The feather cushions gave me the sensation of being weightlessly suspended. The blanked was a bit dusty, a tapestry otherwise being used for show, quite obviously they were not used to having children as visitors. The large cat was asleep beside me.

As children do, I listened intently to the conversation the adults were having. Mostly it was well over the top of my level of understanding. I could grasp the concept of dead, spirits, ghosts. Bad ghosts, tortured souls.

The latter I had a problem with. The notion that a soul, which was as I understood it the very essence of what you were, would be put into suffering for an eternity, well, that was most unpleasant. Hard to put that into a framework of a Buddhist whose higher spirit or godhead had no malice. The imperfect souls were put back on this earth to relive life until lessons had been learned. We earned our place in the afterlife. There was as I understood it, no place where after life a soul would be tortured. Tortured like some of the bad children in Aunt Sien's books. Mams had told me that those books were not true. Yet here was my mother talking about tortured souls inhabiting and haunting, intruding the lives of the living.

The striped cat yawned and exhaled a fishy breath, stretched and purred. The adults were now looking through books, arguing about seeing the future. Mr. van Antwerpen unearthed some old photographs of a haunted tree they had come upon in their travels in France.

"May I see", I asked. "No, too scary".

Now I really wanted to see it. apparently no matter how you photographed this tree, from every angle, you could see the faces of tortured souls.

Of course stories were spun about what happened while they were there. Gooseflesh, shivers and the sounds of screams and wailing. My imagination ran with it. I knew I would not want to go to France if it had many tortured souls. I did not like the scary stuff.

The cat looked at me lazily as if to say "I won't let anyone hurt you". I've always felt that pets do protect you from the unseen. Like guardians. I was safe as long as we had a cat or dog watching over us. I could go to France, if my dog could come too. I curled up with the fishy breathed cat and slept soundly until it was time to go.

Mam dressed me up to go out first and then said their good byes to the van Antwerpen's. I snuk back and looked at the photos of the tree of many souls, and clearly, there they were, pained, reaching out, weeping.

"You shouldn't look at these", mams pulled the photo from my hand, and resolutely the hands were stuffed into my mittens making it very hard to pick the pictures up again.

In the back of the car on the way home Mams asked me if the photo had frightened me. I said no. Truth was that I was confused, not frightened. I spent many hours thinking how one would go about making their pain go away, how to release them from their torment. Maybe I should have asked. I didn't ask because every time I had asked about death and what comes after I was much more frightened by what they told me to put me at ease than anything I could think up by myself. Maybe if I was a good girl, the good would somehow help? I was very happy I had a dog and a cat

to keep me safe, and I trusted my mother when she said I would not die until I was very old. I had to trust her, otherwise I might never sleep again.

Meeting Death

People die. People we know and love eventually leave our lives forever. As a child my naivete was often abruptly brought to an end and death was no exception. Old people were going to die, life came to an end in the aquarium, then my cat died, but people, well that was much harder to accept.

The first death of a person in my life came when I was near four years of age. Maya was a beautiful woman, tall, elegant with long black hair and exotic green eyes. She was my mother's friend. Once before I was born my mother had been a nanny to her young sons. The youngest son, Robert was about six when I was three and whenever Maya came to visit she would bring Robert. He would politely play with me, because that is what his mother expected of him, but he did it with great sweetness and I adored him.

Maya was in my young eyes the ideal of what I one day hoped to be. She sat on those occasions, perfectly dressed in the latest of haute couture suits, silk stockings and Italian pumps. To watch her cross her legs, sit back and tilt her head to one side while her clack hair cascaded over the edge of the chair was an all out performance, you could hear the music that should accompany such a perfectly choreographed movement. No surprise, Maya was after all, a very well known and highly paid fashion model. She would come to visit after the shows and Paris and Milan on her way back to her flat in London. Her sons attended school in England where their pianist father lived. She was not married. I am not sure why my mother impressed that detail on me when I was so young, I don't think it

had anything to do with the morality. It had more to do with a level of envy my mother felt, I think my mother would have been happier had she been single, but she lacked inner strength to say no to my father's proposal.

