

PERHAPS DREAMS ARE REALITY

by

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Perhaps dreams are the reality, and what we know as life is only a dream.

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## Foreword

I thought that I had buried the child amongst the dust of past generations. But it has come to me today, knocking at my mind, crying out for recognition, refusing to go until I have acknowledged its pain.

It has brought with it the past which now rushes helter-skelter along the years, clutching at my memory like a plunger clearing a sink, dredging up the dirt which has collected through time and allowing the present to gurgle down the plug hole, along the old lead pipes, into the sewers of my childhood.

Now I can no longer avoid it. Unable to ignore the pleading persistence of the child I must follow it and allow myself to remember those year. Not the way I remember now. But the way it was. All the hurt of the child gathered into a knotted fist, waiting to be released so that it can scream out its pain to the four corners of the earth.

Only then will it set me free.

I thought I dreamed, but  
I'm not sure  
what is happening to me.  
"Is this a nightmare,"  
I ask myself, "Or  
is it my reality."

K.N.H.

## **PROLOGUE**

She's jumping up and down on the living room couch.

Up and down. Up and down.

She knows it's naughty. Mammie's told her often enough not to jump on the furniture. But they're both asleep so she's doing it anyway.

Up and down, up and down, throwing pillows into the air.

Nightmarish faces appear. Witches, gargoyles, float towards her. Bloodshot eyes, glaring, threaten her. Deformed hands with long claw-like nails reach out through the folds of the deep-blue velvet curtains which drape the large living room window.

She closes her eyes so that she can no longer see the ugly faces and, in order to avoid those grasping hands, she keeps on jumping. Frantically. Up and down. Up and down. Until she falls exhausted into a dreamless sleep.

Carlie wakes. Her small sturdy body held rigid under the blankets. She keeps her eyes and fists clenched shut. The pillow is soaked. Sweat makes her short hair stand up like quills on a porcupine.

She can't cry out. She can't call for mammie to comfort her.

If she cries mammie will know that she's been naughty again. So she lies for a while afraid to move before slowly opening one eye.

Warily she glances around not really wanting to see the horrors which surround her.

After a few seconds she dares to open the other eye. Good! All she can see is her nursery furniture. Toys stacked tidily in the toy-cupboard except for dolly who peeks through a chink of the partially opened door.

Clean clothes ready for the day ahead are folded neatly over one of the little chairs which stand at right-angles against the matching table in the centre of the room.

A sigh of relief. She's in bed in her own bedroom. It had been just another dream.

She doesn't have to call for mammie. Now that she knows it

hadn't been for real she can be brave. She won't allow those dreams to frighten her. Nor will she tell anyone about them. They are her dreams. Her secret. Hers to keep for ever.

## Chapter One

### Carlie

I've lost count of the number of times I've wished it were possible to journey back into the past to recapture the few happy years which once were mine.

I wonder would it be better had things stayed the same. Would it be an abundance of flowers enveloping me with their colourful scent. Would the sun gaze upon me with benevolence instead of the glowering rage which it bestows upon me. Or would it be messed up no matter what?

All those ifs and buts which life throws in our path. Decisions made by Fate. Fate, that strange companion, treacherous, unpredictable, steering us relentlessly forward into the unknown.

If there had been no Second World War the allied troops would have had no place in my country and without the presence of those armies my mother wouldn't have met the Major. But then my half-siblings would not have existed, and two of them wouldn't have died.

So it had to be.

Although I'm certain that my parents never stopped loving one

another Fate decided that they should be apart. Thereby causing the destruction of my life along with their own.

Yet, who can say? Perhaps life would have been a rubbish heap no matter what.

Tennyson sure had it right when he wrote, 'Ours not to reason why.

Ours but to do and die'.

Die we must. Some might even welcome it.

Reason why we 'do'?

Who knows?

No doubt your fancy psychiatrists enshrouded by their theories would come up with plenty of smart-ass answers.

All I know is that some of you out there float amicably along from birth to death without a ripple in your seas of complacency. Others like myself headbutt our way through life, ploughing into one disaster after another.

We tolerate the heartache, pain, and misery, to arrive breathlessly from each encounter with the forlorn hope that tomorrow has to be better.

Yet that tomorrow never comes.

Decades on I still live with that hope while I ponder the whys and wherefores of this world's existence.

Often I have felt the answers within my grasp, only to have them elude me time and time again. As always, slipping away like spectres into the darkness of my mind to bring the dreams which have become my salvation, my friends, my hiding place.

I had been conceived. Therefore the inevitable result of 'I am'.

Born like any other normal person. Yet there the resemblance ends.

September 1935. My first and last coming out party. There I was, an itty bit of premature child.

"Yes," my mother must have told me a million times, "most likely to assure herself, "Yes, you were a six month baby."

From the time I was able to think for myself, aware of my parents' decadence, my own translation of that statement had been that, 'Surprise, surprise, I arrived, the proof of my parents' sin, six months after the wedding.'

Which proves how bloody naive I was.

It took most of my life to discover that I had been thoughtless enough to pop out before their legal knot had been tied. No big deal nowadays. So why did this bit of news make me suicidal? After everything I had overcome during the intervening years why should this useless information have such a devastating effect on me.

Was it because my mother had never told me the truth until after her death when I found THE ENVELOPE, tied with a pink ribbon, my name boldly written on the front. Inside, along with every card and letter I had ever sent her, was my birth certificate and my parents' wedding certificate with dates not matching that which I had been brought up to believe.

God only knows why I reacted the way I did. Perhaps it was He

who encouraged a long term friend to appeal to my strange sense of humour by announcing, "I always knew you were a bastard".

Thereby changing my tears to laughter, and once more postponing my premature demise.

So I arrived, blind and screaming into a hostile world where even at this early stage the pattern was already set.

I remember an incident in my thirties when I had to go beg for Legal Aid.

I arrived at the office all nerves and shakes to be confronted by this sour-faced bitch who gave me a look which would have made the staunchest crawl back under their stone while she snarled, "Oh God, they had to send me a difficult one just before lunch."

All the same, she must have rediscovered her soul in a filing cabinet or something. I received my Legal Aid, thereby bringing to fruition a successful action for cruelty which resulted in my consequent divorce.

However that's another story. I only mention it lest you have never given thought to Fate's way of creating a balance.

It kicks you in the teeth. Throws you to the ground. Picks you up. Sometimes even dusts you down before giving you a lollipop as compensation. But you can't eat it because you have no teeth.

You see what I mean when I say that this kind of irony doesn't appear in the dictionary.

'Difficult' is the story of my life.

Right from the start if anyone had to be different it was I. Like that thing about the sins of the fathers visiting until the third and fourth generations. Divine justice also means to include the second. Me. And there's no escape from it.

Playing with yourself isn't the only sexual pastime that makes you go blind. No sirree, not all of us have a say in the matter.

Playing around can also have the same effect. Like, this kid's father had gone and collected himself a dose before passing it on to mammie and she to me.

Consequently, right from day one the sheer Hell of it, as needles were thrust into my weeping eyes to give them sight, I experienced what life

was to be about.

Before the war we lived in a flat which was situated in a suburb of The Hague, the staid city of my birth.

I don't think we were really rich at that point in time. My father was still in the final stages of studying law and so far as I know we lived on my mother's money.

If there was a lack of funds it didn't show. My parents were certainly able to indulge in the niceties of life and their excellent taste was reflected in the decor of our home.

Not for them the dark fashions of that era. The furniture they bought for that flat was as modern as anything available today.

Here I must beg your patience while I wax lyrical which I am prone to do from time to time as even in despair memories of better days prevail. Or, as my friends would put it, I have that tendency to suffer from verbal diarrhoea.

'Wax lyrical'. What a stupid expression when you think about it. Lyrical maybe. but I always associate wax with nasty stuff that comes out of your ears. Still, I suppose if you look hard enough there's sense there somewhere. So I'm going to wax about our apartment, my first home.

In those early years I was content, cosseted by the elegant comfort of our flat.

My favourite place was the living room with its bright, deep-pile rugs scattered on a polished parquet floor.

In the centre of this room a six piece suite, lovingly fashioned by its

creator, took pride of place. Each piece different yet matching in chrome and varnished black with beige and cream upholstery.

H.G. Wells, Wheatley, Tolstoy, D.H. Lawrence, as well as many more well-read novels were settled in low black-shelved bookcases which hugged two of the walls. The scent of the leather bindings

seemed to envelope the room with a safe, embracing atmosphere.

The space above the bookcases were adorned with the land-scapes of Monet, Degas' dancers, and the Paris of Michelangelo along with the talents of other not so well-known artists.

The third wall housed an inglenook type fireplace where pine scented logs spat smoky sparks up the wide chimney where they lingered for a while before disappearing out of sight.

The remaining wall was completely taken up by large picture window hung with deep-blue velvet drapes which warmed the room with their opulence.

I loved the touch of those curtains, finding comfort as my baby hands stroked the soft material while I relished the rich warmth of their colour when they closed out the icy cold of a bitter winter evening.

Although as already stated, I have found that life has its balance evenbeit in the mundane world of curtains, still it is difficult to understand why something which was a comfort to me as a child would be the centre of my earliest dream.

The nightmare, which haunted my sleep for many years, followed me even after we had moved to a different place and the curtains now unused had been packed away in a trunk in the attic.

This dream was the first in a changing, repetitive pattern. Sometimes

overlapping as my life unfolded, becoming so much part of me that through time I was unable to separate the fantasies of the night from the realities of the day.

Perhaps this dream, as well as others which enveloped my childhood, was a premonition of the real nightmares to come.

The ugly faces symbolic of my troubled mind in future years.

The grasping hands signifying the problems which I would have to confront me throughout my lifetime. And the tireless jumping my everlasting perseverance in trying to overcome them.

## Chapter Two

### Mammie

The first four years of my life were spent mostly in my mother's company.

Mother who could have been anything, done anything. By taking her time I was surely destroying her talents.

I wonder, did she love me then or did she already hate me for lousing up her life. Had she ever loved me? Or, for that matter, hated me?

Not until it was almost too late did I know what her feelings were for me. Before I had been blind. It was then that I also realised she had been completely loyal to the children who followed in the course of time. She gave her life for them. And they never understood. They didn't want to understand. Never having had children of their own they remained totally selfish. How could it be otherwise when, due to their dysfunctional upbringing, materialism had replaced love.

It was to be more than half a century later just before her death that I began to understand and to know just a little of her own tragic childhood. Only then was I certain that she loved me at that point in time if never before.

Most of those early years together were spent in travel during which we visited many European countries.

Sometimes we journeyed by train to reach our destination. More often we put to sea, drifting the time away on the luxury cruiser which frequently returned us to one particular place on the Adriatic Sea, so perfect in scenery and serenity that even in those long ago days it was already a popular resort.

Isn't it just too bad that man seems Hell-bent on destroying all the beauties that God has gifted him.

This land of my childhood holidays has since become a place of fear. The once busy resorts are rubble. Its people face daily destruction, starvation, rape, and death. Babies are born into the misery of war, perhaps never to enjoy a childhood, never to grow into adults as man's greed destroys them first.

After the ship had disgorged its passengers at Dubrovnik we always made for the same palatial hotel. Each time welcomed there by the patron like long lost friends.

Behind the hotel lay a private beach of soft white sand, walled off from prying eyes by high bamboo fences covered in a profusion of coloured plants and greenery. A perfect playground for me, the only child who played there. While the adults lazily lay on their beach mats soaking up the welcome warmth of the sun.

At that early age I was already a solitary being, well used to, and even preferring my own company. As I still do.

In the distance, anchored not too far from shore in a sea stretching to infinity, the cruiser which had brought us here bobbed up and down in rhythm to the waves.

I never ventured far into the water. Just far enough to get my playsuit wet which aggravated my mother tremendously.

"Why can't you keep yourself dry? Why don't you go into the water when you're wearing your swimsuit? Why must you be perverse and always wait until I've changed you into dry clothes."

At that I would shrug my shoulders. Why not? Anything to draw attention to myself. I knew that mammie wouldn't shout at me or punish me in front of the other guests, and by the time we were back in our room she would have forgotten the incident.

So why not be bad when the chance arose?

If the truth were known, I was afraid of the sea, choosing to stay out of the water. Water was for ships and fish, creepy-crawlies, seaweed, and various other nasties, not for people.

I was terrified whenever my mother left the beach to swim beyond the blue-green shallows into the dark depths towards the ship.

Then I would cry out to her, "Please mammie, don't swim out so far."

And she would turn to wave at me, laughingly calling out, "Don't

worry, you silly little thing. I'll be all right."

Yet I would not be consoled, fearing for my mother's safety until she was safely back on the sands fussing over me while I begged her to stay with me and not to venture out so far again.

But mother was a strong swimmer who took a great delight in challenging the sea. Not even her daughter's baby tears could hold her back, and I spent many anxious hours worrying that she would be lost to me. The joy of the holiday gone along with the security which only prevailed in my mother's presence.

In those youthful days I excelled at playing the charmer, confusing those who didn't know me well enough. Nothing delighted mammie more than to be told, "Carlie has such beautiful manners for a child of her age."

And I would smile. Because I knew better. I knew that I was really a horrid little bitch who excelled in getting her own way.

Even then the seeds of perdition had been sown. There were times when mammie's tiny treasure could turn into a little fiend, thinking up ways in which to cause her mother the most embarrassment.

On one particular occasion aboard ship I became impatient while waiting for her to join me in the dining room.

Don't ask how I came to be there without her in the first place.

I suppose she must have requested a steward or stewardess to remove me from the cabin. Maybe my presence had become too overbearing and she wished for just a little respite.

Anyway I, annoyed at having been unceremoniously plonked into a high chair, not about to go along with this, decided to deviate from the 'beautifully mannered' label by placing my plate complete with some horrible gooey substance upside down on my head.

That'll teach her.

The sight of mother's chagrin on arriving in the dining room to find her darling resembling a miniature rubbish tip while stewards hovered about not quite knowing how to tackle this problem was a joy to behold.

Nor was this to be an isolated incident. Once I realised the attentions I could draw to myself I developed a knack of misbehaving in the most obnoxious manner at the most inappropriate times.

"Yes", you will no doubt say, "Most small children turn plates upside down on their head at some stage in their infancy in order to gain attention."

But then their timing is probably better. They usually do it for fun in the confines of home, not with the nasty intention of doing it where it will cause deliberate embarrassment.

Sometimes my behaviour was so 'way out' and my temper so

outrageous that my sanity was in doubt.

There were times when my father, who was a reasonable man and who loved his daughter dearly, would complain to his wife,

"For God's sake Maria, how can you tolerate that child."

Then mammie would find excuses and murmur,

"She's only a baby, Pim. Be patient with her."

Those four years were some of my better times. Those were the years during which I felt I was close to my mother.

In those days I adored her. So far as I was concerned she was the most complete mother in the world. She was surely the most beautiful with well balanced features, and pale skin like a peach almost ready for eating.

Black hair, neatly cropped in the fashion of her youth, was later allowed to flow over slim shoulders as the years progressed. The dark waves offset by eyes which shone like a clear blue sky on a bright winter's day.

Her figure of course was perfect and remained so even after she had birthed her nine children.

I always saw my mother as tall and stately. To the small me she was.

But when I grew up and befriended her in her old age only then, from my lofty five foot three, did I realise how tiny she actually was.

Not only had she cultivated a charming manner she had worked hard

to become an accomplished musician. Whenever her fingers played along the keys of a piano or touched a bow to the strings of a violin the music she made was a pleasure to all within hearing distance.

She had qualified as a doctor, sadly due to my premature arrival now without a practice.

Is it any wonder that she might have resented me from day one.

Yet despite many obstacles, after she dumped the Major and

his children had grown into young adults, she was to become an author and artist as well as making a living from the several languages in which she was so fluent.

You will realise that my mother with all her talents was a hard person to live up to, especially for someone as untalented and plain as her first born.

Unfortunately we can't always get it right and mother was no exception. Her decisions destroyed the love which she should have received from the children she bore. Or, perhaps the weaknesses which would alienate us from our mother were ours alone and not hers at all. In a complicated life who can be sure.

To the young me she was too perfect to be human. She was an angel who was expected to give more than she was capable of giving. We had put her on a pedestal as someone to be admired rather than as someone to be loved. And although love might last for ever, admiration dies when that which we worship does not live up to our expectations.

When I realised that mother was as mortal as the rest of humanity I was incapable of accepting that. I couldn't cope with the changes which her decisions brought about, always blaming her selfishness for the ensuing unhappiness.

Throughout my teens as well as most of my adult life I was burdened by the feelings of bitterness which I carried like a leaden cloak around my shoulders. Until I learned that we can't put the blame for our misfortune upon others, that we control our own destiny. My hate became absolute love. I became her champion in my attempts to protect her character from my thoughtless siblings.

Although it cost me dear I will never regret my actions.

### Chapter three

#### Carlie's War

Ten days before my fourth birthday we moved house, I had measles, and the Second World War broke out.

We moved South to a small place called Ginneken, near Breda in Noord Brabant.

Although it transpired that we were the only heathens in this Catholic part of the Netherlands we were never chided or shunned for our lack of Christianity. We were accepted for what we were during the six years we remained there.

This would probably explain the reason why I had no idea of the troubles which biased beliefs created until my early twenties when the Glaswegian prejudices destroyed that innocence.

Up till then I had honestly believed that some people, like my oma - grandmother -, were Good People because they had crucifixes above their beds and Holy Mary lamps in the living room, and other people

were just people who were not Christian.

I, of course, picked a 'difficult' time to have measles.

Instead of enjoying the journey to to our new house THEY made me sit in the back of the car on my grandmother's knee.

Now she may have been a GOOD person but so far as I was concerned she was a bloody pain.

The silly old cow had me wrapped up from head to foot in itchy blankets. No matter how much I muttered and wriggled she wouldn't concede, making it impossible for me to enjoy a last glimpse of the splendours of the passing countryside.

All I could see was the grey wool which scratched my face as we travelled past fields dressed in cloaks of shaded greens and yellows. Unbroken by even the slightest hillock they undulated towards the horizon until halted by a line of trees especially cultivated to act as windbreaks.

Every so often the flat monotony was broken by a lonely windmill waving its ponderous arms in the breeze, like a giant scarecrow calling for help.

Our journey took us through villages with cobbled streets. The little shops, still well stocked with goods displayed behind latticed windows, their wooden shutters thrown back to glisten in the morning sun, were packed with shoppers sharing the news of the day.

Come lunch time we stopped at one of the picturesque eating houses which dotted the length of the road taking us South.

There pappie - daddy - collected drinks and sandwiches to be eaten in the car instead of under the colourful parasols on the lawn.

Because my spots had to be kept out of sight.

All those beautiful memories, and so many, many more, a much loved part of my fatherland, soon to be devastated by the occupying armies. All left behind, as we travelled South East along the highways, avoiding Het Hollandse Diep which separates Zeeland from Zuid Holland, before arriving in Breda, and Ginneken.

Despite being smothered by the blankets which deprived me of the last chance to admire the passing countryside I was so excited that I almost peed myself. (Another one of my idiosyncrasies.)

After all, we were replacing our flat, regardless of how safe and pleasant it had been, with a big house. Naturally I was filled with almost uncontrollable excitement.

In the darkness of my temporary dwelling I could picture it just the way pappie had described it.

The three upstairs bedrooms. Two of the rooms, the nursery for me and my parents' room are joined by a cupboard with doors on both sides so should I cry out during the night they can come straight through the cupboard instead of having to go along the corridor.

The third bedroom unknowingly awaits the Major.

Next to my room, cosy from the warm glow exuding from a pot-bellied stove which heats the water, is the bathroom.

The wood-smoke from the fire drifts through a thick black pipe, up the chimney into the sky, to finally embrace the clouds.

Above the bedrooms, on the left hand side of the attic, the two sparsely furnished maid's rooms, bowl and jug ready for ablutions, leave abundant space for vapid sunbeams to struggle for survival after they

enter the small windows. A scuttle of rodent movement can be heard as they patter along the dusty floor before being swallowed by the darkness.

Downstairs, at the end of the long narrow tiled hallway is the kitchen area whence wooden steps go down to a well-stocked cellar. This is where pappie keeps the hoard of Jenever for which he's always had a weakness.

On the right hand side of the corridor are two reception room with parquet floors. They are separated by glass sliding doors which can be opened whenever mammie and pappie decide to party.

The room at the front has French windows leading onto a patio paved with grey slabs. Their drabness broken here and there by tiny splashes of colour as nature fights for survival against the man made material.

From the back room another set of French windows bar the entry into a sprawling garden where a large lawn waits warily to be assaulted by hordes of children.

There are places for hiding, as well as bushes hanging with

gooseberries, raspberries, and black and red currants.

There are strawberries, and apple trees where we will be able to eat ourselves sick the whole summer long.

In the centre of the lawn a solitary peach tree blossoms each year without bearing fruit. Yet only twelve months after my departure the peaches are to grow in their hundreds.

So what does that tell you? Makes one think it must be me. After all why, in this modern day, do checkout machines in supermarkets grimace and break down as soon as my turn in the queue brings me to their attention.

Halfway along one side of the garden stands a sturdy hut for garden tools and leaning close beside it, a shed for secrets.

Pappie's secrets.

Odd, how everything is exaggerated to the child. On my return as a teenager the house still held memories sweet. Yet many years later, as an adult, it appeared cramped and unimportant.

The street as well as the surrounding area where my peers and I had played our endless games and had our joys and our differences had lost all its appeal, prompting me to leave that place as quickly as was possible.

Never to return.

Measles was the first time I remember being ill.

Some illnesses are more bearable than others. Considering the circumstances, measles wasn't. And if that wasn't enough, no sooner was I hale and hearty when Fate decided that wasn't allowed, and struck me down again.

My one consolation whenever I was ailing was pappie who spoiled me something rotten. I only had to ask in order to melt his heart along with his wallet.

Whatever I desired was mine. Whatever it took to stop my whinging.

As I said, no sooner was I well when Fate buggered me up again. This time it punished me with the agony of earache, so intense that on really bad days I was incapable of anything.

Then I would sit on the floor of our new living room, which wasn't nearly as comforting as the old one had been, hugging my misery to me. The pain which chugged through my head like an express train

made my parents' conversation seem as though it was in the far off distance, while I willed it to go.

My will power, one of my life lines, was already well developed. Within a period of several months the problem had gone before the operation which the doctors had deemed necessary. Doctors never can get it right at the best of times. Not then. Not now.

Still unaware of the physical and mental scarring which I would

gather as my life progressed I considered myself fortunate when I saw someone else with the scars which that operation left in its wake. Those hideous puckered marks on the side of the neck which I had avoided.

Even having my tonsils removed was a major event for me.

Unlike the other young children having similar operations I had to make a meal of it.

I remember it so well. Every touch, every smell, every sensation. The endless hospital corridor which we walked as we were led towards the torture chamber. Our little slippered feet swishing on the slippery floor. Bodies sweating with dread of what was to come as the sweet scent of theatre came closer and closer.

There were four of us that day being comforted on a nurse's knee as the yellow mask with its unforgettable smell was put over each little face in turn taking us into oblivion.

When I wake my mouth is dry. My throat aches. I open my eyes to find myself alone in a room instead of in the ward with the other children. My hair and neck are matted with blood. Blood covers the pillow. I'm bleeding. It won't stop.

Where does it all come from. Is it real, or am I dreaming. There can't be

so much blood for real.

Or can there?

Instead of the comfort I seek the dragon-lady matron is angry with me for messing up her lily white sheets and pillows.

"Look at that," she growls, as though it's my fault.

"Look at the mess you've made."

"Mutter, mutter, mutter."

Other kids get ice cream after a tonsil operation. I get muttered at.

Never mind that she might have a dead little patient on her hands.

Never mind that my life's blood is draining away.

All she cares about is that I make her bed look untidy.

There's so much blood. I'm scared.

Now you might say,

"So what. What's so interesting about that. Nearly all kids have measles and things. Earache, and tonsils out. So what."

Well I'm sorry if you find all this boring. But this is my life we're talking about. And if you remember, the thing with me is, as I pointed out earlier on, I'm difficult.

Difficult with a capital D.

I am the kid who, instead of picking a more convenient time, has to have measles when we move house. I deprived the doctors of their fee, no N.H.S. in those days, by ridding myself of my earache. I am the one who increased the hospital's laundry bill all by myself.

The other thing is that throughout my whole life, right from day one

I've done a very good imitation of a disaster area.

I reckon I should have been the cat with more than nine lives.

If anything was going, I caught it. And if it wasn't, I caught it anyway.

When the planes were dropping bombs I was in the thick of it. Not everybody has cancer. I had it twice. Both times almost fatal.

Who else makes a point of bleeding all over hospital beds and operating tables in an attempt to give the anaesthetist heart failure. Not just on that one occasion, but many times.

No wonder people laugh at me when I innocently proclaim that I'm never ill. I mean, what is ill. Depends on how you look at it really. I prefer to take it as a challenge. After all, what is life but one bloody challenge after another.

So I might as well make the most of it. Be a proper disaster.

Fortunate it is that I'm a bloody minded survivor. Blessed with an aggressive, stubborn personality which gives me the will to carry on despite suffering and heartache, rising like a phoenix from the ashes, sword flashing in readiness for the next battle, when lesser mortals would long ago have thrown in the towel.

Had nature endowed me with common sense I too might have been wise enough to call it a day and followed the herd.

But then this story would not have been penned.

## Chapter Four

### The Nanny

We lived on the outskirts of the town. The last house in a row of nine detached villas.

A broad river separates the houses from the ones across the way.

The front entrance is at the side of the house. The narrow driveway

leading to the front door is bordered on one side by a high hedge which hides a stream that meanders across the street until it reaches the river.

When you cross the little wooden bridge which spans this stream you find yourself on an avenue which leads past the playground of the school which eventually has me inflicted upon it.

The school remains, but the stream has been filled in to broaden the road. And the little wooden bridge from my childhood is also gone.

The road then continues alongside the river until it reaches two large bridges which, when you cross over and turn to the right, are the gateways to the affluent Regentessen Laan.

After passing the large houses, small cafes, and a lane where the ice cream factory is situated, you come to a main street where shops dot the length of this broad tree-lined road.

Then, having perused the many shop windows, "Oh'd" and "Ah'd" at the available goodies, you finally arrive in the cobbled market square with its old town hall.

Little shops and cafes surround the square, the centre of the small town's activities. Here, in the early mornings, many young folk gather to socialise over breakfast before proceeding to their various employments.

Throughout the rest of the day the pavement tables, mounted with parasols, are alive with cliques of chattering shoppers as well as with the odd solitary individual who rests contentedly while watching the world pass by.

Nowadays the square is an anachronism. The old atmosphere sadly

overtaken by the modern shopping centres which have sprouted in an invasion of commercial greed.

Taking away more memories.

In those days, before the war began to bite, it was usual for the town's more affluent families to employ servants.

As it was with us.

We had a kitchen maid, a housekeeper, and a nanny.

The kitchen maid was the lucky one, as the kitchen was a place where I was not wont to venture. Thereby protecting her from my unwelcome attentions.

The housekeeper was pathetic. A cringing, whining woman who brought out the worst in me. God help her.

Indeed, she needed all the help available as I had developed into such a spoiled arrogant brat with a proficiency in thinking up different ways in which to torment this inferior creature that I put De Sade to shame.

What made it even more intolerable was when on the rare occasion she gathered enough courage to complain to my parents I accused her of lying and even though they were aware of the evil streak in their daughter's nature they preferred to believe my side of the story, which did nothing for the housekeeper's equilibrium.

However, it was nanny who suffered my worst intentions. So my mother often related, relishing every moment while embarrassing me before my friends and sundry with stories about my grotty habits.

One tale she really favoured was that in my own charming way I had become quite adept at protesting to being put to bed for an afternoon sleep. And as I have vague recollections of behaving in the disgusting manner described by her I suppose this particular story is indeed true.

"You know what she used to do," laughs mammie. Although I bet

she didn't laugh any more than nanny did at the time of this happening.  
"She used to wait until it was almost time for nanny to collect her from the nursery after her sleep before removing the contents of her nappy.

Really, any normal child would have been potty trained by now, but not Carlie. She, of course, had to be different.

I'll never forget the first time it happened. She had emptied her nappy, rolled her spoils into little balls, and then carefully placed them along the four sides of her cot."

Stops for breath, while she belches out another laugh at the expression on the faces of her audience.

Mammie, despite her ladylike manners, obviously retained some of the coarse habits inherited from the peasant side of her family.  
Her mother's side that is.

I still remember the vulgar stories which tainted the air when they met en masse.

Probably explains my filthy sense of humour. I mean, what do you expect? Them, thinking that I couldn't understand a word while they spoke in the dialect of Limburg.

Me, not letting on that I had picked it up through time and was soaking up every word, filing them to be related to my peers at a later date.

Mammie continues, "Then she wiped the leftovers in her hair and over the wallpaper at the side of her cot.

It was horrible. Nor was it an isolated occasion. I did everything to get the better of her. I practically padlocked her nappy (Exaggeration). That was useless. She still found a way in. I even covered the wall with sheets of plastic. But that was soon reduced to a nasty mess as well"

Apparently, the first time nanny walked into this experience she was so overcome by the smell and the sight of her charge's horrible little face beaming through the mess that she ran out of the room screaming, threatening a nervous breakdown.

Even the threat of redundancy didn't deter her.

"I refuse to have anything to do with that disgusting brat. Not this time. Or at any other time."

She kept her word that time as well as on future occasions when this obnoxious behaviour was repeated. Then it was left to mammie to take control and to cope with the problem as best as she knew how, which meant it wasn't fun any longer.

It was nanny who had to bear the brunt of this brat's dislike for the thick black stockings which I was forced to wear to the convent school which I attended for a short period of time.

No sooner were we out of sight of the house when I would take a delight in kicking her legs in protest, all the way to school.

The only time the poor woman earned a reprieve was when I was allowed to ride to school on the back of the family's St. Bernard. Then I kicked the dog instead of nanny. After all, he left nappy messes all over the house and he wasn't thrown into a bath afterwards. And trust them to get a big dog which wasn't house trained.

Anyway, I was removed from that particular school after only a

short attendance. Strangely, not due to my behaviour but because, it being a Catholic school, the penguins spent too much time on prayer and not enough on scholastic achievement.

Lest you think too bad of me, despite my horrible, stinking behaviour I

did grow up to be a compassionate adult eventually and, after the nappy-content sculpture episodes, actually developed very fastidious habits, along with various idiosyncrasies which tended to drive my father mad at times.

For instance, at bedtime as well as demanding my usual kiss, cuddle, and story from my beloved pappie, I would have him smooth my bedspread, straighten my nursery furniture at an exact angle, and drape the bedroom curtains into perfect folds.

Only then was I content to settle down to sleep.

All this left him mentally exhausted as well as quite convinced that his daughter was totally neurotic.

Much to everyone's annoyance those finicky habits would remain part of my personality for many years, until recently.

Now I have reached the happy conclusion that life does not have to be a continual search for meticulousness.

My new school was a private school. The one over the little wooden bridge. Here we were made to work. And how.

Teacher's word was law then. You didn't mess about with them the way kids do now. From eight in the morning till five in the afternoon it was nose to grindstone.

Wednesdays and Saturdays were half days. Holidays, two weeks in summer. One week at Christmas and Easter.

Until the armies took over.

First the Germans.

Later the Tommies.

Even then there was to be no total reprieve, as teachers offered the use of their homes in order to continue the education of their pupils.

We had to take it in turn. Six of us at a time. Three hours twice a week.

But as time took us further into the war it wasn't easy to concentrate. Not for teacher. Nor for us.

Most times, seated around his dining table, our school books before us, we were distracted by the sound of planes swooping through the skies. Followed by the scream of bombs whistling through the air before crashing round about us. And all the time we wondered when it was our turn to be hit.

Before long, it was too dangerous to venture out, and our learning came to a halt.

At the opposite end of the street, the end away from our house, there was another large bridge which led to a wood where we kids could

play in perfect safety without having to be supervised all the time.

The canopy of trees made an entrancing playground. It was a place of enchantment. A place of adventure to be explored. We ran along leafy lanes beside sheltered streams, until we reached the little paths which led to open picnic areas where, slouched on wooden benches, we halted long enough to catch our breath. Too restless to bide a while, it wasn't long before we were up and off once more.

Under the red-hot sun, amongst the drone of summer flies, we whooped like monkeys, as we climbed high into branches just grown for us. We raced through bushes in pursuit of one another. The beautiful shades of nature going unnoticed in our haste.

When we tired of those restless games, we expended our energies by cycling through the woods into the next country, Belgium.

Now all that is gone. Those of us who lived are grown old.

The magic of childhood died many years ago along with our

playground, after it was changed into a place of death by German tanks and soldiers. Everything died after the enemy took our country.

Nothing remains of the trees, or the memorable scent of pine and mushroom, or the sounds surrounding our childish laughter: the singing of birds, the hissing and scuttling of small animals, and the gurgling of the streams as they drift on their way.

Gone, along with the innocent summers of childhood when life was

good, and death was still a mystery.

Yet the memories remain, and those summers so long ago were perfect when I was a child.

Despite this idyll of yesteryear, for some unknown reason, the woods influenced my nights for many years and like so many other occasions sometimes my memory tells me that it wasn't a dream, but reality.

*I am playing in the woods beside one of the stream while nanny watches me from where she is seated on a nearby bench.*

*There are shadows under the water. I see gnomes, ugly little men who beckon me and reach out towards me. Gnarled fingers try to pull me down in order to drown me in the murky depth.*

I always escape from them. Just as I had evaded the hands which tried to grasp me from behind the deep-blue velvet curtains which had draped the windows of our old living room.

Yet, on retrospect, perhaps this dream is not symbolic in the sense that my first nightmare might have been.

Perhaps it is just wishful thinking on the nanny's part.

Chapter Five  
Last Days of Childhood

Despite those terrible years which took so many lives, this was for me the last time I experienced real happiness. Even the terrors of the Nazi occupation could not take that away. Whereas the arrival of the allies gave joy to many, to me it brought only heartache and confusion.

At first the war did not affect us children too much. It was a happening beyond our comprehension. Something to be worried about by the adults, leaving us free to enjoy our childhood for at least a little while longer.

Another winter, another summer, before we were smothered by the dark days of an occupied Europe.

During that winter, when the ice was thick enough to be safe, we wrapped up warm, gathered our skates and made for the rivers. Oblivious to the chill which sent our parents indoors to huddle before the warmth of a log fire we raced as far as our energy took us, and back again. Woollen hats pulled over our ears, colourful scarves flying behind us, breath steaming before us like a smoke screen. And the sound of our laughter mixed with the swish of the skates as they cut

along the frozen river.

This is what life was about during that winter.

Every so often we halted, sending sprays of ice into the air as we slid to a halt at one of the hot chocolate stands which littered the river banks. Rosy cheeks buried in steaming mugs, hurriedly slurped, so that we can be on our way again.

During that winter, when the snowfalls had been heavy, some drifts high enough to bury us from top to toe, all the children in the neighbourhood brought their sledges out. Large and small, different designs and colours, were tied together with ropes.

While some sat and travelled, others pulled the train of sleighs through the snow covered streets, screaming with delight whenever one of us tumbled off into the snow.

Before the killing and the hunger took away our childhood we were content, safe in the knowledge that we were accident free. Few people had cars to bar our way. Most transported themselves on bicycles, until they too were confiscated by the enemy.

Winter was fun that year.

Just as the winter had been bitterly cold, so the languid summer brought a heat that made 'the birds drop dead from the trees'.

We played our games until late into the evening while our parents

relaxed on their garden patios, relishing the last moments of those summer days.

That summer we spent hours beside the river. Basking in the sun, we cast our home-made fishing reels into the water. With a bent pin instead of a hook, old bread for bait, we seldom caught anything.

It was the camaraderie which counted, not the catch.

On really adventurous days we stole any neighbour's boat or canoe which happened to be lying unused. An action made all the more

exciting when we were spotted by the owner.

Then the chase would begin.

Us, rowing like the devils we were. Them, unable to reach us, shouting their frustration from the river bank, while we disappeared into the distance regardless of the consequences which would have to be faced later.

The moment was what mattered.

Just as stolen bread, or boats, taste sweeter, so did the corn on the cob and the turnips which we stole from the farmers' fields, to be chewed and swallowed while the dirt still clung to them. Cherries, large and black, apples, red and sweet, anything that wasn't ours, devoured until we doubled up with aching bellies.

Always somewhere to go, something to do. When the fishing and the thieving palled we made for the wood where we created our

adventures without being restricted by adult rules.

That summer was magic when I was a child.

Yet, nothing is ever quite perfect.

Even in the seemingly unhampered days of childhood, unknown to our parents, worries, jealousies, and untold problems can beset childish minds.

For me, one of the abhorrences of those days, as well as our wimpish housekeeper, was my cousin Mieke, six months older than me.

A fact which she would never allow me to forget.

Her reminders were constant.

"I'm six months smarter. Six months prettier. And, therefore, six months superior to you. So you, you ugly little smout do as I tell you," she never tired of reminding me.

Although we both had the same insipid colour of hair, her pigtails were longer than mine. Hers were always neatly in place whereas mine struggled to escape from the satin ribbons which bound them together.

I had to take second place in everything.

She thought.

Mieke was also slightly taller than me, and had bigger feet. This of course meant that, you may already have guessed, to add insult to injury, I was the unhappy recipient of her cast-offs.

Not that my parents couldn't afford the shoes and clothes I needed, but you'll realise that supplies to the shops were becoming restricted.

Everything had to be recycled.

To make matters worse, the stupid bitch was hen-toed. No guessing what her deformed shoes did to my feet, as well as my pride.

Small wonder that I became adept at 'losing' them. Like throwing them in the river. Or hiding them under hedges. Until all I had left to wear were the surprisingly comfortable wooden clogs supplied by the school.

If her superiority towards me was her weakness, then mine was surely my uncontrollable hatred towards her. I swore that one day I would wreak my vengeance for the number of times on which she had made me feel inferior.

I would attempt to pluck up courage by convincing myself, "I'm Carlie. My father is almost a judge. Her father is only a post office employee, althoughbeit of the upper hierarchy.

Our name means something. Hengeveld can pull strings. She is only a Meinlief. A nothing. So who the fuck does she think she is."

Yet time after time I suffered her insults without retaliation.

Bad enough when she bullied me in private. But it was the public humiliations before our peers which were even more intolerable, incensing me with such a hatred that I was fit for murder.

So, when my moment of revenge arrived I did indeed wreak with a vengeance.

That fateful day a bunch of us were happily playing a variety of games in HER garden.

It was a beautiful summer day. The birds tweeted. The butterflies fluttered. The bees buzzed. The grass smelled green. And we were having fun.

Until that superior bitch decided to amuse herself by swinging a rake around her head.

I mean, can you imagine anything so stupid from someone who is supposed to be so clever.

Round and round it swung, accompanied by her maniacal laughter. My plea, "Mieke, for goodness sake stop it," was met by even louder laughter and wilder swings.

Round and round.

Once more I tried to assert myself. "Come on, someone could be hurt if you lose your grip," (like me for instance) also fell on deaf ears.

Suddenly her superior laughter ceased, as I lost it. Making a flying tackle at her legs I brought her to the ground, grabbed the rake from her, and landed her one over the skull with it.

Pointed ends down.

For a few moments there was a hush, (I swear that even the birds ceased their twittering) during which I took a fascinated delight in watching blood spurt out of all the little holes in her head, before the screaming started, prompting me to hoof it down the road, pronto.

Little coward that I was.

It was left to my father to sort that one out with her parents. My brilliant pappie, whom I adored, could always achieve what to others seemed impossible.

He could sweet talk anyone to his way of thinking.

He was a saviour in my times of temper, which was often.

He could right anything for me, no matter how bad I had been.

We were a team. An inseparable team.

I loved him more than anyone else in the whole world.

I love him still.

So many years after his death, I love him still.

And my tears flow, staining the paper on which I write.

## Chapter Six

### Carlie's War Continues

Several months went by before my second and last attempt at killing

Mieke.

Winter had set in. It was icy cold. Snow drifted against the buildings and left a sugar coating on the skeleton branches of the trees. The ice wasn't thick enough for skating, and Hans, my best friend, was too ill for company.

Momentarily bored with the endless sleigh rides I had decided to keep company with a couple of kids who lived at the other end of the street. Inconsequential friends, as their names have long ago disappeared from my memory.

Still, we were having fun as children can, until play was abandoned during the few minutes it took me to have a pee. And during those few minutes my dear cousin arrived to louse up the rest of my day.

I reappeared from the house to discover that she had appropriated my friends, taunting me with, "Ha, ha, ha, you're not playing with us," the way kids do.

Well, whether they do or not I was, to put it mildly, annoyed.

"You fuckin' (or something similar in Dutch) dweep. Go find your own friends. Go play in your own street. Leave us in peace. Why don't you."

But the 'ha has' continued.

I was scared to go too close.

I swore at her again from a safe distance.

This went on for some time till I ran out of swear words and she tired of the 'ha has'.

I saw her lift something from the snow-packed ground, but from that distance I couldn't make out what it was.

Giving one last 'ha ha' she threw the object in my direction.

A large piece of roof tile whizzed through the air, to land right in front of me, inches away from my feet.

So, O.K. It didn't hit me. But it might have done.

The bitch.

If I hadn't lost my equilibrium already, I certainly lost it now.

Control snapped. A black cloud of rage consumed me, chewed me up, and spat me out.

Insane with anger, I lifted the portion of tile from where it had landed and, running in her direction, I drew back my arm and hurled it towards her with all my young strength.

As usual, never one to do things by half, I made good and proper contact with her forehead. The left hand side. Just above her eye.

Blood gushed, staining the white-covered ground with crimson.

"Shit." I'd really done it this time.

This time I didn't stay to be fascinated. This time even my black rage didn't cover the fact that I'd gone too far. Althoughbeit unintentional, I doubted that evenpappie would be able to cover for my stupidity this time.

Although the rake holes in her head had healed, judging by the amount of blood, this wound appeared unhealable. More like bloody fatal by the looks of it.

I wasn't terrified. I was scared shitless.

Even more so when she ran screaming to my house, banging on the door for help. A trail of dappled red where shortly before three children had played their innocent games in the untainted snow of winter. While I clambered onto the roof of our garden shed, where I cowered in the

snow, she rushed into the open front door.

There I lay for a long long time. Too frightened to go indoors, I watched the doctor come and go. I pretended not to hear when Philie - the housekeeper - called my name.

Still I hid, until the freezing cold and the approaching darkness gave me the courage to venture indoors.

My superior cousin, head swathed in bandages, was tucking into a consolatory treat.

I was beneath her contempt, totally ignored by her, as I sidled into the family room to await the onslaught which I expected.

Surprisingly enough my mother showed no anger.

"Carlie, Carlie," she gently spoke, "When will you learn to control that temper of yours."

"But, mammie, she threw it first."

Even though I knew it was an useless exercise, it was my nature to make some sort of protest.

"That might be." mammie said, "The point is that your aim was true. A fraction of an inch and Mieke would have been brain damaged for life."

As though she wasn't already, I thought, now feeling rather brave because no one was shouting at me.

Perhaps my parents reasoned that the hours spent on the roof of the shed had been punishment enough. Perhaps my mother had exaggerated the extent of my cousin's injury. Or, perhaps my parents didn't like her either and reckoned that she had what she deserved. Whichever way, I was never punished for this bit of bodily harm. Except, and this was punishment enough in a way, I had to promise to be nice to her.

Yuk, yuk, and more yuk.

It was an uneasy truth between my cousin and I.

We had our moments.

Like when we played doctors and nurses - instigated by HER - under the table in her play room, pulling the table cloth down as far as possible so that, "God won't be able to see what we're doing."

Dirty bitch, Superior dirty bitch.

We really tried to be friends, but our insidious dislike of one another had infiltrated too deeply. Our relationship resembled that of a rabbit and a ferret. The only difference was that now, for a little while, I was the ferret.