A letter with a black rim came to the door by courier, and my mother without opening the letter sunk to the floor in our vestibule. I sat by her, feeling oh so terribly clumsy, not knowing if I should hug her. All I could do was sit, when mams was upset hugging could be exactly the wrong thing to do. I'd been shoved away a few times and barked at. I loved my mother as we all do, so I sat by her gingerly, just barely touching her dress, her dark blue dress. She bit her lower lip and cradled her face with her free hand, her short curled hair stuck to the tears rolling down her face.

We sat for some time on the floor. Mams became quiet the moment suspended until the tearing open of the envelope. She hesitated to pull out the card. Mams had lost so many people in her life, more of her friends and family had died during the last year of the war and still more afterward to disease neglected medically during wartime. In my brief lifetime I had lost no-one I knew. Until now.

She moaned it, and screamed it, sobbed it, gasped it. Mams is dead, over and over. Later mams took me and had tea with a neighbour, and there I heard the story of Mams, her brief twenty eight year old life. The eldest son was fathered by a pianist in England, the other son the product of an anonymous affair, with a shady character according to mams. She was a fashion model from the age of eighteen and lived a glamorous lifestyle afforded her by

being one of the most desirable ramp models for various haute couture houses. She lived hard, loved many times and was heartbroken every time a relationship ended. I remembered the many crying times during her visits to our house.

The mams I'd known was glamorous and kind, loved her children and was very generous with considered gifts on important occasions. She was a good and supportive friend to my mother and helped her set her singing career on course. Often they were like schoolgirls all gossip and trying on each other's clothes. I think I felt superior to all that nonsense and was slightly embarrassed by it as was her Robert. She hugged me when she came and left. I could not imagine her never again dropping by.

This same woman at twenty eight lacked the support in her life to deal with a profession that was less than accepting of advancing age. She'd already had cosmetic procedures and worked very hard at maintaining the perfect figure. She'd had dangerous silicone injections. She'd become depressed when she felt she was losing her status in the fashion community. she needed the income to raise her sons and could not transition to another profession, all she knew and all that mattered was modeling and being the most desirable arm-piece receiving the most extravagant gifts from the most wealthy men in Europe. It was ending and she had no idea how to deal with it. Maya had tried to land a position and a chance at a new life in Australia, but when it fell apart for reasons I don't know she "stuck her head in the oven" as my mother put it.

Sticking your head in the oven was not something I could picture or understand. For one thing we never had an oven, and I'd no idea what that would look like. We had a wood burning stove in our apartment, it had one spot to put a pot on, but no oven. I knew bakers had ovens.

I did not understand how an oven would kill you or why you'd put your head in there. Surely that would hurt, it would burn. Clearly this was not accidental, something had been very wrong here.

Suicide was not understandable to me. What I could understand is that Mams was depressed and desperate with too many responsibilities and not one person willing to help her with the boys and a new career. I did know even at that age, the very importance of people in your life who love you unconditionally. I was so incredibly sad that no-one, not the father of her children, not her employers, and for that matter not my mother, could keep her from being so sad that she died.

It affected my mother. Mams became more focused on her marriage and home and perhaps a little negligent of her singing career. I think she was scared that if she lost my father, she too would end up with her head in the oven. What also happened was that my mother felt, as Maya must have, trapped in her own life, unable to decide on the basis of what she wanted and thus settling for the safest choices. Maya's death was one of the pivotal experiences in my mother's life and she kept it all inside. Sadly, rather than recognizing that Maya's not calling out for help led to her death more than anything, my mother often in great psychic pain shut others out and herself in. These were beautiful and

talented women, delightful company and I cannot think that no-one would have stepped in to help, and oh, how different life could have been.

So at age four I had learned you could die, young and beautiful, loved by her children and friends of misery. The oven was not important, that no-one helped when she needed it was important. My mother being sadder than before mattered. The death of a person affect everyone profoundly. It matters that they die, also how they die, how young, how much promise. All lost. All gone. Life even when it seemed to be most perfect, was not. How horrifying that no one could just sense what was going on, because she did have friends and she was loved, and she left a sea of tears behind. I doubt she knew just how much I admired her and wanted to be like her, her independent spirit, her talents. she was not just a runway model, she was a mother, an accomplished pianist in her own right. It is beyond belief that no one noticed the pain she was in.