We were constantly wary, constantly warring. Yet, at the same time, making an attempt at being civil to one another for our parents' sake.

There were only few occasions when we actually managed to be as close as two festering little girls could be.

That was the time when we both had nits.

Being such a smart ass she of course had them first, and passed them on to me. I couldn't understand my mother's panic when I proudly announced,

"I've got nits."

After all, every kid in the neighbourhood had them, so why not I.

I didn't take into account that 'only common people have these things'. Aristocratic families like ours didn't.

What a load of balls. And despite the steel comb and DDT treatment, recommended by oma (she being more working class, of course), because mammie didn't have a clue, I managed to keep my little pets for

quite some time.

The war was drawing nearer for us.

One day Mieke and I were walking from my house to hers, a couple of streets away.

We crossed the little wooden bridge and made our way along the side of the stream, passing on the opposite of the old folk's home.

In the distance the drone of aeroplanes.

Warily, we stop to listen as the sound comes closer.

Closer.

Now they are right above us. British planes, swooping low over our heads. So low that we can almost distinguish the pilots.

Bombs scream from the underside of the planes, landing everywhere like malevolent demons.

Now we are two frightened little girls. All our differences forgotten as we hurl ourselves down the side of the river bank, hugging one another for comfort as we try to hide ourselves amongst the waist-high reeds.

A lull in the pandemonium. Up, and running. Helter skelter.

Tripping. Falling. Until we reach her house. There we throw ourselves down the steps into the cellar, the only place we think to be safe, praying for our parents to come and rescue us.

For what seems hours, but is probably only minutes, the noise continues outside. While we wait. Trembling with fear. Waiting for it to stop.

Later, we discovered that the old folk's home had been bombed, blitzed

to the ground. The German headquarters next door, the intended target, was untouched.

Our war had begun. We were there. We passed the remnants of the home. We saw what remained of the old people, the mothers and fathers of our parents' generation.

We learned of the cruelty of war. The slaughter of the innocents. Lifeless bodies carried away on stretchers, leaving behind the rubble our allies had created. All the old ones burned to death in the cellar of the home where they had been hiding for safety.

## Chapter Seven

Hans

I was now spending so much time with pappie that I had room in my life for only a few selected friends. Some were only passing acquaintances, necessary to fill the hours during which my father was unable to be with me.

Most of the names and faces of those inconsequential companions are erased from my memory. Others I remember well.

They were the friends who were caring companions in our endless search for adventure. With them I shared my zest for life. We lived each hour to the full. We truly cared for one another, we had our differences and our reconciliations, as children do.

When I tired of our games, I sought solitude. Often preferring the peace of my own enhancing company.

At other times there was the boy next door. Well, two doors away.

I don't know why he fascinated me. Why I was so drawn to this sweet boy.

His name was Hans. He was ten years older than me.

He was a mongol child, born to older parents.

Sometimes when he was too ill for company his mother wouldn't let

me enter the house. Other times she was glad that I had time for her boy, allowing us to spend whole days together.

Every moment spent with him was so precious.

In some ways he was my first boyfriend. Older, therefore wiser. To my childish mind, almost a man of the world.

I didn't see his differences. The bulging eyes, the drooling mouth, and faulty speech. To me he was beautiful.

I only saw his blond hair, the blue eyes which crinkled when he smiled, and how he towered over me.

I loved Hans. His unusual features, uncertain walk, his manner, so different from anyone else I knew, were of no concern. Rather than think of him as a freak, as so many did, these disadvantages endeared him to me all the more.

He made me feel special. Hans was one of the few who could bring out the best in me, just as I seemed to have the capability of pacifying him. When we were together he was always good natured, his outbursts of frustrated anger directed elsewhere.

He's the one with whom I never quarrelled.

He's the one who made me feel complete.

With him, I was at peace.

And, in return, I was the only one who was allowed to touch his favourite possession, a record player which was so precious to him that

he wouldn't let anyone else come even close to it. I was the only one who was allowed to place one of his records onto the turntable before winding the handle. Then he laughed with me as we held each other close, dancing to the music in our own clumsy, immature way.

Many hours of content were spent with Hans. He was the only one who was able to control my rebellious spirit. Even pappie couldn't do that. When with him I could rid myself of the malice which burned inside me like a restless, evil spirit.

To me he was beautiful. This boy next door, who was handicapped. He was my best friend. The best friend I had in those troubled times. Alas, that it wasn't to last. He died when he was only twenty one. And I wasn't there. I wasn't there for him when he took that last breath. I had already said my goodbyes a few months earlier, before we left the Netherlands. The goodbyes which brought the tears we couldn't halt. I couldn't make him understand why I was leaving him. Because I, myself, didn't understand why.

Yet, no matter how awful, the balance of life still creates good out of bad. Sometimes distance can be a blessing in times of bereavement. When the one you love is already lost to you, the fact of their death becomes meaningless.

Now he lives for ever. The night keeps him alive.

In my dreams I can feel his arms around me while we dance to the music of his record player for ever, and ever.

I see his face when he smiles at me. Now that I am grown taller his eyes look right into mine. Those sweet blue eyes which crinkle when he smiles.

Once more I love him when he forms the words he has to try so hard to say. Once more I adore the way he looks at me when he concentrates so hard to understand whenever I attempt to explain the ways of the world to him.

Our little world. To my best friend. Hans.

## Chapter Eight

### Oma

My favourite adult, besides my parents, was my paternal grandmother. No one else truly cared for her. For some reason I was the only one who didn't tire of her tyrannical ways. The only one who was willing to

give her time.

The strange thing was that much as I loved her, I also stood in fear of her.

Imagine a wisp of a girl looking up at this tall, gaunt old lady who wasn't really all that old, yet to my young mind seemed ancient.

A femme formidable. Always dressed in floor-length black with matching lace-up ankle boots. Around her neck she wore five layers of black beaded choker.

Long hair, gathered with combs, was piled on top of her head. Grey strands escaping the clasps which attempted to hold them in place, irritating a face which was lined long before its time.

She seldom smiled. Perhaps she didn't have much to smile about. Or perhaps she was sullen by nature. The same forbidding nature which was the cause of her continual loneliness. Except for the little grand-daughter who hung onto her skirts.

I ask myself now, why was I drawn to her. To any other young child

she must have appeared too terrifying. Someone to keep at a distance. Is it that I had already developed a compassion for 'lame dogs'. Or was it something deeper. Was it perhaps that I recognised myself in her.

Once upon a time she had lived in The Hague.

After opa - granddad - died, she moved to Breda to live in the Regentessen Laan. In one of the big houses with trees outside. Trees which blossomed to white and pink in the early summer, before quickly losing their leaves as we lose our years of youth, along with everything else which is dear to us. All the beautiful things of childhood, gone in a momentary flash of time, never to be recaptured.

Granddad died when I was still very young.

I remember him as a kindly old man. His white beard tickled my cheeks when he kissed me. His lap was always ready for a little girl who wanted to be entertained with never ending stories.

Perhaps oma was different when he was alive. Perhaps she only became grim after he passed away. Perhaps she was unable, or didn't want to, cope with her loss. Perhaps her life went along with his.

I would visit my grandmother whenever, and as often as I was allowed to go.

On the way to her house I passed the lane where the ice cream factory was situated. I knew that on the way home I could purchase the

only delicacy still left to us at this stage of the war. So much to choose from. So many colours. So many flavours.

The man who sold the ice cream never tired of showing us this and that. He never became cross, no matter how much I fussed before making that final decision.

Once decided, I would run home, clutching the large block of ice cream wrapped in thick paper, before it melted.

I was sure that I really loved my grandmother. That it wasn't just the lure of the ice cream which encouraged me to ply her with my attentions.

My mother often threatened me with, "You'll be just like her when you grow up, and no one will love you either."

Well maybe I am. Maybe not. Whether people like me or not is irrelevant to me. I never did care. I don't care now. And I doubt I ever will in the future. I mean, if people don't like me as I am, well that's their loss.

I prefer to think that my mother said this out of jealousy because of

the amount of time I chose to spend with the old lady. Not because I already happened to be a rotten spoiled brat and showed all the signs of growing up into a rotten spoiled adult.

I prefer to remember that my visits were made out of fondness for a

kindred spirit. A genuine affection, perhaps kindled by the fact that no one else was willing to give her their time.

Even now humanity's indifference to others of different ilk makes me want to be sick. I would like to be able to puke up every self-righteous, egotistical bit of homo sapiens and flush it down the toilet along with the rest of the shit.

All the suffering. Old people. Sick people. Children. Animals. Who cares. The world is an 'I'm all right Jack' place, and doesn't deserve a space in the universe.

I can only thank God, or whatever, that there are some out there who are concerned. Those few who are capable of giving a part of themselves by fighting for the rights of our supposed inferiors, giving their time and their support, even putting themselves at risk for those who can't help themselves.

Whatever my reasons for visiting my father's mother were surely irrelevant to her. Perhaps she suffered me. Perhaps it was a case of abject loneliness. Without me there was no one else.

Only I was quite content to sit with her for endless hours during which seldom a word passed between us. There seemed to be no need for conversation in this strange companionship of youth and senescence.

For me the highlights of those visits were when together we

toasted bread, balanced at the end of a large metal fork, over the open fire. Then quickly devouring this treat, grease sliding down our chins, while it was still hot from the flames.

A simple pleasure. Yet, so memorable.

I ask myself now, was I too young to sense the depth of her unhappiness. Or did I in my childish way try to compensate.

Did I mean so much to her that she was unable to exist without me.

Mayhap a form of conceit on my part. Yet be it so, why did she kill herself shortly after my mother, my sister and I left the country.

I was about seven years old when I experienced my first waking dream.

The dreams which differ from the ones which come to me during the darkness of sleep.

They come after I wake, in the early hours of the morning, usually in times of emotional distress.

In this, the first of those 'dreams', I had actually left my bed to pee in my potty.

I was still firmly planted on the porcelain when I heard and saw my bedroom door open.

My grandmother entered the room, followed by my father.

"Hello," I said to them from my unlofty position. "You're up early. What's wrong."

Neither offered a reply, nor graced me with so much as a glance. They stared straight ahead as they walked past me, to exit through the outside wall.

It might seem strange that I didn't query this happening at the time. Or, if I did, I don't remember. Being an abnormal child perhaps I accepted it all as being normal.

Stranger still, is that this dream as well as the other many experiences which followed, never instilled fear in me. Even though at times things occur in my bedroom which are terrifying.

Like the man who came into my room carrying a ginger tom. The cat was already dead when he slit its throat. Then, holding it by the tail, he swung it round and round while I lay in my bed watching the blood splatter the walls and furniture.

Or, often I can feel the weight of someone as they seat themselves on the edge of my bed. Sometimes they just go away. Other times they cuddle in beside me. And as I grow into womanhood the eventual happens.

Wistful thinking maybe. But, oh so real.

Most times my eyes remain closed. Other times I open them and look at the face of a lover whom I cannot recognise.

I know these events are not part of a normal dream. They never happen during the hours of darkness.

They come in the early morning as I wake to hear the clock strike eight.

Always eight o'clock.

I am aware of noises in the street. Aware of household sounds as breakfast is being prepared. The flush of the toilet. The brushing of teeth. People's conversation. The demanding bark of the dog, desperate after his night indoors.

All the time aware, while in the cocoon of my bedroom strange things happen.

I don't know what makes them go away. Perhaps my lovers, my

nightmares, disappear after I return into moments of sleep. Perhaps I wish them away. I really don't know. Nor do I care.

I have accepted the waking dream as part of the pattern of my life.

More curious than afraid, I derive genuine enjoyment from these weird experiences.

Yet in saying that, although I find satisfaction in those unknown lovers' arms, and gain excitement from the other beings who inhabit my bedroom, I have to admit that I sleep with my door locked to be sure that no outside force has penetrated.

Although these dream happenings are not premonitions like the nightmares of my childhood probably were, this first one, of the two adults whom I loved most as a child, might well have been.

Both were the first to desert me in their premature deaths.

My grandmother with her lonely suicide, and my father dying the painful, lingering death of cancer not so many years later.

## Chapter Nine

### Pappie

As already mentioned, during the earlier part of the war life was more or less normal. The only change it had brought about concerned the years of travelling with my mother. Our trips around Europe had had to come to an end, along with my chance of ( again that 'perhaps' ) becoming a famous ballet dancer.

Fortuitous, or otherwise?

Another of those 'if' situations.

If my father hadn't objected, I would have gone to Duitsland with the German film producer who was so impressed at the way I landed in a 'splits' position after falling down a flight of steps on board ship.

"Perfect," he told my mother, "Perfect legs for a ballet dancer."

If he could only see them now.

Georgie Best doesn't have a look in.

My mother might have been taken by thoughts of accompanying me to moments of glory. My father decided otherwise. For once in his life he put his foot down with a decisive, "NO".

Even though it was before 1939, the coming war and its havoc was already more than a rumble in the distance. Had I gone to Germany

I might have perished when that rumble became a roar, and this story would not have been written.

But it has been writ. No punches pulled.

Instead of glory, or death, I remained at home to develop a close

relationship with my father.

He was, at that time, a public prosecutor. It would be a few years hence before he followed in his father's footsteps to become a judge. Not as well respected or as famous as opa had been but nevertheless well known. Like, infamous.

Pappie appeared to be without the scruples which influenced his father's judgements. This didn't actually make him bad, but did cloud his view of the world.

Not that he was evil. 'Lovable rogue' would be an adequate description of the way he applied himself to his work as well as to his private life.

Pap's occupation took him to many places, and I often accompanied him. He treated me as he would have done a son, while he taught me to drink, smoke, swear, and to play billiards in the pubs which he frequented with his acquaintances as well as with some of his clients. My hands were barely able to grasp the cue which was more than twice my size, and I had to stand on a chair to reach the table while the men amused themselves by giving me a game or two.

Pappie had a fantastic sense of humour. Like my own, without

doubt, rather warped.

Whereas another child would have had its bum skelped, my antics provided him with an enormous sense of glee.

Few episodes delighted him more than to have his little daughter repeat the dirty songs and jokes, overheard during times spent in public houses, to the snooty friends and colleagues who visited our home. Then my mother, close to apoplexy, would try to shut me up without success. While pappie just smiled and twitched his nose.

Whenever my father was 'up to something', or when anything

bothered him, his nose was a real give-away, twitching furiously while he tried to pretend as though nothing untoward was happening.

The twitch was inherited from his mother and, whereas I have my mother's nose, alas I have not been able to avoid the paternal twitch.

Naturally, the inevitable followed. Children can be so cruel. The more they called me 'twitchy nose' the more it twitched.

Even now it is a traitor to me whenever something or someone pees me off. Nothing is sacred, or can remain hidden from friends or partners.

"Your nose is going sixteen to the dozen. What's up?" they will say.

To me, my father's nose was part of the endearing memory of the man who became my world. Pappie was the one man in my life whom I came to love without reservation. So deeply, that no other could take his place. No lover, or husband, would ever be able to

compete with the feelings I held for my father.

How could they? After the most perfect man in the world had gone from my life. How could they even begin to compare?

Pap and I were a team. Two souls in one unit. Two batteries in a torch. The light goes out when you take one away.

My light went out when they took me away from him.

One day we went to visit a client. A farmer who had committed murder for the second time.

The first time he killed a local girl who had probably rejected his advances.

You know, we Dutch are a bit like Fate, except there's no lollipop as compensation. So we go one better. Without giving it thought we'll knock you into the gutter just for looking at us the wrong way. Then we'll stretch out a friendly hand. Heave you out. And treat you to a

pint.

Maybe, the farmer hadn't meant to kill. Maybe he had intended to buy her that drink. But the barrel had run dry.

The second time he killed it was a prostitute who was sent to meet her Maker.

Pappie had managed to prove his innocence once, for a price. Now he had been asked to do a repeat performance.

Don't take this the wrong way. Paps wasn't bad. It's the way he was, and the way things were. The approaching occupation was sending things all awry. My father was feathering our nest before the deprivations of war began to bite. By doing so he saved our lives. But by doing so he also made his own bed. A bed from which he did not arise.

Anyway, there we were, seated in the farmhouse parlour, pot plants everywhere, their scent mixed with the noxious fumes from the farm yard, being plied with milk by the farmer's wife.

A good strong jenever - gin - would have gone down well instead of this stuff, still warm from the cow.

To make it worse, she had added sugar.

It was fucking disgusting.

Pappie thought so too. He gave me a conspiratorial grin while he donated the content of his glass to one of the plants which I swear just about died on the spot.

I had to be a brave little soldier by pretending to sip mine. Jesus, it was awful. Until the opportunity presented itself for pap to fling it out of an open window when no one was looking.

Luckily, the farmer nor his wife knew about our noses.

Another time, during my 'nit' days, before my mother had managed to

rid me of my verminous entourage, my father had taken me to the local hospital where I was receiving a course of sun-lamp treatment to help build up my bones.

Maybe, had I drunk the farmer's milk this could have been avoided. But then, how were we to know that soon growing children would be deprived of the essentials of life.

I was lying under the lamp, pappie seated by my side, when one of my little pets escaped. A black speck, quite unconcernedly making its way along the snow white sheet.

I don't suppose the nurse would have banished us. Nevertheless, we weren't about to let on that I had brought nasties into the hospital. Every time we thought the nurse wasn't looking paps tried to flick the little nit away. And every time he missed.

This turned out to be one of life's challenges, as she persisted with her presence.

By the time she finally left the room we were both helpless with silent laughter. Paps killed the little bugger, while both our noses twitched away lest she returned to catch us out.

Two inconsequential stories to some.

To me, part of the loving memories I have of times shared with my father. The bond we had. And the happiness we shared before our lives were shattered by events.

Oddly enough, at the time of writing I can barely remember what

his looks were like. Until recently I had no picture of him and, after all, I was only eighteen when I saw him last, and eighteen was such a long time ago.

I know that he was attractive to women. He slept with plenty of them. He did love my mother to distraction, yet his nature did not allow him to be faithful to her.

Dark blond hair swept back from a high forehead, velvet brown eyes which constantly smiled through the spectacles he had to wear, a manner which could charm the birds from the trees. How could they not love him.

The twitchy nose has an aquiline appearance. Dimples in both cheeks whenever laughter overtakes. The manly chin has a tiny cleft, just enough to be attractive.

And now, as I write, his face comes back to me.

How could I ever have forgotten? Every time I see my reflection in a mirror it is his face which looks back at me.

"Like two drops of water." "Two peas in a pod." People used to say.

Yes, there is no denying that I am his. The resemblance is unmistakable even though I have reached an age far in excess of the one he achieved.

For a Dutchman he wasn't very tall, although his five eleven

towered over mammie and me.

He was the man whom I adored.

He was the one who spoiled me with presents, not only when I chose to stay in bed with 'school sickness', but whenever he felt like spoiling me, which was often. He was the one who supplied my friends and me with black market cigarettes to compensate when the rice paper we ate instead of sweets was no longer available either.

There we were, Jantje and I sitting in the back lane, puffing away like mad before being caught by a snotty neighbour.

Even though it was done with pap's blessing, we ran like hell, leaving our precious hoard of cigarettes and matches abandoned in the dirt.

When I finally dared to venture home, sure that mammie would give me 'what for', the packet of cigarettes was lying all alone on a little table in the hallway, while guests of the house, including the neighbour, mingled round about.

Mammie didn't give me laldy. But she didn't give me the ciggies back either. She just looked at me, reproachfully like.

To make me feel guilty no doubt. Which was a bit of a laugh as it took many years for guilt and I to become acquainted.

Although as a baby she held and cherished me, from the time I was a toddler I cannot recollect ever receiving affection from my mother.

Yet my father endowed me with innumerable cuddles and kisses.

Perhaps my mother, once the initial miracle of childbirth had receded she, herself having been deprived of love as a child, was simply incapable of those feelings of emotion which just wants one to hug and kiss for no reason but sheer affection.

Or perhaps my memory fails me. Whatever my mother's faults might have been, in one way she can not be faulted. And that is her total loyalty to the children she gave birth to.

To the child I was, my father was the perfect one. He was invincible. I was unaware of the flaws in his character. His inability to say 'no', regardless of what it entailed. A weakness which would lead to his eventual downfall.

Yet had I been aware it would have been of no concern anyway.  
I loved him without question. He was my life. Without him I have nothing. The memories of what we shared are a constant reminder of my loss, along with my everlasting love for him.

## Chapter Ten

### Death of a Friend

I was almost six years old when my first sibling interrupted my life. For six years I had been my parents' only. The recipient of their total attentions. The bane of their lives.

Now I had competition. A sister to contend with. A sister came with all the advantages.

Not only had she been planned, whereas I had been an unfortunate accident, she also had it all going for her.

I was the one with the straight mousy hair, cropped into my head like a boy's.

Hers was a true blond, long and curly.

I was a scrawny little brat, all arms and legs, and ribs you could play the Dutch national anthem on.

She was chubby. Sweet smiles and dimpled cheeks.

My already less than attractive looks were not enhanced by the loss

of some of my baby teeth.

She, of course, was beautiful. Not only in outward appearance, but also with a rare inner beauty. She had a sweet, easy-going disposition, always ready with a smile which spread across her face to light up the

green of her eyes. In contrast I, as you are already aware, was a spoiled arrogant child, whinging and whining to get my way, quick to fly into tantrums when my whims were not immediately attended to.

So far as I was concerned my sister was an interloper who could drop dead for all I cared.

She was an aggravation.

A pain in the butt.

I hated her.

Small wonder that she feared me.

Yet despite all her assets, I remained pappie's girl. His constant companion. So far as I was concerned that was all important. All that I needed to make me happy. Not to have to share his love.

I would suffer this little sister. So long as he loved me best.

As well as Hans, I had two other close friends of whom I was very fond. They were brothers. Rieneke, one year older than me. Jantje, a year younger.

Unusual for boys, they both smelled of soap and baby powder, and I liked them both equally. In turn they treated me, not as a sippy girl but as one of the boys. Most times anyway. Sometimes one or the other would be otherwise occupied. Then there would be two. Me and Rieneke, or me and Jantje. Then I became the opposite sex. Then it was

time to play, 'Let me see yours, and I'll let you see mine', games. Or, in our naivety, 'You pee on mine, and I'll pee on yours.'

Yet strangely, innocence prevailed.

A more gruesome threesome would have been hard to find.

What we didn't get up to has still to be invented.

Whenever poor Hans was too ill, as was often the case, and the other kids' company palled, the three of us would slip away to search for mischief.

Until that summer's day which destroyed a part of our childhood.

One of our favourite spots, as well as the woods, and the rivers in which we never swam because we were aware of the antiquated drainage systems which sent shit shooting into the water, was the outdoor swimming pool situated near the outskirts of the town.

It consisted of a sandy beach bordering three pools.

The first was a shallow play area for non-swimmers.

The second, with a diving platform at the deep end, was for those who swam sufficiently well to stay afloat.

And the third pool, which we were not allowed to use, was the usual type of tiled pool, for experts only.

We were seven that day.

We went home six.

The sands were hot and crowded. We swam, ate sandwiches washed down with bottled water, and kicked a ball around reclining bodies.

We built sand castles, and we destroyed them.

We did most everything kids do on beaches.

The twins, identical girls, were wearing red swim suits.  
At some time during the heat of that day one of them, Annie, swam to the deep end of the second pool. She hauled herself up onto the platform where she rested for a few moments, before diving back into the water.

Almost twenty minutes later the lifeguard found her in the cloudy depth. Her body limp. So white against the bright red of her swimsuit.

It was the first time we saw death.

We didn't understand. It was too much for childish minds to comprehend. One minute Annie had been one of us. The next she had become this lifeless stranger.

Even now, almost sixty years later, I can picture the scene with absolute clarity.

The tall man, bleached by the summer sun blond hair, already dried by the heat during futile time spent trying to bring the girl back to life. A warm breeze fondles the long strands, blowing them across his face into his eyes.

He walks fast, carrying her along the wooden walkway beside the

swimming pools towards the club house. Two small girls, crimson against white. One limp in his arms. The other running behind him, tears running rivers down her face.

I feel the grittiness of sand on my body. A caressing sun heats my skin. Claustrophobia overwhelms me, as mindless ghouls gather around the remaining five.

I want to run. To burst screaming through the crowd which surrounds us as we attempt to dry one another's crying, to struggle into our clothes, while we try to understand.

And the people stand and stare at us. Because our friend has died.

What is it about them? Why have they singled us out?

Why do they gather around in whispers, and hamper our grief?

What is it about the misfortune of others that collects them like flies into a spider's web, clinging there with fascinated delight. Mindless stares, without compassion.

They gather in droves at someone else's misfortune. The death of our friend. A car smash. A body in the water, not unusual in Holland's network of canals. Yet, still it brings them in breathless anticipation. In the hope of seeing, what?

As the years pass all of us learned to know death. Too much death. Of friends, of family, as well as of strangers.

But this, the death of a peer, a seven year old child, accentuated by the morbid interest of the vultures who crowd around us, while we attempt to gather ourselves together before running home to our parents for comfort, stayed with me for many years. Not as a dream, but as a reality.

There's a tendency to imagine that children are resilient, that they soon forget. The bad things in our lives might indeed be forgotten, but the memories are stored, hidden deep within the childish mind, to affect the behaviour pattern of our adult years.

I know that none of us returned to that pool-side. And that instead of being a comfort to the surviving twin, we rejected her. We wouldn't allow her to be a reminder of the death which we in our immaturity refused to acknowledge.

Still unaware of the deaths which would become a normal pattern of our existence we only wanted to remember her sister as she was before

the water laid claim on her life.

We wallowed in our own selfish needs, without thought for the grief of the remaining sister who had to live with the loss which we could put aside as though it had never happened.

The sister whose name I can't even remember who had for ever lost a part of herself for ever.

And so part of the pattern for the adults some of us would become

was set. Of those who survived our own death during the war-torn years, how many would develop compassion. And how many would grow up as selfish as the crowds who had hampered us on the day our friend died.

## Chapter Eleven

### That Was The Day

Although we were well into the throes of war by now my parents could still afford to entertain their friends as well as hangers-on with dance and dinner parties.

We had retained our servants, at least for a little while longer, and the wine, jenever, and whatever else, still flowed freely.

This I discovered to my delight when I found the left-overs in the early hours of the morning after my parents had finally hit the hay and before the servants were about. Remnants in dirty lipstick-stained glasses which I happily gulped down regardless of the taste or content.

A true lush before the age of six. Well trained in the art of boozing by my father, I wallowed in the euphoric sensations of my childhood alcoholism. My pleasure a thorn in the side of the housekeeper who had to sober me up before school.

Although I didn't really have full knowledge of what was going on during those partying days, I did develop some vague awareness of the husband and wife swopping with which some of the adults passed their time at those gatherings.

I just knew there was something that grownups did which children didn't, after witnessing my father doing 'it' one evening in the back

garden with someone else's wife.

There were other incidents which didn't mean much to me as a child but on retrospect as an adult I came to realise that my parents were very liberated for the times in which we lived.

Dirty sods.

Nor was it only their predilection for the swop shop which proved how modern they were. There were loads of home movies of me walking the dog and things like that. Films which were brought out for family gatherings. There were also the secret films which I wasn't allowed to see. The ones that were hidden in the secret garden shed along with other goodies.

I sneaked in there once, to find loads of books. And, even though I had to wait until I was eighteen before my English was fluent enough to read the Chatterly one amongst others, I did find an ingenious little booklet which afforded me hours of fun.

When you flicked the pages very fast with your thumb it showed a man and woman bonking. It was hilarious. Although mammie didn't think so when she caught me with it.

Jan and Rene were the couple who were the most frequent swoppers.

They came from Scherpenzeel, a village about one hundred kilometres from Breda, where they operated a medical practice.

Scherpenzeel was more countrified than Ginneken. Therefore, being a lover of animals, I never objected when we sojourned there.

Except for Philie, who couldn't stand me and tended to keep out of my way as much as possible, the servants stayed behind, giving them a much deserved peace, and me the chance to roam at will.

The tiny village was the closest place to paradise so far as I was concerned. A haven where I rose at dawn, while the other inhabitants still slept, to wander through the village streets, alone.

Even at that early age I had a craving for peace and oneness with myself, away from the rest of the world. A dream which I have sometimes had almost within my grasp, almost become reality, only to have circumstance make it elude me time and time again, until now.

Often, I visualised my cottage in the country, isolated, except for the animal and plant life, which is the only company I seek. Unfortunate it is that city life would seem to be my Fate. And my companions, the wild life which man has created from himself.

Yet if this is how it must be for the remainder of my life, then I can only pray that death will finally grant me my wish of peace and solitude.

At least, on those quiet mornings in the village, my parents' immoral

bonking granted me the pretence of being the only person in the world.

A wonderful daydream, as I walked along the dusty road, past the village church, the little shop, until I reached the outskirts of the village, there to wander amongst the trees and flowers still misty from the dew which the night had gathered.

Here I was content with the company of an occasional dog or cat or farm animal who approached this lonesome little person without fear.

Sadly, that paradise can not be for ever. Came one early morning when that peaceful existence was shattered. Not only for me, but for the thousands of others in the Netherlands who had not yet been affected by the German infiltration.

That was the day when the enemy reached our part of the Benelux, which had first been invaded on May the tenth, 1940, eight months and

one week after war had become official for the British people.

That day I had taken my usual route towards the fields where my bovine friends were waiting for me, stopping once or twice to stroke a cat or talk to Mrs Squirrel as she chattered around the acorns which had fallen from a tree.

I had only made half my usual distance when I heard the sound of loud voices. Men's voices. Men in green uniforms, brandishing guns and rifles. Demons disguised as humans. The foul stink of their evil almost tangible.

I hid behind a hedge, while they forced their way through the door the first cottage, shouting and laughing, crashing it down because the occupants were too slow in opening the door.

To them the whole thing was a joke.

Through the window I could see the elderly couple, whose home had been invaded, cowering under the threat of the soldiers' weapons. Like me, they couldn't believe what was happening; and the soldiers used fists on the old people because they didn't comply to their wishes quickly enough. They wanted the food and valuables of which there was so little left.

What had for many years been the safety and comfort of their living room had been changed into a place of terror by the barbarian Kraut.

I remained hidden, watching as they worked their way along the row of houses.

I wasn't sure if it was a dream. Perhaps this wasn't happening. Perhaps this was just a challenge of the night to be discarded and forgotten at day break.

Alas, that this was not so. Day break took many years to come, and

the forgetting never happened.

For the occupants of those first houses in the village it was a night-mare.

For the soldiers it was a cruel sport. Cowardly. Unnecessary. They didn't need the cottages. They didn't need the items which they stole. They were sadists who made the most of their situation. They took what they wanted, perhaps later to be discarded. They killed anyone brave enough to stand up to them. The people, young and old alike, who fought with bare hands and sticks were shot by the guns which the soldiers so bravely carried.

Still I stood transfixed, unbelieving, frightened to move lest the soldiers noticed me. I knew I had to go, to warn my parents.

The minutes seemed like hours, before I managed to find my feet and run. I ran so fast, back to the house of the Renkens, Jan and Rene.

By the time I arrived I was out of breath, banging on the bedroom door to wake mammie and pappie.

"Mammie, pappie, soldiers. In the houses. Come on, wake up. Hurry. Hurry. We have to go. We have to go home."

It was some time before the adults could make sense out of my incoherent babble. They assumed I had been dreaming again.

Eventually my father decided to humour me. Hangover and all, he put on his outdoor clothes to do a recky.

When, minutes later, he returned his face was ashen as he called to mammie, "Maria, we have to hurry. They'll be here soon. Get the

children ready. I'll tell Jan and Rene."

Hurriedly dressing, quickly packing, soon we were on our way home.

Home. One hundred kilometres, which went on for ever.

Chapter Twelve  
And the Journey Home

There were five of us that day. The Renkens had decided to brave it out. Why should they be forced out of their home. They were both doctors. Their usefulness would be enough to spare their lives. It was a chance they took. A chance that paid off. They survived the war, and all its dangers, to eventually retire into old age.

So it was, that my parents, my sister, the housekeeper, and I prepared for our weary journey home. Our belongings were strapped to the luggage rack of our bicycles. My little sister was parcelled into the seat which was built onto the back of my mother's bike when we left the village just before nine o'clock that morning.

I rode the bike which my grandmother had given me on my previous birthday. My first grown-up bike which, because it was too big for me, had wooden blocks attached to the pedals to enable me to reach them.

I was so pleased when oma Hengeveld gave me that grown-up bike. Even though I had to wait weeks before I could ride it. Not because it was too big. But because my foot was swollen, red and sore and full of puss, after I had trampled on a live wasp.

A little reward for walking around on my bare feet after ditching a pair

of my cousin's shoes. 'Whoops, sorry mam. Lost another pair'

No big deal. The bike was there. It was mine. And I could wait to ride it.

On that never ending day, I would ride that bike more than I had

ever bargained on.

The first few hours were uneventful. We rode in silence. My parents anxious to be home and, hopefully, safe.

For me, this was a rare adventure to be enjoyed as long as it lasted, while I happily pedalled away. My little legs going like the clappers in an attempt to keep up with the adults.

It was about lunch time when we reached a ferry crossing, already commandeered by German troops.

There was no other way home, bar a lengthy detour. We had to cross this river - The Waal - which entered the Netherlands from Het Hollandse Diep to course its way across the country before reaching Germany.

Just our luck therefore that like everything else the Germans stole from us they had decided the ferry was theirs, off-limits to Dutch civilians.

Some had tried. Those who had come before us. Those who had chosen to argue. The ones who had been shot. Their bodies unceremoniously dumped into a ditch at the side of the road. Remnants

of people who had lived and loved. Strangers, now clinging together like lovers before their humanity becomes one with the dust of the earth Exposed to the noonday heat of the sun, already the smell of death hung heavy in the air. Sweet, cloying scent which, as the war progressed, became terribly familiar.

This threat of death however did not deter my brilliant pappie. He strode forward towards the guns and rifles, leaving us huddled in a little group at the side of the ditch where we could hear him harangue the soldiers in fluent German.

Young as I was, in a case like this, innocence soon flies out of the window. We knew paps was taking a chance, yet better to die fighting than to give in gracefully. And, although fully aware of our vulnerability, my arrogance still reared its ugly head as I became more and more peeved off by the housekeeper's ceaseless whimpering. Was she not Dutch. Should she not be brave. How could she show her fear to the enemy in this insipid way. I was ashamed to be in her company.

"Philie, if you don't shut up, I swear I'll push you in beside them," I threatened, while pointing to the bodies in the ditch.

Her wail of a reply was silenced as I made a determined move in her direction. Urine trickled down her legs. With a shudder she backed off. As far away from me as possible she stood, now fearing me as much as

she feared the enemy.

Poor Philie. Poor dumpy, mousy Philie. It was a shame really. She had nothing going for her at all; except the fact that she was a hapless, harmless soul at heart.

She had no one. We were the only family she had. There was nowhere else for her to go.

But then, one has to grow up before becoming aware of the misfortunes of others. And some of us never do.

So we waited, our hearts pounding, the smell of our sweat mingled with that from the ditch. Until, having by one means or another persuaded the Germans, pappie led us aboard the ferry.

I don't know what my father used to bribe the soldiers that time, or at other times when it was necessary. All I know is that he achieved what to those others had been impossible.

Our safe passage across the water.

It would be many years before I learned that no matter how difficult a situation, money, charm, and position, can obtain miracles.

I have no recollection of stopping for food during that terrible day. I suppose we must have done at some time or another. Always assuming that food was available.

By now my young legs ached so much that I had lost track of time

and place. My sense of adventure had deserted me some way back. All that mattered now was to be home. Yet, much more would have to be endured before that day finally came to an end.

During the latter part of the afternoon we were cycling along a tow path separated by a field from the railway line. The sun shone with the promise of a bright summer to follow. Endless fields, in various shades of green and yellow, sighed their tranquillity in the soft breeze. No other sound interfered with that false peacefulness, except the plopping of life in the river, and the swishing of our wheels on the sandy path. Peaceful sounds. Had it been any other time this might just have been a family outing. But it wasn't. Far from it. As soon the quiet of the afternoon was broken by a distant sound.

A train rumbled along the railway track. Coming closer. Closer. Steam hissed into the air in accompaniment to the cha cha cha of the wheels against metal.

Closer.

Overhead, British planes appeared. Now swooping low, swooping down over our heads towards the train. They seem so tiny when you see them high up in the sky, so gigantic when you're face to nose with them.

All Hell broke loose, as they released their cargo.

The train, which our allies wrongly assumed was carrying German officer, erupted into flames.

Bombs, as well as lots of unmentionable bits and pieces, flew around us as we hurled ourselves down the river bank, bikes and all. My little sister screamed as she landed on a bed of thistles. Mammie, having thrown herself on top of her to protect her, thought she was screaming out of fear.

Much later we discovered the real source of her discomfort. It took ages to pick the needles out.

The housekeeper peed her knickers, again.

Then silence. Complete silence. Even the river seemed to have gone quiet, while the wind held its breath.

Before the screaming began.

We climbed back onto the tow path to a scene of horror.

Mangled metal. Broken bodies. Blood. The cries of wounded civilians. And the silence of the dead.

There had been no Germans on the train that day.

Senseless destruction, just as with the people in the old folk's home, caused by our allies.

Thoughtless results of war, when through fear and panic men lose their reason. While others show their worth.

People arrived from nearby farms and villages. First in ones and twos,

then many, with trucks, bandages, blankets, and comfort

Our own exhaustion, our discomfort and fears, had to be put aside. We couldn't just be on our way. We couldn't leave the agonies behind us. My parents had to stay, especially my mother with her doctor's knowledge. They had to help alleviate some of the suffering until those better equipped arrived. The medics, and the makeshift ambulances. Only then could we leave this carnage behind, to continue our own weary way.

Nine o'clock in the evening. Twelve hours after setting out on this unforgettable day. We were almost home. Just a few more miles to go. My hands, my legs, and my mind had gone completely numb. The events of that day had so exhausted me that I could no longer hold onto the handlebars of my bike. It clattered to the ground, echoing through the otherwise empty streets as my hands slipped away, and I fell onto the cobbled street.

There I curled up to sleep. I couldn't move. I no longer cared.

"Please, let me stay. Please let me sleep."

So near to home. Yet so far away.

My parents lifted me back onto the saddle and, holding one handle bar each, their own tiredness put aside, they wheeled me the rest of the

way home. While I hung on for dear life.

I have no memory of arriving. Or being put to bed. On this the first day of the end of life as I had known it.

## Chapter Thirteen

### More Death

The war, which until that day had not seemed to affect us too much, became a time of reality. Now there was death and hunger, constant fear, and having to hide in dark cellars to escape the destruction which surrounded us.

The German soldiers took our food, our transport, our hope, and our pride. It became increasingly difficult to remember that they were but ordinary men obeying orders rather than the spawn from Hell they imitated so well while they destroyed our people and our cities.

The nursemaid and the kitchen maid had returned to their own families. Philie remained. We were the only family she had.

Yet even home wasn't safe. Nowhere was safe anymore.

One day soldiers came to our house. They took away a couple who were visiting. I can't remember who they were. If they were relatives or friends. Perhaps they were Jews. I don't remember.

I don't want to remember.

The soldiers forced them into the street, pushing them to make them

move quicker. The woman tripped over the drempe - door step - and fell to the ground. Her knee bled. Her face screwed up with pain. There were no tears. Only pride.

Some minutes later shots rang out. The couple were dead. Left to sprawl like abandoned coats in the middle of the road. Their lives for

ever gone where minutes before they had been talking and drinking tea.

I don't understand why they were shot. There seemed no reason.

There was nothing special about them. They didn't seem different from anyone else. They were just ordinary people.

Like us.

Then the soldiers came back to the house for mammie and me.

Pappie was out at the time. Philie as usual was peeing her knickers somewhere.

They didn't take mammie and me outside. They didn't shoot us. For some unknown reason we were spared. Perhaps to save us for another time. Today was for sadistic games. For playing boogie men, there to frighten bad little girls.

They made me collect my dolls. All the dolls mammie had bought me in the different countries which we used to visit before the war.

They lined them up on top of a commode in a neat little row.

They shot all my dolls. While we were made to watch.

They shot them all with machine guns.

All my dolls, shot through the stomach.

I couldn't understand their sickness. Why they laughed as the arms and legs flew about the room.

Eyes.

Heads.

Holes everywhere.

They couldn't even cry, as the bullets ripped them apart.

Harmless toys.

Sick....

I never played with dolls again. I loathe them. Can't bear to touch

them. To this day the sight of these disgusting travesties of human beings takes me back to that day, and makes my stomach turn.

English nationals were shot on sight.

My own mother who was English had been taken to German headquarters several times on suspicion. Luckily, whoever doxed her in had no joy. Mammie's command of Dutch as well as German was perfect. Even though she was in the 'Ondergrondse', she was always able to convince the commandant that she was not the 'Englander', or the traitor to their cause whom they suspected her of being but a true native of the country to which she had been brought as a child.

My mother's youngest brother was only fourteen when he was

forced to go 'underground'; and to carry a gun instead of playing the games which a fourteen year old should.

He lived with my maternal grandmother in Gouda. North from where we lived. Her house was a 'safe house' for resistance fighters, people in transit as well as others who had to remain hidden until it was safe for them to be smuggled out of the country.

The house was situated on one side of a canal, De Herengracht, ironically, opposite the Town Hall which the Germans had requisitioned for their headquarters.

It was at my grandmother's house that I discovered not all German soldiers were fiends, that some of them were human. Good men who, just as we grieved for our lost ones, also wept for the families they had left behind.

These were soldiers with compassion. Men who rebelled against the Nazi regime. They were the ones who balanced the scales.

When sent to search my grandmother's house, these soldiers only pretended. They didn't even attempt to look for the people they knew to be hidden there. People who were waiting to be transported out of the country right from under the Gestapo's noses.

These soldiers stood behind the front door for several minutes, rifles at their side, joking with my grandmother, before returning across the

way to report that their search had been carried out and no one had been found.

While it was still possible for civilians to move from place to place, one of those soldiers came to visit on an evening while we were at oma's. He had a daughter about the same age as me. He pulled me onto his knee and he cried over and over, "Wei varen naar Engeland. We are sailing to England. We will die. I will never see my child again."

As he cried he tried to hold me close for comfort. And all the time I struggled to be free. My hatred already so deep that I cursed him, "Vuile Moff. Vuile Moff. Dirty Nazi."

The more I shouted, the sadder he became. A grown man, one of the master race, with tears coursing down his cheeks at the thought of sailing to England, and because a small child called him names.

How was I to know then that their loss, their heartache, was just as bitter as it was for us. The fighting, forced upon them by a few fanatics, was not how they had visualised their future. The ordinary German people wanted this war no more than we did. Not the older men with families. Nor the young men, some of whom were only fifteen years old. Boys who cried for their 'Moeder' as they lay on the Arnhemse Weg, caught in their parachutes after they had fallen from the planes

which had been shot from the skies by enemy fire. Children who lay with shattered bones before drowning in their own blood.

If I hated them as a child for what they had done, with age I grew to understand, to feel compassion for these people, the ordinary German who had suffered as much as we had done.

There were many safe houses throughout the country. Unfortunately not all of them as well protected as my grandmother's house. The good German soldier was outweighed by the bastard, the sadist, the Nazi who attained his kicks from the suffering he could inflict. The more vicious the scene the more intense his elation.

One of those 'safe' places was a farmhouse, not so very far away from where we lived, which housed a family with seven children whose ages ranged from three to sixteen years. Both parents were active in the underground movement. And, just as there was good amongst the enemy, there was also bad amongst our own.

One of those informants, probably for very little reward, betrayed the family to the Nazis who enacted a terrible revenge.

It was on a night when dark storm clouds scudded through the heavens, shutting out the light of the moon while the trees swayed with ominous whispers.