Tonni's Yellow Frilly Dress



When we moved to our second apartment in Hoogvliet at Klaasjezevensterstraat (translated "little Claude's seven star street", I kid you not) I left behind my dearest friend Robbie Ringeling (honest I am not making this stuff up). There were no other friends. I had not started kindergarten yet, my bizarre extended family never encouraged cousins playing together, we were only allowed to sit neatly on had chairs until adults deemed it time to go home. Dry Calvinist types my aunts and uncles. Most of the time it was my dog and my parents, I seem to have lacked the imagination for invisible friends. When mum had to go off singing and I very inconveniently got sniffles or flu it was our downstairs neighbour Mrs. Ringeling who watched me. She had a son Robbie the same age I was.

When Mrs. Ringeling watched me during the day she'd sometimes take me to the bunny club. In the parkette beside the dark masonry apartment buildings was a very upbeat communal garden/parkette where Mr. Ringeling as a labour of love had built a series of rabbit hutches and the bunnies were for all the kids of Bahrain Street to enjoy, in case they had no pets of their own. Very little in life is as calming as petting a contented bunny. Robbie's mum also make bread with jam, not the health food jam my mom had at home but the very red, very sugary kind I was not supposed to have, yummy. I loved those afternoons.

Life was going to change. No more bunny club, Robbie, and out black and white cat Piereke had just fallen of the balcony and this time it killed the cat. Changes, lots of them.

As an incentive to really liking the move I was asked to choose the colour of linoleum I wanted on the floor in my room. Such marvelous colours, not the brown and beige of the other apartment. Purple, it had to be purple. I got it too, this was not just a bait piece, no, I was actually getting a purple floor, It was a considerable move up from the concrete floor with sea grass mats. We were also going to have music piped in, classical music all day long.

A piano was being moved in. Just to get out of the way I settled on a quiet corner on the large balcony. I could see the sea, ships crossing the North see sparked on the horizon. From out previous balcony all one could see were the across the street's neighbours and I knew it was rude to look at other people in their homes. for me looking out was an entirely new experience. This was a new polder, We now lived in the polder's newest building there was no other building that we could see looking in this direction. Everything was very new, the balcony sheet metal was still covered in primer.

The man with the linoleum arrived a burly man with hairy arms and he was sweating a lot. He was a bit scary and he was working with a very scary knife. So when my mother beckoned me to come with her I happily did so, My mother took me downstairs and knocked on the door of the apartment directly under us, A very thin, grim faced woman answered the door. She had a wonderful smile which

I'd not seen coming it was really very surprising. It was all very jovial and I could only assume that this was a friend to my mother. In the living room was an older man I assumed was the husband. I remember thinking that everyone was wearing an awful lot of brown.

"Tonni", the woman yelled the name. My goodness that woman as thin as her could have so very much voice was utterly beyond belief. I'm quite sure I must have looked very shocked. I did hope someone would come soon because I really did not want her to yell again.

There was a rapid klip klop sound down the hallway. I found myself marveling at the near mirror shine on the pale blue linoleum floor, I stepped closer and there was a little girl exactly the same size as I, in little pretty white shoes and a pretty dress with red flowers. She had wavy blonde hair with barrettes in. I thought she was very pretty. I found myself a bit out of place in my blue knee pants with striped shirt, and those ugly orthopedic shoes.

Apparently the arrangement was that while my parents finished with the movers and the linoleum man I should stay down here with he van der Linden's and play with Tonni. A fine arrangement. I just hoped she could like me even though I did not have a pretty dress like that. I had very much wanted one of those frilly flouncy dresses. My mother was opposed to them. Vulgar was what she said, they ere vulgar, for the lower classes Mother was adamant about it.