The soldiers waited until the parents had gone, leaving the children on their own, before they forced their way into the farm. They took the children one by one and locked them up in the cellar, where they

tried to comfort one another while they shivered on the cold dirt floor

to await their fate.

And the soldiers laughed as they set fire to the house. And they watched as the screaming children were burned alive.

By the time the father and mother returned the men in uniform had gone. All that remained was a pile of smouldering wood and stone and the smell of burning flesh, their children's flesh.

It is not possible to describe the parents' agony as they brought the remnants of their loved ones into the open. To lose one child is horrendous. To lose seven children is beyond imagining. Seven children, so badly burned that their skin stuck to the hands of the mother and father who had prayed to breathe life back into them.

A terrible punishment for being patriotic.

There were many more who suffered for their patriotism.

Some learned the terror of the Gestapo 'gevangenis' - prison. Never knowing when they would be tortured. Never knowing when they would be taken to die. Still they came. The brave and the true, unafraid in their quest to help others.

Those years also brought the cowards, the greedy, the mercenary, the thoughtless. Those who cowered to the enemy. cringing cowards,

Disgusting arse licking bastards. Men and women who betrayed their own people as well as their country for selfish gain. The two faces of humanity. The two sides of Fate.

Do cowards become, or are they born that way? And are brave men born to die?

## Chapter Fourteen

### The Dream

Most of the rest of the war was about trying to survive as best as we could while encased in the confines of our cellar.

Curled into a foetal position on our mattresses, we hid away in the darkness, praying that it would protect us from the devastation which continued without let up.

The only window was carefully covered with bags of sand to give us some protection. Our only light was an occasional flicker from the few candles we still had stored away.

Even then we had to take great care, as even the tiniest chink of escaping light would attract the bullets from the soldiers' guns.

Every so often we would dare to enter the cavern of the rooms above the cellar, to sit around the dining table, chewing on the dark dry bread which my father had bought from the black market.

Those were the times we tried to pretend that all was normal.

But never for long. Soon we had to return to the cellar as the drone of planes, first in the distance, then overhead, swooped down, again and again. And the screaming of the bombs never ceased.

We lay on the floor of that little cellar listening to the destruction of distant buildings.

Close by, the screams of the injured and the dying; the howling of a dog being blown to pieces as it triggered of a land mine. All around us fires

glowed, flickering flames catching brick and flesh alike. And all the time, knowing how vulnerable we were, we held our breath, waiting helplessly for our turn to be blown into oblivion.

I don't remember being scared. If I was, I hid it well. Every time I heard the scream of a bomb I still managed to snicker in Philie's direction, "This one's for us. This one's going to hit us bang-on for sure."

And every time the poor soul almost died of fright.

Whether scaring Philie half to death was arrogance or bravado, I don't know. Whichever, it certainly did not protect me from the psychological aftermath.

If things were bad before, then this particular period of the war had the most profound effect upon my childish mind. And the aftermath followed me into adulthood.

Or perhaps it was a build-up, and this was the final brick.

Much as I love the feel of a fresh wind against my skin, or the battle against its fury when it meets me outside, when it howls outside my

window it brings the sweat of terror to my brow. It is reminiscent of the swooping planes, the high pitched whistle of the bombs before they crash to the ground, and the smell of burning flesh, mingled with the screams of my countrymen.

Not only does the wind instil that fear in me. The sound of a low flying aircraft still has the ability to send me hiding behind a closet or under a table until the sound fades far into the distance.

The weeks spent in the cellar brought the dark dream which has stayed with me, and will follow me until the day I die. Neither a

sleeping nor a waking dream, but a relentless pursuit which lurks in the corners of my mind.

A dream from which there will never be an escape.

- Close your windows when you hear the sighing of the wind.

Run inside and bolt the door when you can feel its whisper in your hair.

Hide. Hide deep when it begins to gently touch the trees and you can hear the soft ecstatic rustle of the leaves as it caresses them.

Hide. Hide deep, as soon that sighing will become a thunderous roar and the whispering will reach a huge crescendo like a thousand orchestra playing out of tune.

And that sweet gentle touch will turn into an all-devouring fear....

I sleep. I sleep the sleep of death.

Blind and deaf, I sleep.

I hear no sigh.

I feel no gentle touch reach through my open window.

I sleep deep....

Then, suddenly.

My mind reaches consciousness.

I hear the crashing cymbals on my window pane.

And I look on, so fearful, upon the evil of the cold dark wind, slavering jaws ready to possess me.

For a moment, fiery eyes hold me in their embrace. Before I tear myself away from its grasp.

Senses reeling, I scramble from my bed.

Run down the staircase.

Tripping.

Falling.

Here below in desperation I search for a deep corner wherein to hide myself.

Up above, the darkness enters.

Heaving, smashing, snarling evil, gushing down the treads which I have just left behind me, leaving devastation in its wake as it seeks out its prey.

It enters.

Here. Where I cower in the darkness behind the door, praying that it cannot see me as I melt into the welcome shadows.

Frustrated in its search it destroys all that stands in its way.

Cups and plates upon the dresser are dashed to the floor.

It reduces chairs and tables to splinters.

Curtains. Clothes. Carpet. Torn by the wild, wild anger it emits.

My home now in ruins around me I jump to my feet, snatching at the handle of the door.

Once more running, stumbling along a grey empty tree-lined avenue. Dark shuttered windows watch me as I run.

Sobbing.

Afraid. So much afraid.

Finally to reach the open doors of my destination, and without hesitating for a moment I enter this sanctuary.

How quiet.

How quiet and peaceful in this huge empty hall.

Quickly, I must search the emptiness for a corner which will take me into its arms and protect me until my fear is gone.

But listen.

It comes again.  
Along the avenue.

Screaming through the trees, scattering leaves high into the starlit sky.

It comes.

This black evil creation of Satan which hurls itself against the old  
wooden doors, howling without let-up to be granted entry.

And, as they give way to its fury, it enters like a thousand demons,  
tearing round this sacred hall.

And in the centre of it all I stand, as one turned to stone.

Quietly I wait, now no longer afraid, for this cold monster of the mind  
to envelope me and carry me into eternity. -

Our cellar was so small that there was only room enough for my  
mother, my sister Janni, myself, and Philie.

My father had to sleep on a mattress on the kitchen floor, near the cellar  
steps.

One night we were startled out of a restless sleep by a massive  
explosion, and by pappie as he hurtled head-first down the steps to land  
on top of us.

Several minutes later, having recovered from my father's undignified  
entrance, it was decided that he should investigate.

More foolhardy than wise, especially with curious little me tagging  
along at his heels.

No sooner were we outside when a second explosion bombarded the

street, causing us to throw ourselves - this was becoming a habit -

down the river bank. Splat, into the freezing water.

Glass flew around us as the few windows which still remained intact were blown in every direction. Lumps of masonry splashed beside us into the river.

If curiosity kills cats then we were surely lucky.

The first explosion had been the blowing up of the bridge nearest to our home. The one at the other end of the street had been the cause of the second.

Had it been the other way round paps and I would have gone up with the bridge, and you would not be reading this.

I am sure that during that time, as well as on many other occasions, somebody up there liked me, or something. Definitely something, even if it was to spare me for the traumas to come, which shows that Nature does have a perverse sense of humour.

Despite everything, my family and I remained unscathed.

Except for one little incident with me and my potty. And that had nothing to do with the war.

Like I told you, I just have to be different.

Other people are shot or blown up by bombs. Or just get sick or something.

Me, I have to fall through my po.

I was probably growing too heavy for it the night it gave way under my weight. It was on one of the few nights when the bombing was lulled. One of the few nights when we were able to sleep in our beds instead of on the cellar floor.

One minute I was sitting there happily peeing. The next I was lying amongst several pieces of broken china with a piece of it embedded in

my back.

Blood spurted everywhere. On the floor. On the blankets. On my parents who had been summoned by my screams. Even on Philie, who was promptly sick.

Heed should have been taken then, as my mother exclaimed, "I've never seen a kid bleed so much."

But like the tonsil time it went unnoticed.

The pressure of war made it just another incident, even though the healing was hard.

Medication, dressings, everything had gone the same way as all else. To the German armies.

Yet once again I was luckier than most.

Our doctor had some huge plasters hidden away.

My dressing was changed every day, painfully torn from my skinny little back to be replaced with a fresh one for as long as they lasted. And so I healed. And collected my first scar.

## Chapter Fifteen

### Hunger Winter

We had reached the hunger winter of 1944.

Now we sat in the blackout of our dining room, all its windows boarded up, by an empty table.

Most everything had been taken by the enemy. Our transport, our food, gone. Our towns and cities destroyed. Families grieved for children, for partners, for other loved ones lost.

Now, knowing that they were losing the fight, the enemy took the little that was left to us. Even with their confidence shattered, their armies retreating before the relentless approach of our allies, they still

had time to take revenge out of the people who happened to be on their way.

The farmers' fields, from which the brothers and I had once enjoyed our stolen treats, were turned to dust; empty in their desolation. All Dutch cats and dogs had long gone the same way as the rats and other edibles. (After the war two dog families were a status symbol in the Netherlands. A sign of guilt, maybe?)

Believe me, anything tastes good when one is starving. Flower bulbs for instance, and wallpaper paste mixed with contaminated water heated over some dried twigs, tasted deliciously awful.

We became quite adept at adapting to non-food items. We had no choice. You either ate the shit, or died a miserable death.

Pappie had managed to keep us alive with the few goods which had been available on the black market. He had kept a crust of bread in our mouths from time to time and, although what remained of authority had attempted to stamp out the black marketeers, people lived who would otherwise have died of starvation.

Now there was nothing, while we learned to suffer the gnawing ache of hunger.

Occasionally the odd miracle happened. Like the time when I woke to the sound of my parents' whispers and giggles floating down the wooden steps into the cellar.

Stealthily I made my way into the kitchen, inquisitive to find out why the hilarity. God knows, it had been a long time since anyone had had anything to laugh about.

I discovered them huddled over a little saucepan. Of all things, my father had acquired some sugar which they had endeavoured to make into a horrible looking pink fudge. I mean, fudge,

pink at that, at this time of the war.

There they were, like two naughty little children, taking turns to lick the wooden spoon.

Greedy buggers, they shooed me back downstairs.

Didn't even share it. Kept it all to themselves.

Often rumours abounded that the war would soon be a thing of the past. Days when we lived in hope that the misery would finally come to an end. Yet still it would seem an eternity before we knew for certain that the end of war was for real.

It was about a week before my ninth birthday that the allied troops had entered Belgium and The Netherlands, several weeks prior to the 'food drops'.

That was when the English planes dropped food instead of bombs.

Food for us, instead of for the enemy.

Big bundles which broke open as they landed on the ground.

As they fell we scabbled amongst the bits and pieces, ladled the food into our hands and stuffed it into our hungry mouths, regardless of the dirt or the taste. Flour which was supposed to be turned into bread covered our faces, and stuck in our throats as we spluttered and coughed and laughed. Our joy a sight to behold while we ate everything raw to appease this fierce hunger.

Still we waited to be free. Never ending days of misery, until about six months after the food drops, we heard soldiers moving and talking, right outside our house.

They had to be our saviours. After the onslaught they had suffered surely there were no Germans left. They had to be the Tommies.

Mammie watched them for a while through the small window which was set in the front door, like a large spy hole.

There were four or five of them, shuffling about on the tow path on the other side of the hedge, opposite our front door, where they muttered away to one another while blowing clouds of smoke into the air as they puffed at their cigarettes.

It was impossible to make out their speech against the sound of the wind and the distant shelling. We had to assume that they were allies when mammie, after finally deciding to make our presence known to them, addressed them in English.

Big mistake! Their German reply was like an electric shock. After surviving so much for so long we would die, just when it was almost over.

Yet once again Fate smiled on us. Fate was keeping us alive. It had a future for us. To suffer more than we could ever have imagined.

The men were Polish soldiers. Advance troops for the Tommies who were close behind. The British soldiers who would free us from the enemy. We would soon be free, they said. Soon life would be back to normal.

In our elation we ran through the street to wake all the neighbours.

We couldn't wait to give them the good news. We banged on boarded-up cellar windows, almost giving the occupants heart attacks in the process, as they too expected the worst. A last minute effort by the Germans to maim and kill. A last minute revenge for their defeat.

Instead, it became a night of excitement for everyone. For the first time in many weeks people felt free to come out of their cellars, to walk the streets in the knowledge that, except for those isolated bursts of gunfire in the distance, no longer was there any immediate danger.

That night the Polish soldiers became our dearest friends for a short time, while they joined us in our little cellar. Until dawn we celebrated the end of war. Even Philie joined in. I had never seen her so happy.

The end of war was five more weeks away.

When the Tommies came they incarcerated us for another thirty five long days. We didn't want to go. We argued for the right to remain in our own homes. But one force had taken over from another. We were forced to huddle without privacy in the claustrophobic confines of a communal cellar in the next town before we were allowed to surface for the last time.

After almost six years it was over. We were free to pick up the pieces. To exist once more. To leave one nightmare behind, in order to begin another.

## Chapter Sixteen

### The Allies

The war was over, to give way to the long weary struggle to put everything back together. The country was a shambles. The people were exhausted, weakened by the years of horror and deprivation. Some cities, like Rotterdam, had to be rebuilt almost from scratch. Nor was it only cities which had to be rebuilt. Shattered lives also had to be put back together. Whole families had perished, and there was no

one left to grieve. For others, too busy in their struggle for survival, the chance to come to terms with their losses still hung over them like the dark clouds which had covered the Netherlands for so long. The winds of change would take an eternity to blow them away. Even then, the pain and the nightmares would return time and time again like an insidious plague.

The war was over, but it wasn't finished yet. Now that the fighting was done other realities had to be faced. However, we Dutch are a hardy race. Blessed with the spirit of survival we began the long fight back to normality.

To all appearances my own family had come through it more or less unscathed. O.K. so I had to spend some months in bed suffering from

malnutrition. At the same time, not only had the immediate family miraculously survived, so had everyone else who had touched my short life.

Despite the years of danger we were still together. Despite my mother's dangerous trips with the 'Ondergrondse', and my father's sooking up to the German officers for favours, we were intact.

Although the war was now a thing to be put in the past, the aftermath brought many problems. Not only was the country to be resurrected from ruins and chaos to its former glory, the people themselves had still to be freed of their acidulous hatred towards the collaborators. Those Dutch who had betrayed their country. Those who had enjoyed plenty while their countrymen died miserably of starvation. These ones had to be punished.

Now it would be their turn to suffer.

The men who had turned their backs on their own country, the women

who had taken favours from the German officers, were dragged from their homes, marched through the streets, heads shaved of their former glory, to be defiled by jeering crowds before being thrown into jail.

No longer did we have to stay within the obscurity of our cellars, but still we had to live in the claustrophobic darkness of our homes. The shattered windows boarded up. Our days and evenings spent in the light of a few remaining candles, and the flickering warmth of wood fires.

Food was filtering into the country. But it was rationed, and even then not yet readily available.

Many adults who were children at that time still suffer the consequences, brought about by the lack of nutritious requirements when they were needed most, in our years of growing.

During the occupation the German soldiers had commandeered our schools as living quarters. Now that the war was over, the Tommies used our schools to accommodate themselves.

The officers were boarded with the town's elite.

One such officer, a Major, was allocated a room in our house. And so it came about, that this bit of upmanship rekindled the rift between my cousin and I. Our precarious friendship tumbled upon her discovery that their lodger was to be just a common Captain. She had wanted the Major as a status symbol, instead there was little insignificant me lording his rank over her.

Stupid inferior bitch.

Another 'if' and 'but'.  
But, if it had been the other way round, how different my life would have been.

From that time on she revenged herself on me by her insistence in

speaking English to the soldiers in the knowledge that, as I had opted

for French, I couldn't understand a word of what was said.

If you've ever been in a foreign place without knowledge of that country's language, you'll understand just how irritating it was for me in my own country, especially as I just knew that she was making derogatory remarks regarding my deficiencies.

One night the soldiers gave a party for the local children.

I have a faint recollection of not having been invited until my mother kicked up stink with the Major. Although she tried to hide the fact from me, I am sure that she was really angry at this omission.

"After all," she said to him, "Carlie is the judge's daughter. And you are resident in our home. So I think it might be a good idea to sort it out."

Mammie could be very persuasive when she put her mind to it. So, invitation or not, I went.

For the first time in years us kids enjoyed real food. It was a meal which I'll never forget. Even now, after all the happenings of the intervening years, I can still taste every delicious spoonful in all its glory.

We had to take our own plate, a soup plate and a spoon. First it was filled with lentil soup. Probably gruesome army soup, but I remember each mouthful as sheer bliss.

Then without cleaning the plate the lentils were followed by

tinned pineapple, crammed into childish mouths in our hurry to go for seconds. Sweet juice ran down hungry chins. Sticky hands were wiped

on clothes. It mattered not. This was nectar of the Gods indeed.

Unless you have experienced hunger, the kind of starvation we had to suffer during that war, you can't even begin to imagine how much we children relished those simple luxuries.

After all the years of Hell and starvation, we had finally arrived in Heaven.

Nor was that the end of it. More was to follow.

Chocolate.

The last time I had seen chocolate was not long after the outbreak of war, when a visitor brought a few small pieces for my sister and I to share.

That's all I had, a look at it.

All afternoon I waited patiently for the visitor to leave, drooling at the thought of the treat to follow.

That patience was to go unrewarded.

Unseen by anyone, that little bitch of a sister of mine stole the chocolate, crept behind a large armchair, and scooped the lot.

"Oh, look at that," I heard my mother laugh when Janni sneaked out from behind the chair, chocolate spread all over her sweet little face.

I couldn't understand the adults' hilarity. What was so bloody funny

about that scheming little cow. Me, I was decidedly unamused, angry, and so disappointed that I could cheerfully have spread her face all over the floor.

At that party which the soldiers gave, I was fed so much chocolate that much to my mother's annoyance I sicked up all over the living room carpet.

She blamed the Major.

I didn't care. I had enjoyed every delicious bite.

And, I hadn't kept any for my sister. Not one tiny little bit.

A few days later another surprise followed when the Major took me to the officers' mess. There food aplenty furnished the big trestle tables. White bread and jam. It was like having been given another pass to Heaven.

White bread and jam. Not the greyish stuff which had kept us alive, but pure white bread. And jam.

Would you like a piece, he signalled.

(Even though eventually he learned to speak Dutch quite fluently, for some perverse reason he refused to speak it, preferring to shout in English in order to make himself understood.)

Would I just, I nodded.

Greedy teeth bit into the thick slice.

Spittle ran down my chin.

Then the shock of bitterness.

Bitter marmalade. Then, an unknown product in my country.

I spat my mouthful in the Major's direction before running out of the building.

I couldn't understand why he would try to poison me. He might have had good cause in the years to follow but I hadn't started to be rotten to him, yet.

Nor could he understand my reaction, my disappointment. He was only trying to be civil to the brat who was to become his step-daughter.

The shock to my system that day was so intense that it took, believe it or not, another thirty years before I was able to give marmalade another chance.

Now I love the stuff.

Especially that one they advertise on telly.

You've seen it haven't you?

That one without threads.

Yummy. Yummy.

Well, maybe they don't advertise it anymore. It's politically incorrect.

Who cares, it's yummy anyway.

## Chapter Seventeen

### The Other Woman

The following months brought many unwelcome changes into my young life, beginning with the breakdown of the relationship I had enjoyed with my father.

For more than five years he and I had had a togetherness which was incomparable to any other relationship I'd had before, or would have throughout the rest of my life.

Not even the upheaval of the war years had been able to separate us. If anything, it had brought us closer.

Now that he was seldom home I was left in an unbearable vacuum.

No longer was I allowed to accompany him when he was out and about. Whatever his business, I was no longer a part of it.

My only compensation for his lengthy absences was to be able to steal into his bedroom at night, to rummage through his bedside locker for the occasional sweetmeat or cigarette and, when he did return from time to time, to cuddle close beside him and know that he still loved

me.

But most nights his bed was empty, his loving embrace gone.

Mammie had retired to the guest room. Whether the guest was there or not I can't remember, nor do I care.

Judging by the consequences I suppose he must have been.

Now Philie was the only adult who could offer me comfort.

However, considering my past behaviour towards her, you can imagine that this was no compensation for either of us.

Even though in my confusion I had mellowed somewhat, one can hardly blame her for being wary of my affection. Besides, I was too proud, too bloody minded to let on to anyone that I was crying inside for reassurance.

I choose to remain alone in that joyless existence. A whirlwind void which carried me down into deepest despair.

Not even Jantje and Rieneke could lift me out of it, no matter how hard they tried. No matter how constant they were with their affection by bringing me presents, their attempts to make me smile, nothing could console me.

With the cessation of war the laughter went from my life and I submerged myself further into the world of dreams.

On the rare occasion when paps was home this woman came to call for him.

I never managed to see her properly. She was a shadow who infiltrated a place where she did not belong.

This was our home. What did she want here?

She was a loud voice, standing demanding at our front door, to be silenced only once pappie left with her.

Through time I learned that she and her friend had shackled up with German officers, enjoying all the privileges that went along with being traitors to their country.

Two women who were secure in the knowledge that they would not starve like their fellow countrymen. Two bitches who stayed warm with gifts of fur, snugly wrapped in ermine coats while others froze to death in rags.

Like all other traitors they should also have paid the price. They too should have been left in their cells to rot away along with the rest of the filth. But my father, my poor weak father, fell for the bribes they offered. His position in the Judicial Service gave him the ability to grant these women their freedom.

In return for what? Money? Nookie? What was it that was so precious that it ruined the rest of his life, mine along with it, and consequently also that of his sons.

Whatever it was, she used it well.

Once in her clutches he was never to be free. She blackmailed him into marriage. She swore he was the father of a child she allegedly carried. Seeing that my father couldn't leave 'it' alone, nor that he was fussy as to where his favours were obtained, the possibility could have arisen.

She lied to him right from the start. The pregnancy was a female ploy. The phantom child gave her the promise of a wedding certificate, even though it took two years to arrive, by which time he was truly committed to her.

The atonement for sins committed throughout his lifetime was to be a

severe sentence indeed. She became the reason for the unhappiness which haunted him for the rest of his life; until death released him. The premature death for which she was the probable cause.