After getting to know Tonni we got on very well, which worked out well for mother since she did need someone to mind me whenever I would be sick and she had a concert to sing, Mrs. van der Linden was so very nice when I was sick, she'd bring me sugar water with crumbled aspirin. She would hug Tonni and me while telling bedtime stories, I was also allowed to wear one of Tonni's frilly dresses while I was there,

One afternoon Mrs. van der Linden had suggested I take home the yellow frilly dress I liked so much. Tony didn't like the yellow so much so it was alright with her, I showed it to mum when I got upstairs and in the door. "That awful thing", my mother scowled. "It's a rag, it's trashy, you can't wear that". and then the coup de grace. "Take it back." I think I must have been so tearful that Mrs. van der Linden decided not to ask why, She just hugged me and said I could still wear it while visiting, She was a wonderful mom. I used to pretend to myself while staying there whenever mom had concerts, that she was my real mother

My mother must have noticed how fond I was of the family, she took every chance to point out just how vulgar and lower class they were. I knew it was a mean thing to say, but very unclear of it's meaning. I stayed in touch with Tonni until she died at age 19, she was engaged at the time, and killed when she waved at her boyfriend and did not see the truck. She died instantly. I was told that it was probably for the best. She would otherwise have died from a brain tumor, which gratefully she knew nothing of at the time.

I visited the family once after that. They were terribly sad even years later. Tonni had been their only child, her mother was nearly fifty when she had her. All I could think to do was tell them just how very much they had all meant to me growing up.

Overnight in the Country

Train stations were exceptionally noisy places. this one in Rotterdam was under a glass gallery, immense amounts of glass and steel. The sound of voices, hurried footsteps and screeching metal train brakes drowned out even thinking. Our train was just pulling in. The first few coach cars were first class. The people in the cars looked down smugly on the world, their well-coifed hairstyles resting gingerly against the crisp white lace doilies pinned in the velvet upholstered seats.

"First Class" my father announced, with the disdain one would fully expect from a post war socialist. Now the second class cars came rolling in. These seats were upholstered in vinyl, some dark red and some dark green. These people were well dressed but not nearly as well coifed. My hand was being tugged to keep on walking to the back of the train. Third class.

In third class you were seated on plain benches, if you dared. There were all sorts of stains and puddles and malodorous sticky stuff everywhere. Most of it no doubt left behind by all manner of animal, livestock, baskets of pigeons, Dogs and pigs both on leashes. It was a good idea to cling to my daddy.

As I understood it we were going for a fun weekend out to the country with my father's university friends. We each packed a small bag with just the necessary things like clean underwear and toothbrushes. The dog was staying with the next door neighbour for the weekend. Mum and dad wore matching corduroy pants and

black hand knitted sweaters. I was in my favourite flood pants and striped shirt.

It was not long before our stop, just as my nose was getting accustomed to the smell. The pig on the leash had gone to sleep. I felt somewhat envious of the pig.. I was told that Jaap's mother was an excellent cook and was excited to have a little girl staying the weekend. I hoped I would like her, if I did I would pretend she was my grandmother, I really wanted a grandmother. It had rained lightly and the cobblestones of these small streets in Leiden had my shoes make a klip klop sound, I made a game of dancing noisily along the cobblestones to my father's whistling. We passed the canals with ladies putting laundry on the lines strung along deck now the rain had stopped.



Jaap poked his head out of the door, apparently he had been waiting. there was a great deal of hugging and his mother was very nice, really grand motherly as I had hoped. I was there not five minutes and a hot chocolate and cookie appeared before me. Jaap had also put a fresh heap of sand in the back yard for me to play in. The afternoon was lovely, I had to go to bed early because the next day included a long walk in the forest for me. I tried

to imagine what a forest looked like. I'd grown up in the polder with just the occasional tree. No wildlife other than marine birds and insects.

Forests as I understood it has rabbits and deer, and foxes. I was a bit apprehensive after all these would be wild animals and I also had heard frightening stories of little children being eaten by wolves. I asked my father about wolves when he put me to bed and he said simply "no, the wolves all live in Germany these days". That suited me, after all according to my mother Germans were terrible people so they deserved to live with wolves.

The next day was absolutely beautiful. We left early and could see the mist rising from the gardens and the water of the canals. Jaap's car was coughing and sputtering it's way to the forest. He had salvaged the aged Citroen from a junk yard and with my father's help had somehow managed to get it going. We passed through large fields of brightly coloured tulips, row upon row of greenhouses being built, and finally trees, many, many trees.

From here we would walk. As Jaap stopped the car the engine gave one last full-body shudder. Jaap patted the hood with considerable affection. There were trees everywhere, very tall trees, as we walked into the forest there was less and less sky. I missed the sky, my whole life it had been there and now all I could see were branches, and stuff was falling from the branches, insects, leaves, sticky stuff. I was so focused on the missing sky that I kept tripping over the stones and branches strewn about. (I was getting tired and I hadn't seen one rabbit.

Mom kept pointing out all the interesting mushrooms but they could not be eaten or touched, pretty boring after a while. I had hoped for flowers and bunny rabbits, but it was not summer so there were no flowers in the forest and bunny rabbits were

apparently very shy around people. We reached a clearing where dad wanted to do some sketches and Jaap sat to smoke a pipe. Mom and I had a small sandwich and she told me forest stories, most probably designed to frighten me into never letting go of her had as we walked through the forest.

I screamed, a blood curdling full-body scream, not a scream that was planned, it had taken even me by complete and utter surprise. Searing pain from my calf had completely consumed me. suddenly there was a whirl of activity all of it with my leg at the centre. I kept trying to look to see what hurt, but people were in the way. Daddy scooped me up and ran with me all the way back to the car I could see my mom and Jaap running after us. I leaned a new word "adder". That's what Jaap was yelling.

In the back of the car mom told me an adder bit me. Daddy explained that adders were like small snakes, but it could make me very sick so I was going to the hospital. I looked out the window and saw the sky, it was blue and the sun made the drops on the car window sparkle and I fell asleep.

I woke up in the bedroom at Jaap's, his mother was knitting rhythmically in the chair beside my bed. As soon as I started to get up she yelled for my mom and dad. I was safe and I had no desire to get back to the forest, ever. Forests were not safe places for little children, nor little Red Riding Hood, or Hansel, or Gretel or me. We had bunny rabbits in our community garden and there were lots of wild flowers growing all over the polder. I liked the world inside houses and near houses, familiar sounds like the clicking of knitting needle and the whistling of a tea kettle. The forest

-62-

belonged to adders and bugs and other wildlife. I would not go intruding on it again.

First Snow

Winters were long and dreary in the polders. Endless grey and near freezing fog. Round the clock life was comfortable only close to the stove. The stove was a one burner, coal fed, black cast iron model. The apartments on Klaasjezevensterstraat were not centrally heated. Fortunately as an employee of Shell, my father received all the coal we could burn free of charge. We also received all the free potatoes we could eat. during these years of post war recovery that was especially helpful. One less item to stand in line for with rations coupons.

Several times a week mams would standing line with coupons for cigarettes, coffee, tea and sugar. A great deal of noisy trading went on in those lines for cookies and sweets. I was not allowed sweets, I think that helped keep my chain smoking mother in cigarettes. I have no living memory of my mother without a cigarette in her hand, and not infrequently another lit in the ashtray.

Mother could knit furiously with a cigarette in her mouth and keeping up a conversation. Intricate sweaters they were too, and happily very warm ones. I needed those sweater to go to other rooms in the apartment which were stone cold. Thank goodness winters were most often above the freezing point. It was a week after my fourth birthday when it snowed. The first snow I'd ever seen in my life. Magically my mother had anticipated the moment and through some of her own special magic, and probably coupon trading magic at that, produced a green snowsuit with a feathered furry trim around the hood.

Mom did not like me playing outside in winter. I'd had several cases of pneumonia by age four and living in the shadow of an oil refinery made one very prone to lung problems. In retrospect, living inside with a chain smoking mother was no real improvement, but then no-one actually knew that then. The suit was an indication that my playing outside, at least for the duration of the snow, would change.

I was eager to play in it, make snowmen, throw snowballs, just like the ones in my book. I only knew that snow was cold. It did not drop from the sky like rain, it drifted down like leaves falling from trees in autumn.

I had to wait until the suit had warmed by the stove, as with all our clothes, when they came from the closet they were far too cold to put on. At night out next day's clothes were hung from a chair in the kitchen near the stove. In the morning we would have breakfast and take the clothes from the chair to change into.