Even though the Judiciary stood by its own, his actions could not be ignored. It was the good name of his father which guaranteed his position. But the consequent scandal caused him to be exiled to Djakarta in Indonesia where he sat as a judge for the military.

They - she accompanied him, clinging to him like the leech she was - remained there for the next six years, until it was safe for him to return to the Netherlands. By that time there were three children to keep him in line. Three sons to guarantee her his loyalty.

Had my father been stronger, perhaps our future might have been a happier one. As it was, we all suffered in our own different ways. An indirect result of the war which changed our lives for ever.

After everything we had experienced, the horrors we had overcome, the death we had escaped, our suffering was still ahead of us.

Yet, were he and his woman the only miscreants in ripping the web

of our personal lives apart? If he hadn't been weak. If she hadn't seen him coming. If the Major hadn't attracted mammie's undivided attention.

How much was my mother to blame? It was she who plucked me out of the gossamer cocoon and took me away from my one love to fester in a world which I loathed.

They couldn't even speak of the facts. None of the four adults concerned ever could. They all knew the truth as they themselves saw it. Both pairs justified in their actions, casting all blame on the other.

Often, as I ponder those 'ifs' of the past I wonder if we can decide our

destiny by our actions. If we can enhance it, or destroy it.

One would assume that we probably can.

Yet are we really responsible for our own agonies? Or are we right to fault others for the relentless pain which life burdens us with. Or perhaps it is Fate to blame. Perhaps it has already decided our future at the time of conception. So let us lay the blame at the portal of that Fate.

Best to believe we have no choice, helpless to change whatever lies before us. Be it good, bad, or indifferent, we must follow our Karma. Then the thought of what might have been, what actions we should have taken to change our lives for the better, will not be too unbearable. Because the choice is not our, and we are blameless.

## Chapter Eighteen

Jeanne

Despite the separate bedrooms, or maybe because of it, another sibling was born in October 1945.

A sister, too beautiful for this world. Dark-haired, swarthy skinned, and sloe-eyed. Eyes as black as the deepest night and skin of velvet. So tiny, wrapped in a swaddling cloth. Almost perfect. One of her little hands was crippled, held curled into her side.

I think she might have been conceived to 'save the marriage', or some sort of crap like that.

She was born in the guest room.

She was buried a Hengeveld. Yet could have been the Major's child.

At the time of her birth I had whooping cough, therefore well warned

to stay away from the baby lest I infect her.

To be honest, despite the discomfort, I enjoyed this bout of illness. It meant that I didn't have to attend school which had recently reopened its doors to the students who were expected to study hard, from eight in the morning till five in the afternoon, six days a week to compensate for the years we had lost.

Those lost years had created an indolence in me. While the other kids were confined to long days in stuffy classrooms, I was more than content to play outside with another 'sufferer'.

"Fresh air is good for you. Go cough in the garden," Philie would shout as she shooed Corrie and me out of the house.

When the garden became a bore, when we had exhausted all our outdoor games, we escaped. Happily whooping it up along the High Street where much to the disgust of passers-by we deposited big gobs of phlegm onto the pavements, competing with one another to see who could spit the furthest.

When tired of this disgusting behaviour, being a thoughtless child, I disobeyed my parents' wishes.

Contrary to my feelings towards Janni, I loved this new sister so much that the imposed separation was intolerable. Perhaps, now being ten years old, nature was already nurturing the mother instinct. More probable, was the fact that I couldn't stand being ordered not to do something. So no surprise that I sneaked into the nursery when the coast was clear to kiss and cuddle this little miracle.

I would take her into my arms, just hug her to death before returning her to the cot, nicely tucking her in again so that no one would know what I had done.

Consequently, she became ill. Her condition deteriorated until it was necessary for her to be admitted to hospital for blood transfusions.

I don't know what blood transfusions have to do with whooping cough, but that is what the doctors ordered. Ironically, after testing the rest of the family first because I was still undernourished, it was found that mine was the only blood that matched.

It is only now as I write this that I wonder why.  
If she had whooping cough, why infect her more with my blood.

I still remember the large needle searching for a vein in my pathetically thin arm. The pale blood being drawn into the glass tube while the rest of the family commented on what a brave little girl I was.

If only they knew.

If only I had known the truth.  
Nobody told me that she was already infected at birth. Had they done so, I would not have had to carry the guilt for most of my life.

Why are parents so perverse? Why do they treat their offspring like imbeciles? Why warn me to keep my distance when she was already infected? Why did they inflict this guilt upon me?

At ten years old, the pain of the needle was not retribution enough for the misery I had brought to my beautiful sister before she died.  
After three miserable weeks of life, it was taken from her.

The last memory of her, a tiny lifeless bundle wrapped in white, lying on a large trolley in the cold loneliness of the hospital mortuary.

And Janni innocently asked,

"Is that Jeanne?"

And somebody cried for this needless death, caused by my disobedience.

Guilt was to be a constant companion for most of my life, while little Jeannie lay under the cold, dirty earth in her tiny grave next to oma and opa. Guilt, as my beautiful sister crumbled to dust in a churchyard near The Hague.

Guilt.

One evening, some days after the funeral which Janni and I were not allowed to attend, I had wandered away into the night to mourn on my own. I met a woman who didn't know that my sister had died. She said to me,

"How is Jeanne."

I looked at her in horrified amazement.

Why did she have to ask such a stupid question? Why didn't she know that my sister was gone?

She couldn't understand this strange look. She couldn't know why I ran away, loudly lamenting. Nor did my parents understand the depth of my tears as they tried to make sense of my incoherent babble while

attempting to comfort me.

Over and over I cried,

"Waarom is die vrouw zo stom. Weet ze niet dat Jeanne dood is."

("Why is that woman so stupid. She must know that Jeanne is dead.")

How could they know the extent of my grief. How could I tell them what I had done.

They must never know.

The guilt brought with it the fear of needles. The phobia which has been the cause of many a painful moment in the dentist's chair as well as other times when my mind and body reject a local anaesthetic.

If I sinned, then I surely have also atoned.

Yet not so many years ago, shortly before my mother's dying, she spoke of Jeanne. She told me how Jeanne was given her name. She told me that she, herself, had had whooping cough while she was 'zwanger' - pregnant -, and when Jeanne came into the world she was born with the virus.

Now I have to live with the thought that I don't remember my mother having a cough, but I do remember being told, for whatever reason, to stay away from the baby.

Is it that my mother guessed my sin, and that she finally gave her forgiveness with this attempt to console?

Had I really killed my sister. Does my memory fail me?

Was it perhaps that I had been innocent all along?

Or had it all been a dream.

It becomes increasingly difficult to separate the real world of dreams from the fantasy which is life. No longer can I be sure if the events of the past really happened, or if they were sleep induced. I can barely hold on to the present, let alone the bygone years.

Soon, even today will bury itself as I slip deeper and deeper into a world where night intertwines with day. into a world where it is safe, and death beckons with a welcoming finger.

## Chapter Nineteen

### Christmas 1945

Prior to 1939, as well as during the early part of the war, Christmas was always a time of magic. Even after Decembers had become intolerable my parents tried to make this festive season as special as possible.

In the Catholic South Christ's birthday was without the commerce of today. It was as it should be, a religious festival, giving me the best part of both worlds.

For the people of Brabant, the time for giving presents was on December the fifth, Saint Nicholas Day. This was the day for parties at school. Afterwards we watched Saint Nicholas ride his white horse through the thronged streets of Breda. Elegantly attired, mitre perched precariously upon his head, black servant boys running at his side, he threw handfuls of sweets to the children who worshipped him.

December the fifth was the time for 'poffertjes' ( a sort of doughnut without a hole ), either made at home or more often to be bought in the market square from myriad stalls.

On that day, oily smoke stung our eyes while hot baking smells invaded the surrounding areas.

Plates of the ready made delicacies adorned the counters, waiting to be bought. Once purchased, the poffertjes dipped in icing sugar melted in our mouths.

Although this event died out during the shortages, after rationing this remained the custom. The only difference was, that we had to take along our own ration of butter and eggs. Then we waited with patience, while the stall holder made up the batter to order before dropping spoonfuls into the sizzling fat.

Teeth floated in anticipation until they were ready to eat. Not even the lack of sugar could deter from our enjoyment.

At Christmas, in our house an enormous tree exuded scents of pine. Its thick branches proudly adorned with cotton wool, coloured balls, chocolate rings, and real candles burning bright.

At its feet languished the heaps of presents to be opened on that special day.

Even on the days following Christmas, brightly wrapped gifts bearing my name would appear by the tree as if by magic.

Yes, all in all, was a terrific month.

As all good things which might come to those who wait, so all good things are taken from those who expect endless miracles.

The Christmases past were lost in time.

Jeanne had died before being allowed to experience even her first Christmas. She never had the chance to know the pleasures which those times brought. At least I had, but now no more.

I was ten years old, this Christmas of 1945. A Christmas I'll never forget. For ever it remains a constant reminder of the sad years which were to follow. Those bad years of which I was then still unaware had already begun.

Christmas 1945 took away the magic, along with my parents.

Pappie had disappeared. I don't know where. Probably entangled in the clutches of that woman. Her with the shrill voice who came in the night to take my father away from our house.

My mother was abroad with the Major. You know the one. He who should have lodged with my cousin but came to us instead. The Major who was either my mother's life line or the greener grass on the other side. The Major, who was supposed to replace my father.

Who knows the truth? Who knows the truth of it all?  
My father? My mother, perhaps? Or was the Major the cause of the ensuing misery?  
I doubt if even they themselves were aware of what they were doing. It was a bad time. A time of confusion for everyone. A time when things happen to adults which children cannot understand. We are aware only

of our own hurt, our own loss, and our own frustration, caused by their actions.

All I know for a fact, is that I blame her. That other woman, who didn't help matters. Without her presence I might not have lost my beloved father, my parents would have remained together, and we would all

have lived happily ever after.

One adult tells me one thing. The other something else. In the end they tell me nothing. I, as the child, can only feel pain. I, as the teenager, can only long for what is gone. And I, as the adult, can never forget.

And boy, do I feel sorry for myself. Pathetic bitch.

I'll let you into a little secret now. Won't keep you waiting as it's too many chapters later. I did atone for all my sins, and reaped the reward of contentment. So, bear with me, please.

That Christmas of 1945, Janni and I were dumped with oma in Gouda.

We can't know why. We're not told what's going on.

We just have to accept what the adults dish out to us.

To add to the misery, there is no tree. No magic tree with burning candles. No whites and reds to decorate its branches.

There is nothing, only despair.

That Christmas, which should have been the best now that the war was over, was to be spent without our parents, without the happiness

we'd known in years gone by.

That Christmas the presents, which in those better years had always been plentiful, were sadly lacking.

In fact, mine was pathetic.

My sister, whom I swear I disliked even more than ever, received a rosy-cheeked, blond-haired doll.

The old lady had certainly gone to a lot of trouble for that little bitch. It seemed impossible that anyone could have dug up such a beautiful doll so shortly after the war. Never mind that I loathe the things, and would probably have chucked it out of the nearest window had she given it to me.

I mean, I am the oldest. I deserved something better than the ugly black lace-up shoes which were in my Christmas parcel.

It didn't enter my mind then, that my grandmother must have gone to as much trouble to find me those shoes as she did to find that doll for my sister.

I was outraged.

What made that stupid old woman think that my four year old sister should have something nice while I had to be content with a crappy pair of shoes.

Never will I forget that bitter Christmas. The whole idea was beyond my comprehension. She should have tried harder to make up for the

absence of my parents, as well as for the deprivation of the past years.

She should have given me something nice as well.

Looking back on that Christmas, more than fifty years ago, I know now that she was oblivious to my resentment. That she was unaware of my bitter disappointment at her gift.

Although some might differ in this, I suppose she was a good woman who, until the day she died, could never understand the reason for my everlasting animosity towards her. She suffered my hatred and my abuse which sometimes drove her to tears without ever querying the whyfor.

Stupid old cow.

And I, had I been different, might have found life a less bitter pill to swallow. A less shallow child might have been more content with what came her way. Rather than the constant battle to hide my feelings by venting abuse on others, I might have learned compassion a lot sooner.

Had I been different, I could have liked myself so much more.

Instead, I deprived myself of the inner contentment which has taken me most of my life to find.

I was a strange child who found it impossible to communicate my true thoughts. My emotions were private to me, bursting forth only in outbursts of anger when they released themselves in a twisted, uncontrollable passion.

Not only did this behaviour alienate me from my grandmother, but also from those to whom I should have shown the true depth of my love instead of appearing cold and uncaring.

The following months were days of utter confusion. My life was turned even more upside down by the news that we were going abroad with the Major.

Except for my father. He was to stay behind.

We were going to England.

England? What was England? A word that had come out of the mouth of a German soldier who hadn't wanted to go there either. A name which made a grown man cry at the thought of going there, as I cried now.

With the exception of my short sojourn at the convent school, my religious education had been null and void. The teaching of God and His Son long ago forgotten by this child.

Still I pleaded to some unknown deity,

"Why, why, why? I need my pappie. He is my life. He can't let me go. Doesn't he know how much I love him. Oh God, why?"

If only I could have told my father how much he meant to me. How much I needed to be with him.

If only I hadn't been too proud to give in to my emotions, and too

reticent to state my preferences, then I might not have lost the only man

whom I could ever love.

Perhaps, had I spoken then, events might have turned out different. Perhaps my parents might have thought again, as even adults don't always know what they want from life. Had they stayed together, perhaps a childhood with my own mammie and pappie might have developed me into a more normal human being than the one I turned out to be.

But then, I don't suppose paps had much say in the matter anyway.

If he had, would he have let me stay with him?

I'll never know. Now it's many years too late to find the truths.

As always, much too late.

The future was decided by the actions of the day; and we can never know what might have been.

## Chapter Twenty

### Almost the Last Goodbye

It was about five weeks before we were due to sail to England when we travelled North to bid a last farewell to oma in Gouda as well as various aunts and uncles who were dotted around the country.

The time of year was not at its most salubrious. January 1946, the weather was fierce. Layers of snow covered the landscape. A white haze, except for oily tracks on the road, as far as the eye could see. Which wasn't very far.

Cold winds howled their discontent, gusting flurries back and forth as if in anger, battering the snow which froze where'er it landed.

The windscreen of our car refused to be defrosted as we trundled along behind a convoy of army trucks.

Once or twice my father impatiently tried to overtake, but icy patterns on the windscreen obscured his view, and we were going nowhere fast.

What was the hurry? Whyfor the rush? I was content to rest cosy in the car for ever, just watching, drawing comfort from the familiar profile of the man I loved. The man who would be lost to me by the end of this journey.

For pappie also, this must have been a trip he was loathe to take. He didn't want to make goodbyes. He longed to be home. Back to the way things were before the end of war changed it all.

This trip was a token of the finality of the past. The sooner it was done

the better. Foolish hopes that life would then resume its normal course.

So it was that, several futile attempts later, he lost his rag. Paps had a temper, which I had inherited.

Determined to pass the slow moving trucks, he stuck his head out of the side window in order to see the way ahead.

Kind of stupid when you think about it.

There was no road. There was no landscape. The view in front was the back of an army truck.

The convoy drove on the left. The car's steering was also on the left.

When he went to overtake he couldn't know that trucks approached from the opposite direction.

Mammie had just turned to see if we were all right there on the back seat. To ensure that we were kept warm she was in the process of tucking us under a travel blanket, and I had just put my head underneath it for a giggle when, BHAM.

Yes, you're right. Our car had hit the oncoming convoy.

It, the car, didn't stand a chance. Neither did we. We were blitzed.

Paps was almost decapitated by the window as it slammed down.

Mammie's skull was split from forehead to crown when she flew through the windscreen. At the same instant the passenger seat tipped up to eject its passenger, Janni catapulted forward from the back seat to disappear underneath the one in front as it once more righted itself.

I slid down the back seat, trapping my legs at the knee.

Caught. Can't move. Can't help. Can't staunch the blood which turns virgin snow crimson, slowly trickling towards the icy cobbles where it unites with the oil on the road. Life draining away along with the blood.

And I, I'm bloody stuck in the back seat of the car. I'm trapped but unhurt, still covered by the blanket which my mother had tried to warm us with.

My parents are a mess. I can just about catch a glimpse when I strain to see through the splintered windows.

Mammie lies so still. Eyes closed. As pale as the ground on which she lies. Soldiers remove their coats, piling them high on the inanimate form, while snow seeps into her skin from underneath.

In the field where he has been thrown, I can see Pappie bleeding away. I'm sure he is miraculously conscious, probably wondering if his head is still attached. And if so, how.

Or is he dead, and doesn't know it yet?

Janni is silent under the front seat, so tiny, all curled up, that at first

they are unable to find her. I know she is there, while the adults panic in their search for the child. But they don't listen.

"She's hysterical," they whisper. "She's in shock."

And they tell me to 'HUSH'.

While the rest of the family is loaded into an ambulance, a big black car takes me to hospital. I'm crying. I had wanted to help my family.

But I couldn't. I had wanted to help but I was trapped in the seat.

Now I'm trapped in a big black car with a strange man who can't understand my tears.

Insensitive prick. For fucks sake, my family is dying or dead and he can't understand why I cry.

I take back what I said about the Dutch being hardy. They are just one cold bastard.

At the hospital I was put into a children's ward. They had to keep me there even though nothing ailed me, bar my emotions.

Janni is very ill. She's in isolation with severe concussion.

Mammie, stitched from forehead to crown, now conscious and very voluble, insists that we can't stay too long.

We have to be free to flee the country. Soon.

The other kids in the ward can't fathom what I'm doing here.

Nothing's wrong with me, while they have to suffer stitches and things.

But I have nowhere else to go. Not without my family. Not without my

pappie. So why shouldn't I stay? What business is it of theirs?

One big boy is a show-off. He thinks he's smart because he's had his appendix out. He says it's because his father wouldn't allow him to go to the toilet and his appendix burst along with his bladder. Obviously the father has as little charm as his son.

Anyway, I don't believe him. He's just showing off.

I don't think I like him very much. I don't think I like the other kids in the ward either. Where's pappie. I want pappie.

"Ah," say the adults, Aren't you all lucky to be alive."

Stupid bastards.

What's so lucky then, eh?

What's so special about living?

It's the fucking pits. It's a Hell hole.

Yet the misery of being alive was not to be spared us. Once again Fate had decided to keep us for another day. We had survived the war. Now we would jolly well have to survive the unhappiness which was to follow. Like it or not.

Bloody shame it was that, despite their injuries, my mother and sister recovered in time to allow us to be the first family to make that journey across the North Sea. De Hoek to Dover. Or was it Rotterdam

to Dover.

Heaving water. Heaving stomach. Racked by tears. Tears of grief.

Maybe Fate had tried to intervene by causing the accident so that we wouldn't be able to go. And made a cock-up of it.

Perhaps we had been meant to die. But didn't.

Or perhaps it is true what Antonia - her to be explained later - told me, that my father had deliberately crashed the car. That he would rather have shared death with my mother than lose her to another man.

Did his love for my mother exceed that of life?

Who knows.

Of that I will never know the truth either.

What I do know is that he never denied this accusation.

So perhaps there does lie a truth.

One truth I am sure of, until the day they died my parents never ceased to love one another.

Now at long last, forty seven years to be exact, they are together once more, in death.

Unfortunately Antonia is there also.

PART II

OF BOYS AND THINGS

The war-torn years now forgotten. Death and hunger just a memory. The only thought within this childish mind of mine is longing for my own country. Fate dealt its hand. No one gave me a choice. I live afar, and as I wake each morn I ache to be in those low lands beside the sea, beloved land where I was born.

K.N.H. 1988.

## Chapter Twenty one

### Of a Strange Land

The mist enshrouded ferry starts to chug its way across the channel,  
slowly taking us further away from our fatherland.

I stood at the rail for as long as I was allowed, peering through the  
fog for that last glimpse of the flat countryside which I loved so dearly.  
Too soon it is gone, disappearing into the distance until all I can see are  
the grey churning water.

Dark, welcoming waters, waiting for me.

The sound of the surf roars loud in my ears, and the spray from the  
sea mingles in with the salt of my tears, as I stand here alone and  
afraid.

Already the ache of losing my father, my homeland, is so intense that  
it feels as though my heart has been torn from my breast with the agony  
of it all.

I didn't know it then, but seven years would pass before I could be  
reunited with my beloved pappie. Only a few months together and then  
he died. Seven long years of grief, of homesickness, of utter confusion  
and misery.

We arrived in England on the eighth of March, 1946.

Two nights in a London hotel before the train took us North.  
Wheels rumbling, 'further away, further away' along the railway track.

Scotland, fully living up to the jokes made about its climate, cold

and damp. Abysmal. Snow still lay heavy upon the ground.

Not the white snow of my country home which had given us such hours of fun, but the chill invading city snow, trampled to slush by thousands of feet.

Glasgow. Dirty buildings. Streets crowded with unsmiling strangers.

A city hotel. Tall and drab.

"Don't tell anyone that I'm sleeping in the Major's room,"

said mammie as she tucked us in for the first night.

Why not, I wondered. After all he was the reason why we were in this dump.

My sister peed the bed.

A couple of weeks of this, blank weeks without joy, before we took the low road to isolation. Nothing, but Rowardennen House which still sprawls on the banks of Loch Lomond. Nothing, but the grey lake on one side of the hotel and, on the other side across a narrow road, horizons chopped off by mountains which tower over the scene like malevolent giants.

Three miles away was Balmaha. It still is, although now in keeping

with its tourist trade slightly more sophisticated.

In 1946 it was a forsaken backwater. Like the hotel, it was dull and dreary. A few houses, a shop, a garage which exuded diesel fumes from its elderly pumps. Boring people without intelligent conversation.

"If I had known that this is where he was bringing us I wouldn't have come," exclaimed my mother upon sighting this apology for civilisation.

You should have thought of that before, mam. Where's the green grass now?

It became routine, something to do, to trudge those three miles

through knee-high snow which sludged over the top of our wellies,  
soaking socks and feet.

Dampness penetrated shivering bodies, froze our blood and bones  
along with my soul.

Six months. For six months we stayed.

All the time I longed for the country we had left behind. For the green  
flat meadows stretching into endless horizons. For my people whose  
language I understood. For cuisine which was not strange to me.

I missed my friends, especially Hans, Jantje and Rieneke. But most  
of all I craved the lost love of my father.  
Nothing, no one, could fill the space in my heart which his absence had  
created.

I hated this desolate land with a loathing that was almost tangible.  
Had I reached out I would have been able to touch it. Perhaps to tear it  
away, to free myself. But I was incapable of reaching out. Instead I  
crawled into a corner of my mind and killed the child within me.

Two decades would pass before I learned to adjust. To savour the  
beauty of this country's lonely scenery, and to be proud to be a part of  
it.

Twenty years it was before, instead of loathing, I learned to drink in  
the breathless splendours of this land.

The Glasgow architecture began to have a beauty of its own once I  
adjusted to the city winters. And, although the summers still are  
mediocre, spring brought its own contentment, The budding trees  
which lined the streets of the West End where we finally settled, and I  
remained for many years even after my parents were gone, flourished

into blossom. Like the trees in the Regentessen Laan, flowering in pink and white to brighten up the otherwise drab streets before falling to the pavements to be trampled into oblivion under mindless feet.

And, with Autumn come those precious days when the same trees turn to shades of yellow and gold. While in the distance, the mountains dressed in cloaks of purple heather, proudly preen themselves under low-hanging misty clouds. Benign giants whose majesty reflects in the

lakes which languish at their feet while pebbled shores glisten in the late autumn sun.

There were two.

No other children here.

Only my sister and I, unable to communicate with others in a language which was foreign to our ears.

Yes, we had the company of one another, but have the bond. The six year chasm between us gave us very little in common but the fact that we were sisters, as well as strangers.

Most times I preferred to wander away alone, to shed my tears in private.

There was plenty alone. The only human life was the hotel staff. The only guests, a mother with her two daughters. And the Major who came at weekends.

Outwith the hotel, the only signs of life was the brush of the wind through the trees, the rustle of grass when the breeze caressed its blades. And, in a field without fences to contain them, two horses who roamed at will. They were companions of a sort, to be beheld from a safe distance.

I had been afraid of horses ever since my parents, who used to ride a lot, had taken me along to enjoy their pastime. They never gave it a

thought that I was too young, too fearful, to share their passion.

How well I remember the scene of my younger cowardice. The cobbled forecourt, squared off by stables. My parents already mounted, preparing to show their offspring the joys of horsemanship. There was I, dressed in little jodhpurs and riding boots, screaming blue murder while the groom attempted to coax me on to the pony. Finally, given up in disgust, I was abandoned as my parents rode off without me.

The two in the field were different. From an apparently safe distance my fascination exceeded my fear. I admired their magnificence. Even daring to follow when their owner led them away to be stabled for the night.

I stood at the stable door while he groomed them. The fierce black stallion who lifted his head to snort his disapproval at my presence, and the gentle white mare who might have been the one to end my fear.

Too busy watching the man groom the stallion, while keeping a safe distance between us, I didn't noticed the mare as she edged towards me. Whether she meant me harm or only wanted some attention, I had no idea. Nor did I hang around to find out once I felt her looming close. Definitely not.

I took off as fast as my legs could go, with her belting after me.

I was a good runner, and surely broke the record for a nearly eleven

old as she chased me along the country lane, followed by the groom who threatened her with visions of horse meat should she not comply to his demands.

Pleased to say that I never found out her attentions had she caught up with me. She either took heed of her master's threats or else just tired of chasing this particular child.

Her momentum came to a sudden halt. With a wistful look in my direction she studied me for a few moments before she allowed herself to be returned to the stable, leaving me to make my weary way back to the hotel on shaking legs.

Now I had no one. Not even a horse.

We remained in that hotel for several months. Boring months. Unhappy months.

I know I repeat myself, and will do so time and time again as my hatred for this country, along with everything in it, was so intense that it tore my childish heart asunder.

Everything about it was wrong.

Salty lumps of oats floating in water faced me at the start of each day. This was called breakfast. I loathed this puke, when I should have been content with any kind of sustenance after the years of starving.

I detested these strange people who took the piss because I was unable to understand their meaningless phrases. Perhaps they were only kidding. Perhaps they meant to be nice. At the time they made me feel like a turd. I just wanted to be home, back where I belonged.

I was so homesick.

Please don't criticise me or think too bad of me.

Unless you yourself have ever experienced this emotion, this terrible need, this hopeless longing, you cannot even begin to understand the devastating effect it has on your being. It is indeed a sickness. An unbearable misery which at the time I thought could never end.

But, even worse than the need for my own country was the heartrending need for my father. The ache of wanting him near, to speak with him, to have him comfort me, was more than I could bear. I would never forgive my mother for taking me away from him.

In my selfish grief it never occurred to me that she also might be suffering. That she too might be longing for that which had been left in the past. Perhaps for her matters had gone out of control. Perhaps this was no longer her choice either. Perhaps it was fate which had decided that this was how it should be.

## Chapter Twenty-two

### By the Sea

Finally, after those six long months in the depth of nowhere, we moved to a town house in the South side of Glasgow where I attempted to fit into school with an English vocabulary of about six words.

The Major's attempts at bullying me into the language of the land had been fruitless. I preferred to spend my free time buried in the KZV, a Dutch comic which my father sent me every month.

I had not the slightest interest in learning English. Even though it had its drawbacks every so often. Like when I wanted to buy 'een

fluitje'. I saw it in the shop window with a little notice saying 'whistle', a word which my tongue wouldn't go round.

In the end I gave up, before the assistant had a nervous breakdown, and left the shop without my 'wistel'.

No big deal. Stuff the whistle. Why learn English when I had no intention of staying here. I had decided that soon pappie would send for me.

Unfortunately soon never came. Try 'never' instead.

We lived in Langside for two months, in a large gloomy house in

Millbrae Crescent before moving to Ballantyne Drive in Ayr.

Something to do with the Major's job. Though we had to move around a lot, it was obviously worth it as the money was good. £13.000 per

No complaints here either. Living beside the seaside exceeded the city by far.

During the two years we lived there two more siblings were birthed. A girny boy, and another dark-haired girl who would grow up to be her mother's clone so far as beauty was concerned.

Whereas I had inherited my mother's strength of will, as well as having plenty of my own, when it came to the looks department I didn't have a look in, I thought.

Consolation: beauty fades as time takes us into old age, personality of which I had plenty in one way or another, remains. Not only was I advantaged by having nothing to lose, I also took pride in my resemblance to my handsome father.

"Like two drops of water," people would say.

So looks, no big deal really.

Although my command of English was still sparse, the law commanded that we attend school. Even my little sister who was still a baby was made to go. Much against my mother's wishes who mollycoddled Janni even more than usual after a little incident with a workman's labourer.

Seems the boy put his hand up Janni's knickers while working in our house. So, if you think this is something new, then don't.

I can't recollect the full facts after all this time. All I do remember was Janni looking uncomfortable. Mammie angry. The boy crying when the police came. And me wondering if I'd really seen what was happening.

Anyway, of to Ayr Grammar school we went. Don't remember much of the school, so I suppose it wasn't too bad.

Even managed to form a couple of friendships from amongst the classmates. Two friends who obviously left an impression. Else why would I remember this particular pair.

On retrospect probably because, unlike the hangers-on, they were real friends of that time.

There was Stella who was frowned upon by the olds because she came from Princess Street on the other side of town. The poor side. My first taste of working class. I liked it. Nice, friendly, comfortable. A real mother, unselfishly bustling about the business of her family. A family atmosphere of which I have never had personal experience.

Unfortunately, after we moved away, Stella and I gradually lost touch. We were twelve years old. I suppose I was still too mixed up to form a long lasting, old girls, type of friendship. It didn't do to stay too close. Closeness hurts when it is torn asunder.

Still I wonder, where is she now. How is she now? She is one of the few from my past whom I can still picture clearly. Large nose, dimples, and pigtails as blond as my own.

It would be fifty years before we met again.

The other girl, Rosemary and her handsome twin brother Malcolm, lived along the street from us.

Malcolm was a cruel example of how fate can twist our lives when it takes the notion. He had been a normal healthy boy until the age of three. Just an ordinary little boy who could be bad from time to time. When he was bad his mother snacked him.

That one moment in time, which we spend the rest of our lives regretting, wishing that we could go back and change it.

That moment when he climbed onto the kitchen table to avoid a smack, and fell down on the other side to crack his head against the cold stone floor.

From that moment in time he remained a three years old. A six footer doing all the things a toddler might do. Handsome Malcolm, three years old for the rest of his life. His mother's toddler for ever.

Does she carry the guilt with her. Or has she taken it to the grave. The smack which never connected. The intended smack which changed all their lives. Does she wish, as I have so often done, that she can set the clock back and do things differently.

Living near the sea certainly had its compensations. Whenever the waters called to me they soothed my pain, enabling me to forget this world of unhappiness for a little bit of time.

Seashells held to my ear, soothing sound of lapping water. Magic promises from the waves which would carry me home.

Yes, it wasn't bad at all, this.

Us kids must have been a lot of bloody nuisances when we pestered the local garage for discarded inner tubes.

"All holes sealed, please mister."

Once in possession we proudly ran them along the pavements, coaxing them towards the beach. Into the beach hut to change. Into the water to float on our proudly acquired rubber tube.

I was the popular one, I was. We had a changing hut, you see. Those other poor suckers out there, struggling with a towel which flapped in the wind, had to change to an audience. We, my friends and I, we had the privacy of the hut.

This is one day. A balmy day. The weather is overcast. Dark clouds scud along the sky, but warm. So warm. The wind sighs fast and hard, blowing the sea almost to the steps of the beach huts.

Quickly I change, not knowing that the waves are about to keep their promise.

I leave the hut with my float. Run into the water. Laughing as I paddle along on my rubber tyre..

Not too far from the hut a large wave skites me overboard. Not to worry. Not too far out.

But the sea is mean, deceiving. It's depth a hidden secret. Out of my depth, I remember another day. I remember the friend who had died in the swimming pool.

Now I know the sea has lied to me I panic. Grey waters engulf me. My breath leaves my body. It's dark. I'm going home.

Red ribbons at the end of my pigtails float above the water.

Red ribbons, all that remains of Carlie.

But no. Of course not. Else this book would not have been written.

The ribbons are still attached to my pigtails. As the pigtails are attached to me.

Some bright spark pulls at the ribbons.

Discovers the pigtails.

Saves Carlie, by yanking her back onto the float.

Saved by a friend, and a red ribbon.

Am I accident prone, or just lucky unlucky.

How many lives are left to me now.

Our house faces an abandoned tennis court which is lined with tantalising trees. Trees perfect for climbing. The tomboy who is me

can't resist them despite mummy's repeated warnings not to climb.

What are trees for, if not for climbing. What could be nicer than baking potatoes over a fire of twigs and leaves, before retiring into the branches of a tree to devour the smoky treat.

A challenge indeed. The largest tree of all. My mother's warning unheeded, up and up I go.

Of course, mother was right as usual.

Down, down I go.

The ground meets my spine.

I can't talk. Anxious friends gather round me.

I can't say 'don't' as I hear them mutter, "Get her mother, quick."

I am more afraid of mother's wrath than I am of any damage I might have incurred.

I shake my head, the pain spearing me, warning them 'don't'.

Just let me lie. Just let me die. Alone.

Just as fate is a pig at times. so it can smell of blooms.

I didn't deserve it but, after a short sojourn on the ground, the paralysis left, letting me return to play as though nothing has happened.

And I still climb trees.

Behind the tennis court is a railway line. Beside the railway line leans the derelict club house. Perfect for kids. It is a palace. It is a den. It is a

hiding place when the heavens burst. It is a disaster area, about to be barred.

There must be at least ten of us having a heated argument as to what it's going to be today. Unknown to us, a disaster slowly walks towards us, priming his arrow into the bow. A birthday present to be shown off.

From a distance he aims. The arrow flies free, speeding towards us. And, you'll never guess, out of all those kids, it bloody well singles me out.

Bloody it is, as it shatters the lens of my two week old specs. Old blue eyes is about to be blinded. That's what people always called to me,

"Hi, blue eyes."

"The clap didn't do it, so let's give it another try," said fate.

Bloody it is. Blood everywhere, from my eye. Kids screaming. Mammie panicking. The Major's away on business. A neighbour and his car are made available. The wife watches the little ones. Mammie and I are taken to Ayr County hospital.

I am shunted onto a trolley where I lie under bright lights for endless hours. Eyes closed. The slightest flicker sends searing pain through my skull. I am so cold. A coldness that whispers death. For hours I lie. To wait for ever in this dark, pain filled void.

Until the man comes. The man who saves my sight.

The specialist from Aberdeen - or is it Edinburgh? - who remains nameless, but who saves my sight.

I remain on the children's ward for many disgusting weeks. The ward is huge, understaffed. There are too many sick kids. One boy had his bum burned. He stinks. God help him.

His big sister had pushed him onto the fire. One bowl of water washes a whole row of kids. The water smells of the burned boy by the time it arrives at my bed.

No visitors are allowed. Not even our parents.

The comfort of a parcel from home is denied us. The thieving staff take the parcels which the parents send for their kids. Bloody bitches, chewing, choking on our delicacies. Everything is still rationed. Four ounces of sweets per week per person. The parents did without for the children. The children receive nothing.

There is no TV. No books. No visitors. There is nothing.

At long last. Home.

Those friends who had been at the scene of the crime can't believe that I'm not blind. That I can see. My eyes are both my own. They think I have a glass eye. My eyes have changed from a bright blue to a pale grey.

Chapter Twenty-three  
When the Circus Came to Town

As summer fades into autumn, the beach which has given us so much pleasure becomes a place of churning sand and dangerous waters. Cold winds lashes at its shore. Rain sweeps over where we had played that summer. We abandon our beach huts and our inner tubes to the weather.

Now summer is replaced by the opening of the skating rink. Indoor skating. What a novelty.

You already know that during winter in the Netherlands we skated outdoors as soon as the rivers had frozen to a safe thickness. As well as the rivers, enterprising farmers flooded empty fields during the icy season. Barren fields transformed into havens of delight. Flood lights hanging from branches. Old barns miraculously changed into cafes, warm and cosy to comfort frozen bodies.

Before long the ice is crowded with hundreds of rosy cheeked children and adults. Steamed up breath mixes with winter air. The swish of skates heard late into floodlit evenings.

We had it good then, with our childhood pleasures. Without television, without discos, we never knew the meaning of boredom as our days were filled with fun.

It was at the indoor skating rink that I met the circus people. There also at the tender age of twelve, innocently unaware, I discovered my sexuality.

Although my forty inch boobs weren't fully grown until I reached the age of fourteen, I had already developed those womanly wiles which were to be a burden to me as I grew into adulthood.

Without realising what I was doing I flirted shamelessly with the

soldiers who were based in the town. The men who were more amused than turned on. Nothing came of it, bar the odd cup of hot chocolate at their expense in the rink's canteen.

The circus people. Now that was something else entirely. They brought a different kind of excitement. They brought the sawdust and the smell of wild life. They brought the sound of the ring, crack of whips and snort of horses, swish of elephant feet surprisingly gentle as they loomed over their trainers, barking of seals. not to mention the breathless tension while tight suited performers floated aloft, until broken by the laughter of clowns.

Best of all they brought memories of home. Memories of carnivals with my father. Endless hours of fun on roundabouts. Shooting stalls. Contorted mirrors. Rubbish food.

One time, after stuffing everything edible into my mouth, pappie

made the mistake of taking me up in a boat swing.

Higher and higher we swung. With each swing my stomach came nearer to my throat until I sicked the lot up over the side onto the happy crowd below.

Suddenly they weren't happy any more. My father should have been embarrassed. But his warped sense of humour overcame him. Much to the sick-covered people's disgust he couldn't apologise for laughing. And I. Well, the carnival magic left me just as the contents of my stomach had done. Since that day even the sound of the whirly-gig music is enough to send me running to the loo.

Anyway, this was different. This was the circus. For us kids, a time of magic and excitement as we ran around the side shows, not knowing what to try first, unable to decide which was

worth more of our precious pocket money.

We bumped around the circus folk in our attempts to assist in raising the big tent, more hindrance than help. Our hapless efforts rewarded when we were told to return the next day for a conducted tour around the animal quarters.

This was for me. This was the ultimate treat. Animals.

The following day.

I go alone. I stand by the side of the circus ring to watch black beauty

being put through his paces. Dark coat gleaming under bright lights.

Hot breath from flared nostrils. Legs in perfect synchronisation. Despite my fear his splendour leaves me breathless.

Someone calls out to me, "Come along. Come and see before the show begins."

Someone leads me into the passage which houses the circus animals. Cages packed together on both sides, leaving but a narrow passage in the middle.

The chattering monkeys, the roar of lions fills my ears. Scents of clean straw pleases my nostrils. So many beautiful animals, confined to appease humanity's selfish desires, when they should be free to roam the wilderness which nature has gifted them.

I am entranced. Overwhelmed by my emotions, I am lost in the world of the beast, unaware of the commotion at my back. Men's voices call in panic. Suddenly, aware that something is amiss, I look over my shoulder to see the black stallion rearing towards me.

Tired of the ring, he has decided to make for his stall at the other end of the passage. The fact that I am in his way does not deter him.

He closes in. Both sides of the passage are packed tight with cages.  
There is nowhere to go.

I am prepared to face my fate, ready to call it quits, when a circus  
hand grabs my pigtails, hauls me up, and dumps me beside him on

top of a cage. The stallion, unconcerned, thunders by where moments  
before I had waited to die.

Once again, saved by my pigtails.

This, my third unfortunate equine encounter, brings more dreams, so  
vivid that often I wonder, are they dreams or are they for real.

I am surrounded by green fields, rolling into hills as they recede into  
the distance. One solitary tree decorates an otherwise bare landscape.  
A troop of horses in the distance. Now approaching, coming closer.  
Closer.

Black. White. Piebald. Brown. Coming closer.

I start to back away. Still they come towards me.

Backwards I walk towards the tree. High enough for me to escape  
into its branches.

Before I reach it, more horses appear from the opposite direction.

Closing in.

This time there is no evasion. There is no bed to jump on. There is  
no circus hand to lift me into safety.

There is no escape. There is only the wild scent of the horse as they  
close in on me from both sides.

And, like the waking dreams it goes away into nowhere, taking the  
fields, the tree, and the horses with it.

Or.

A dark night, a cobbled street. The sound of hooves in the shadows. I am unable to see my pursuer but I hear the clop clop of its hooves coming nearer. Nearer.

There is no one else about. Only me and the sound of hooves in the dark cobbled street.

A tenement entrance gapes before me.

Up the stair I go. Right up to the top. As far as I can go. And I bang and bang on an unresponsive door.

No one will help me. And the sound of hooves thunders up the treads of the tenement stairway. Galloping now. Closer and closer.

Despite the sensation of terror during the dream time, those gentle animals never seem to wish me harm. Nor can I really equate them with the faces and hands which were so evil in my first ever night-time adventure.

As the years roll by, these dreams are unceasing and I have to believe that those horses must have had a more profound meaning than just a reflection of my childhood fear.

But what?

My curiosity is never satisfied. My 'whys' and 'wherefores' remain unanswered.

The dreams books beg to differ. Although the definition which crops up most often is that horses signify 'luck', financial and otherwise.

Don't you believe it.

Any kind of luck has done a good job of avoiding me so far, no matter how many horses appear in my sleep.

Another theory, some bright spark explained to me years later is that,

"Dreaming of horses is a sign of sexual frustration."

Don't you believe it!.

## Chapter Twenty four

### Preparing for the Ga Ga Farm

The uncontrollable temper which was a part of my infant years stayed with me as I entered my teens. If anything it became worse.

There was one incident, just before we moved house again, which threw doubt on my sanity.

Maybe I shouldn't tell you about it. Obviously, by now, you'll have the impression that I'm a total pain in the bum. However, I promised myself to be honest. To tell all, no punches pulled; which I don't do at

the best of times anyway.

Although my friends agree that I am not insane, just eccentric, this time I excelled in my imitation of being crazy.

But then the provocation was extreme.

The object of my wrath was an older girl who lived two doors away from us. We were friends of a sort, her and her two older brothers.

She was a big girl compared to me, and a bully. Unfortunately for her, this time she picked on the wrong person.

It's odd, you know, how often I am told,

"You seem so placid. I can't imagine you losing your temper."

But you know I do, don't you? And how.

She must have taken me for a soft mark, else she would have thought a few times before doing what she did. One thing for certain, afterwards she didn't have to think about it all ever again.

We were in her house, carrying on the way kids do. Only, things became serious when she stopped kidding.

For some perverse reason, known only to her, she pushed me down on the floor, placed a cushion over my face, sat on it and, judging by her hysterical laughter, was highly amused.

I wasn't.

What the Hell's so funny. I don't see the joke at all. I'm suffocating.

Can't move. Can't breathe. The sound of her laughter recedes into the distance. Black. Everything is turning black. I'm dying. This time I am definitely going to die.

In my mind I try to catch hold of the laughter. Something to hold on to. To give me strength. I reach out, and finally manage to grab it.

Now, insane with rage, I push her away from me. My lungs gasp for air.

Drawing in deep mouthfuls, dizzy, I lunge at her. My hands around her throat. Squeezing. Squeezing.

The soft flesh is a joy to my fingers. Her struggles are my revenge. I'll never let go. I don't want to relinquish my grip.

She's turning a nice shade of blue. Her movements are becoming weaker.

"See how it feels. Nice isn't it."

Strong hands attempt to prise my fingers loose. Pulling at my arms, my hands. I won't let go. The more they try to pull me loose, the stronger my grip. Tighter.

Someone is shouting, as if from a distance.

Two people, violent in their panic, prise my fingers loose.

Then she is free.

And I run.

This time I didn't have my father to soothe things over. This time my mother took me to the doctor to have my head examined.