In three layers of clothes plus the suit I could barely move. The dog knew we were going out and feeling my excitement was jumping up with full bodied slams against the door. The door with beautiful frost flowers also had snow blown up against it. Mams was furiously loading film in her old twin reflex box camera. She pulled on her wool coat over her corduroy pants and black knitted sweater.

It was unlike anything I could even have thought of. The world was completely changed. sounds were muffled, the air was crisp and easier to breathe and there was no-one anywhere. We walked

and ran into the polder the dog ran shovelling the white stuff with his nose. Snow flakes landed on my face and I could feel them melt. It was like a tickle, a tickle from an angel. My mother ran and pelted me with snowballs and I returned fire, Cerberus (my dog) was attempting to intercept each one as we threw it.



Mams was taking photographs as dad came into view, pushing his bicycle through the snow. As soon as he was near he dropped the bicycle and ran over to join in another snow fight. With considerable expertise, which one would expect from someone who once studied at art academy, he had made an enormous snowman, or rather a snow cat, very Egyptian looking.

"There", he said when he was done, "you'll see this from our window until it melts". On the way home dad carried me most of the way, I was exhausted and cold. It was warm in his arms. Mams pushed the bicycle home, Cerbie was still running himself into exhaustion.

There were two more snow days, until the great cat melted away into memory and the virginal white polder was once again grey and muddy with nightfalls of frosty fog. All those Dutch snow scenes with skaters on those tied on wooden skates were of a time many years before, when it was much colder. Our most famous long distance sating contests - the Eleven cities Journey" was now held in Norway because our rivers no longer froze as they did in my

father's time. I was twelve before the next snowfall, thousands of miles away, thousands of feet below sea level.

The Taai Taai Pop

"Aletteke, kom hier" mum stood by the school fence waving her arms in the air with the enthusiasm most adults no longer possessed. This was the good kind of "come here", this was a child to child "come here." I ran toward her. I could hear my shoelaces clicking against the wet brick path dragging along as I'd not managed to tie them.

Judging mum's from her enthusiasm she would not yell at me. I rarely ran. I wasn't any good at it. My right foot always dragged a little and the foot was turned in. Ballet lessons has really paid off. Now I could run, trip in mid-air and have it all sorted out by the time I landed..

Mum caught me at the end of the little walkway. "We have to hurry", she said it with a most triumphant smile. The smile that could make me forget all the cruel little things four year olds can do to each other. Mum could tie my laces, fix my coat, put on my mittens and kiss my cold little face seemingly all at once.

Something good was happening and I wondered what it was. I'd have asked but we were moving quickly and I had no breath left for asking. We were not going home, we were facing the wrong way for that. We were going toward the shops. Magically as we came close to the shopping streets the street lights lit up, including the decorations. Seasonal sparkly stars and banners with the friendly face of St. Nicholas and his faithful companion Black Piet. I wanted to stop and take it all in but we were still flying and I hadn't caught a breath.

I was beginning to sweat uncomfortably into my knitted scarf. "There", mum's gloved hand pointed at the bakery window. In the window was the largest Tai-Tai Pop (doll) I had ever seen. Tai-tai is a thick chewy molasses and spice cookie/cake traditional during the festive holidays. Most were shaped as St. Nicholas, horses, Christmas trees. This one was the mitred saint and his companion, four delicious feet tall. I gasped. "It's beautiful, and so big."

"We have to take it home, and you have to help". She hustled me into the bakery. Mum fumbled through her purse as she excitedly announced to the lady behind the counter that she had won the Tai-Tai pop. We were congratulated. The roly-poly baker came from the back of the store and took a picture of us by the window, where there was just enough light. I was dwarfed by a pastry, wow. We were urged to stay for a coffee and a cookie, I was given a little milk. I felt very special. I would have something to tell the rest of the kids tomorrow. While we had our cookie and beverage the baker and his lady wrapped the doll in cellophane topped off by a large red ribbon. Several customers came in and noticing that the doll was won and by us we were congratulated.

It was cold, but the excitement made it easy to bear. Mum held onto the top of the pop and I kept the bottom from falling to the wet ground. It had to be done with care so the pop would not break before we got it home. Pappa would be so surprised.

We were drenched but the cellophane had kept the pop dry. It was displayed on a small bench near the piano. Guests were invited to come and eat the pop at a drop in party the day after St. Nicholas. The usual oddball collection of beatniks, neighbours and opera

singers, they brought wine and beer and hot chocolate. There was dancing and singing until the next morning.

It was a very large pastry it took many people a month to help us finish it. Taai Taai is very chewy, so it was not hard to sit, relax and savour the spicy treat. Saturdays Pappa would make hot chocolate and it was one of the few times I was allowed to dip a cookie in.

I was allowed one piece each day until it was all gone, and it was the most delicious Tai-tai even on the last day.

‘Taai-taai’ indeed is in English: ‘tough-tough’. It is not that easy to bite off (or chew) a piece of taai-taai, except for the ‘kleutertaai’ meant for toddlers. Together with ‘speculaas’ and ‘pepernoten’ (little, round, spiced or gingerbread cookies) taai-taai is the cookie of choice at Sinterklaas, both as a snack and a gift.

Being an Only Child

I liked being an only child. No one touched or ran off with my stuff. No one pulled rank with my mommy and daddy. It was just me, nothing complicated. Then one day at age six the whole of it changed. There was a lot of talk between the parents which had nothing to do with me. I knew something was up. Baby things were starting to clutter the apartment. Still nothing had been said and I wished so much that it was not so that I found a half dozen other reasons why these things were finding a place in our home. Alas, then came the talk. That we have something "wonderful" to tell you talk.

I'd known for some time my mother was unhappy with me, that was obvious. She rarely spoke to me at all unless someone was around to see her being mother-of-the-year. I played alone, ate alone, daddy was now the one telling me bedtime stories. Having another baby was just another way to have me demoted, make me even more invisible.

I sucked it up. I had to know that there were going to be consequences when I ratted on my grandparents, after all it put mummy solidly between the people she loved the most. I was not the priority. I could only be happy that at the very least I seemed to be my father's priority. I think he dreaded the coming of the new "baby" as much as I did. Likely for very different reasons, but he sighed a lot and looked wistfully off in the direction of the city. I think that means either he was wanting to spend more time at work or he had a woman in the city. I think the latter, in retrospect.

The sea of blue baby things were rapidly covering every table top and corner of the apartment. I was moved into the "larger room", my old room (to which I did have an attachment, the baby could have had the larger) was usurped for the new creature.

"You're going to have a baby brother" announced my mother. "no," said I, "it's going to be a sister"

That fell on deaf ears. Later that day I received a "male" doll, to get me used to the idea of having a little brother (despite dolls of the day having no genitalia at all). Now I was expected to get into the joyful preparations, not likely. All day long I spent in the shadow of the great belly, it hung over me ominously, followed me, sat on mother's lap instead of me. Clearly I had to find other accommodations, mom's lap was out. I could not help feeling that I was being replaced.

I received further bribery, the toy shop with cash register that made a ringing sound, Meco sets, Lego. My father spent more time with me now he was out of the armed forces and his studies had been completed. We worked on the aquarium together. Saturdays we would go to the local slough and catch water daphnia the fish would go nuts for them, Siamese fighting fish, danios, tetras, gouramis. We had no television but I could spend hours watching the drama in the small 10 gallon tank.

Mother grew ever larger, she looked like she was going to blow. Quirk in our family, we have elephant length pregnancies. I myself was born at 10 months gestation. This time mom made it through the 11th month. There were a good number of false alarms, each

one fraught with drama and upheaval. This was going to be a home birth. towards the last week the midwife had moved in (what a zoo) and the doctor now visited with the belly daily.

I was roused out of bed, my lovely warm bed, the midwife had her face just inches from mine. Not an attractive woman, she had maybe ten of her teeth left and her breath was most unpleasant, musky and sour all at once.

"You have a little sister", she took me too mom's room where bloody linen was on the floor, the doctor and my dad were drinking and mom was looking, eyes glazed and tired. In the little crib was a good size baby, eyes wide open. I had met the enemy at last.