That nameless girl had released a power in me. A power of which I had been unaware. It was unlike the mindless lashing out in temper with a rake, a stone, or anything else which happened to come to hand. At those time there was still awareness. An inane pleasure in my actions.

This, however, was something new. It was the start of a black anger, tearing into me until it destroyed all reason. A rage which enveloped me like a sombre being, inciting me to kill.

I suppose I shouldn't have admitted that I'd enjoyed that power. The feel of her throat under my hands, soft flesh under my fingers which had felt so good that I never wanted to let go.

And how I hated her brothers who, having heard the commotion while

in the room next door, had freed her.

Yet, after that incident, I did pose the momentary question to myself. Am I crazy? Was I crazy then? Or was it the pent-up frustration, caused by the need for my father and my country, which caused me to flare up at the slightest provocation.

My mother used to tell my friends,

"Carlie can't help it. Insanity runs in the family. On her father's side."

That may be. I still don't know the truth of that.

Anyway, I wasn't taken to the funny farm, even though I suppose more should have been made of it at the time. But then I was provoked. And I did heed the doctor's warning never, ever, to put my hands around anyone's throat again.

Despite my numerous faults I already had the strength of will which would stand me in good stead, especially in later years.

I admit I am foolish at times, always have been. And that I have a bloody minded temper, always will have. But I was without the weaknesses which I might have inherited from my father.

Perhaps 'my rushing in where angels fear to tread' might be considered a weakness. Yet my curiosity, my search for truth, my need to discover all the whys and wherefores of life, is such that I have to try everything at least once. Or twice.

That's the problem with having a contradictory nature. Once should be enough. Like falling in love. Taking dope. Strangulation. Once ought to be sufficient.

If I'd stuck with 'better to have tried it once than never to have tried at all', life just might have turned out all right. But I have to be like the

proverbial donkey. That's why I don't practice what I preach. I'm a right sucker for falling over the same stone twice. Even three times. or more.

However, I never attempted to strangle anyone again.

No, indeed, the next time I felt murderous I used a cloakroom floor instead. because the anger never left me. It was there to be enjoyed. Until it got out of hand, and frightened me as much as it did the object of my rage.

There was never a warning. The anger came from nowhere, touching my soul and enveloped it, until I was out of control, unable to even relate to the time of day, as the darkness crept over me..

Those who didn't know me well were terrified when the gremlins gripped me. There were times when even my nearest and dearest were shocked at the extend of my actions.

It is still a miracle that I never killed anyone as I smashed my way through life with flying fists, bottles, knives, stones, as well as with many a cruel word.

## Chapter Twenty five

### Unhappy Schooldays.

Once again we moved house, to a quiet street in Mount Vernon, within twenty miles of Glasgow city centre.

It was huge, fronted by a gravelled driveway and spreading lawns. A sign of our increasing affluence.

A patio at the rear, surrounded by a veritable jungle, must have seemed like heaven to the little ones whenever they were released from the confines of the house.

And, when they tired of their outdoor games, their toys discarded, they disappeared amongst the trees and bushes, to gorge on the fruit which grew wild in this rambling back garden.

Upstairs, spreading out from the large square landing, were four bedrooms, as well as a long narrow passage which led to the bathroom, linen cupboard, and store room.

Downstairs consisted of four rooms, along with a maid's room adjacent to the huge kitchen, whence the rear door took us to one of the many spare toilets before leading out into the garden.

We were warned not to use this particular toilet because mammie said it was dirty. I used it. I used it to pee, dirty and all, and to catch

flies in jam jars to feed to the many spiders which had made this out of bounds toilet their habitat.

The dining room window looked into a hothouse where tomato

plants fought for space. This room also had a walk-in-cupboard which was taboo. Not because mammie said so, but because the thought of entering its shadowy interior brought to me a state of abject terror, and many nights were spent in dreaming of the horrors which it might contain.

Although my inquiring mind insists that there has to be a further reason why I break out in a sweat at the very thought of being confined in small spaces, I can only put it down to another phobia inspired by our days in the cellar.

Despite the teenage traumas which I experienced while living in this house, it was the only time I felt some contentment since leaving the Netherlands.

I always remember 'thirteen', rather than being unlucky, as my happiest year. It was the year I was growing up, without the nuisance of menstruation, big boobs, or the complications of falling in love. It was the last year of innocence.

Yet, twenty five years later, when returning for nostalgic reasons, perhaps to recapture some of that contentment, I found that the greenhouse had been replaced by a stone staircase which led to a new

front door where once our linen room had been.

The house had become too large for one family, and had been split into two.

I couldn't understand why this made me feel sad. Why had I wanted to find the house unchanged? It had been so long since I lived there and, except for that one year, my thirteenth year, it hadn't really been a particularly happy time.

So here was a lesson to be learned. I began to realise that nothing can remain the same, as time takes us relentlessly forward, leaving the

past an inaccessible dream.

Two more brothers were born in that house.

My sister and I attended the village school, Garrowhill Primary. I still didn't like her very much. She was a sneaky little bitch, always ready to clipe on me. We fought constantly, but she was such a little girl. Too vulnerable for school, I thought.

Her command of English was even more sparse than mine.

Whereas my sister had not been encouraged to learn, my isolation, as well as my inability to communicate, was my own fault, due to my persistent refusal to learn a language which would never be mine.

Nor did Janni have the pushiness with which I blundered my way through anything and anyone who stood in my path. All in all, it made me feel unusually protective towards her. And, I realise now that life

might been even more confusing for her than it had been for for me.

It was a long walk to school. Unlike those fortunate enough to have thoughtful parents, we had to hoof it instead of being transported by car. To make matters worse, my sister attended for half days only, which meant that I had to bring her home at lunch time. By the time I had gobbled my lunch and returned to school, I was hungry again.

I really resented this 'couldn't care less whether she's hungry and tired or not' attitude. It encouraged me to feel justified in revenging myself for those hungry walks in my own perverted way with the warped, and sometimes cruel, sense of humour I had inherited from my father.

My chance presented itself on a cold foggy day. A mist, so thick that one could barely see the end of one's nose invaded the area like a damp impenetrable cloak.

When school finished early that day, a few panicking mothers, including mine - hurray - towing all the little ones, had managed to find their way to the school. They called out their children's names in a desperate attempt to locate them in the muggy shadows. Grateful kids hurriedly made their whereabouts known.

I heard my mother's voice all right. Sod her. Let her worry for a while, I thought, as I felt my way home to arrive well before she did.

"Where have you been, mammie, on such a terrible day," I asked her with an innocent smile.

I didn't make any friends at this primary school. On the one hand, they thought I was stupid because I had never heard of periods.

One girl started at ten. I heard them all talking about it in hushed voices. But I didn't have a clue what they were on about. Even when I asked what it was, and they mentioned "bloody slimy stuff", it made no sense to me.

On the other hand, they felt threatened because I was two years older than the rest, coupled by the fact that I was a smart ass.

Despite my difficulties with the language, and the two years of schooling I had lost during the war, I was always first in class. Nor was I prepared to take second place on the sport's field, which was resented as much by the teachers as it was by the other pupils.

"Paranoia," I hear you shout.

"Not so," say I.

Is it paranoid when, on prize-giving day a prejudiced teacher, tired of calling my name, states,

"It would be nice if someone else won for a change."

Who says the British have a competitive spirit.

At fourteen I moved to a secondary school in Hamilton. A fee paying

school for which I had passed the entrance exam with honours. One of the first twenty out of four hundred. Not bad under the circumstances, you must admit.

Hamilton was several stations away, which meant that I had to travel by train. Through Uddingston, Belshill, Burnbank.

Memories consist of belching smoke. the smell of the old steam engine which still sticks in my nostrils. Memories of being sick out of the train window when the nausea of migraine gripped me with its agony.

We had to wear school uniform. In summer, feminine dresses of pale shades of blue or green. In winter, the pleated gym tunic which exaggerated my, by now, forty inch boobs.

At fourteen they were an embarrassment. Unaware of the assets I was carrying, I tied them down with a binder and hunched my shoulders in the hope that they would go away.

At Hamilton Academy, just as at the primary school, I had the natural ability to learn without having to study too hard.

Yes, I was a pretty smart cookie.

As before, in or out of the classroom, if I didn't come first I would at least be second. And of course, just like my peers at primary school, this natural ability, coupled with man's xenophobia, did not enhance me to these peers either.

You know, people are so stupid. These kids didn't know the difference

between Dutch and German. There had been a war. I had an accent. So

I was the enemy.

One fat, blond haired girl, Elizabeth, kept up a constant barrage of,  
"Dirty Dutch. Carlie's a dirty Dutch."

Now we Dutch might be tough. But some people never learn.

I tried to ignore her. For the best part of three years I ignored her taunts, which you must admit was pushing my patience to an extreme.

"Dirty Dutch. Dirty Dutch."

Silly bitch didn't even know where Holland was.

Yet, despite this harassment, we had some sort of friendship going. I remember being in her house in Bellshill a few times. That's probably what protected her for as long as it did. Plus the fact she had an older brother, Russell Grant, who was a doctor.

He was more than twice my age. The female Oedipus complex was worming its way into my personality. My father was inaccessible. So what else, but the attraction to older men?

Anyway, friendship, brother, after three years they no longer protected her. She said, "Dirty Dutch," once too often.

Result, was a nearly dead Elizabeth, after I had smashed her head off the cloakroom floor a few times. And one expelled Carlie.

Shortly after that we moved house again.

Twenty six

Of Boys

I can't honestly agree that school days are the happiest days of our lives.

School days are the pits.

O.K. So, what's to be done about it? I wasn't particularly imaginative when it came to humour, yet sometimes it would prevail to cheer me up a little bit. For example, jumping in a puddle as a prefect was passing by, or blowing up a bag and bursting it during assembly, would break the monotony of the day for a brief moment.

I know that nowadays jokes are more sophisticated. Like covering the bowls in the school toilets with cling film, - the mind boggles -, but at the time my puerile efforts did lend a bit of interest to an otherwise dreary day.

Unsophisticated or not, none of my tricks made me popular with prefects or teachers. The headmistress, ugly stringy bitch, hated me. Spinster, suffering from Japanese decease (lackanookie), taking her misery out on her pupils.

I was forever being hauled in front of her because I was in trouble.

The fact that I'm a foreigner didn't enhance me in her affections either and, I suppose Elizabeth's blood on the cloakroom floor was really the last straw.

Anyway, her dislike did nothing to deter me from my shenanigans. I was not to be put off by her dislike of me. I wasn't going to be frightened by an old bag like her. Like the time when, tired of one of my classmate's excuses, I belted her for not repaying money she owed me.

"Aw," she cried. "I'm going to tell the headmistress on you."

"I'm coming with you," I bravely stated. "I'll tell her what a lying bitch you are."

Together we marched to the headmistress's office. Together we sat on the bench outside. We waited. She was shitting herself. I was a close

second, but I wasn't giving in. My bravado paid off. Just before it was our turn to face the dragon the other girl chickened.

"Come on," she said, "There isn't any need for this," handing me the money she owed as we made our way back to the playground.

Another time I almost took it too far.

It was during English class. Tony, the teacher, slapped me for whispering answers into a more stupid pupil's ear, right in front of the class.

Now, I couldn't let that go by, could I. A slap on the face. Not on.

Something had to be done to save my now burning face. A kick on the shins, right in front of the class. Was that something!

We glared at one another, as I waited to be dragged to the head mistress's den. At the same time, my glower dared him to back down. He backed down.

Once more I'd won the battle. And with a teacher to boot.

Often, when I couldn't face going to school, I played truant. I must've seen 'King Kong', the black and white version, about half a dozen times, in the old cinema I had spotted on my way to school. An old six pence for a seat in the stalls made it a real bargain.

These illicit visits to the cinema were made even more exciting because cinemas were for birthdays, or other special occasions. Or to be used at times when I had been especially bad. Then mammie would say,

"I was going to take you to the cinema, but now I won't because you've been naughty."

Applied psychology. My punishment was knowing that she wasn't going to take me anyway yet, at the same time, wondering if she might

have done.

In between cinema visits, school, and the rest of my life, I discovered boys. There was James Harkness, the doctor's son, who lived along the

road. There was Johnson Jeffrey, a school prefect. Both darkly handsome. Both unaware of my presence.

I had yet to strengthen those womanly wiles which would enable me to overpower the stronger sex.

There was Tom, the grocer's delivery boy from Baillieston.

I was madly in love with him. Unable to take my eyes away from his spotty features whenever he delivered the groceries.

"Breeds," he would say as he checked the contents of the box.

"Bread," I repeated.

"Tau'ies," he said.

"Potatoes," I said.

"Toma'os," taking the bag out of the carton.

"Tomatoes," surely the boy had a speech defect.

I didn't know then that his was the dialect of Parliamo Glesgae.

Janni was always fascinated by these exchanges. Howling with silent laughter at his accent as well as at my futile flirtations. Until the day she laughed so much that she peed the carpet.

It was during those frustrating days of adolescence that I took my first good look in the mirror. What I saw there was most displeasing to me. No sir. I did not like my reflection at all. However, what the Hell, it's personality that counts. So I'd better go find myself some.

Typical of me, I detached myself from the hoi polloi at my own school to take myself to the High Street at lunch times. In a cafe, over peas and vinegar, I joined the 'common' boys from the state school. And, like all the others, they didn't notice me as a girl either. I was just one of the boys. Their disgusting conversations went on unabated. The usual boys' 'knocker' talk. Filthy, yet strangely fascinating.

However, with perseverance, I attracted the attention of my prince. His name was Alec. He had fair hair and spots. A nice distraction. A change from the cinema. Until he put his hand up my jumper while we were courting in an old air raid shelter. After me thinking the dirty talk was just that, talk. And here the dirty bugger was actually doing it. Disgusting boy, immediately banned from my life.

Then there was Johnny Ray, as like the singer, also from the cafe. He was nice. Never touched me, except in a gentlemanly fashion as he escorted me to the school dance. Me in the white sequined dress which mammie had made for me. Him looking handsome in bow tie and tails, fidgeting with embarrassment at my parent's scrutiny. Can't remember what happened to him after that.

The house in Mount Vernon was backed by woods and surrounded by fields. Unlike my classmates, the local children were much friendlier. My interest in boys waned for a while as the child in me fought with the adolescent about to burst forth.

For just a little while longer I wanted to remain that child. To play with the crowd, boys and girls alike. To race through the woods and the fields where the cowboys and indians were still very much alive. At fourteen, forty inch boobs and all, I was still a tomboy.

## Chapter Twenty seven

### And Men

At fifteen I discovered men.

Men, so much more interesting than those silly boys who just wanted to grope. Not that the men were adverse to similar pursuits given half a chance. But then, for them it would have been too much of a risk.

After all, I was only fifteen.

Tommy, plumpish and ginger haired, was a porter at Hamilton

Station. He got his kicks out of wrestling with me in the bothy. Me, I was totally naive, wondering why a grown man would want to play wrestling games. I just thought it made a nice change from the goody goody Girl Guide troop I was supposed to be at. And, whatever happened to him after whoever told the school, and the school told my parents, nobody told me.

Then there was Eddie, a signal man who changed the signals along the line which I travelled to school. I had spotted him one day as the train was pulling out of Bellshill station. More than twice my age. Tall. Grey haired. Extremely good looking in a rugged kind of way and, I would discover, married to a French lady. He was my second puppy love.

A few days after first sighting this elderly Adonis, I left the train before my usual stop, hoping that HE would be there. If a railway platform in a little town could possibly be the place for a romantic setting, then this was it. I mean, the sun shone especially for me as I sauntered nonchalantly along the platform, pretending that I didn't even know he was there.

Yet, he knew all right.

Eddie taught me to French kiss, and all about oral sex. Hell, when I think about it, it was really quite daring. Here was I, unaware of the age of consent thing, trying to convince him that I was sixteen. If he asked me once, he asked me a few dozen times, obviously unsure of my reassurances. Which is just as well. I would probably have gone into shock if he had taken advantage of me. Well, more of an advantage than he was already taking. At this stage, despite my experiences, I had not the slightest inkling that such a thing as sex

existed.

He was curious about me. Probably flattered by my adoration.

Luckily, he was also a gentleman of sorts even though he did encourage me to sneak out at night, so I could keep him company in his signal box, while he initiated me into the art of not even attempting to board the train, let alone jump off before the terminus.

And my parents never knew.

Wow.

Robert, also, happened to be more than twice my age.

He came into my life when he worked around our house for some time.

He never made advances. He treated me like a delicate piece of china, to be idolised at arm's length.

I sort of half realised that for him this was a serious business. That he was in love, whereas for me it was the highest form of flattery.

He took me home to meet his parents. I didn't let on to mine.

He lived in a small wooden house in Tolcross. I lived in a palace compared to him. He still lived there when I met him again about two or three decades on. Still in that little wooden house. Now grey haired, jobless, and alcoholic. The half dozen brothers and sisters gone. The parents deceased. And the man who had loved me, and treated me so well, had also died in spirit.

Robert had dark hair, and a light moustache which he used to pencil in with black crayon. One evening, he came to meet me at the theatre where I had gone to see Othello with a school party.

On the train home he showered me with passionate kisses.

Well! Why not? I needed all the kissing that came my way.

"Have you been kissing the Moor," asked the Major jokingly on my return home.

Little did he know.

Probably assumed it was soot from the train.

My parents' unawareness of these two men still amazes me.

They were so strict. Yet I was able to pull the wool over their eyes. Probably never entered their minds that I would have the audacity to behave in such a brazen manner. Me, I just thought that I was an improper little smart ass.

Only seldom did my mother miss a trick. Yet she missed this one. Probably too busy with the little ones. Probably I had ceased to exist as the house and the other kids took over.

In fact, no 'probable' about it. I know I had ceased to exist.

However, by the time I had reached the age of seventeen, she had developed an uncanny knowledge of my movements. At first I couldn't understand how. Until I discovered that all she had to do was wait until I had just dropped off to sleep. Then she would gently shake me. Ask me. And I would tell her everything. Pure dead brilliant sneaky, wasn't she?

Despite my affinity with men, I was only fifteen and still a child. Still wearing boy's shorts. Still tearing through the woods and fields with the younger kids.

Yet, the years were insisting it was time for me to grow up.

At the primary school I had heard the shocked whispers,

"Kay's started her periods."

Kay was the ten year old.

'Periods' were way above my head.

"What's periods," I asked of my peers.

"It's bloody slimy stuff that comes out of you from down there," informed Sandra, two years my junior, but obviously wiser in the ways of the world and of women.

Me, I shrugged my shoulders and dismissed it as a load of rubbish.

I suppose I must've been about twelve or thirteen when my mother started rabbiting on about sanitary towels.

"You come and tell me when it happens," she said.

But I hadn't been interested enough to take note.

At almost sixteen I had occasion to remember. And it was good to be able to go to her. To tell her. To be told not to be afraid.

At fifteen, sex was still an unknown quantity. Sex was smutty boy's talk and half knowing conversations amongst friends.

Unfortunately, it was not to remain a mystery for much longer. Our years as a child are too few. Soon we have to grow up, to enter a different era. The days of innocence fade away into the past as the realities of life takes over.

My more informed friend was to see to that.

One day Margaret, she lived next door, and I saw a man wanking.

I thought he was just itchy.

She knew better. She said, "He's tossing himself off."

I asked, what he was tossing himself off from, as he didn't seem to be up any height.

She looked at me funny, deciding that I needed to know more.

"This what men and women do," she demonstrated with two tennis rackets. (We had been playing tennis.)

"What d'you mean," I asked.

She explained it to me. She was two years older than me. More worldly wise. I choose not to believe her. I didn't want to believe it. My feelings were of shock. I couldn't believe that anyone, especially a girl, could talk like that. At the same time I was horrified lest it was true. Surely it was too disgusting to be true.

"I'll ask mammie. She'll tell me its not so," I told myself.

I asked mammie.

Mammie sat me down. For two hours she talked.

I couldn't believe this. I didn't want to believe it.

I had always known that little boys were different from little girls, but these things were for peeing with, or for showing off. Not for sticking into girls. People just didn't do these things. Especially not my mother. Not my beautiful mother.

I swore that for as long as I lived I would never lend myself to

anything so vile.

But people do.

And I did.

Eventually.

Much to my regret.

Several months before we left Mount Vernon, a builder had started building prefabs across from our house, on the waste ground in front of the railway line. My tomboy friends and I had a fantastic time crawling amongst the bricks and along the scaffolding, after the men had left for the night. Here again I discovered my fear of small spaces. While the other kids explored every nook and cranny, crawling through the claustrophobic foundations in their search for treasure, I couldn't go

beyond the front door. The very thought brought me out in a cold sweat.

Soon families moved into the new houses. Families with children. Janni, now seven years old, had her first friend, Isabelle. Isabelle Cook who, ten years later, was one of the victims murdered by Peter Manuel. Killed in the same field where, in the twilight of our childhood we used to meet our cowboys and indians, and where our cops and robbers fought their battles, now filled with real terror and death.

## Chapter Twenty eight

Nihad Sattar Bayatti

After my attempt to kill Elizabeth, coupled with the discovery of the wrestling bouts in the bothy with Tommy, we moved to the West End of Glasgow, to the last home I would share with my parents.

A new school, new friends, new boys.

I was sixteen, and despite my anti-social attitude I could be nice when it suited me. The arrogance from my childhood days had followed me into adolescence, but no one realised that my 'cocky' nature hid an innate shyness.

"I wish I had your confidence," other girls would remark, little knowing that underneath my skirts my knees were jelly and my stomach did a fair imitation of a food mixer.

Yet, by kidding others I also fooled myself.

Boys now found me interesting, although I couldn't figure out why.

So far as I could see, my features had not improved since that first

serious study in the looking glass. And my search for personality had not yet reached fruition.

"It's your sex appeal," explained my new friend Dorothy.

"Oh right," said I, without a clue as to what she was talking about,

never attributing it to the boobs which, free of the binders and the gym tunic, now flourished forth.

Ian was six feet tall, a class mate, one of my peers. Too engrossed with Mr MacFarlane, our good looking science teacher, I was unaware of the boy's attentiveness. I was in love again. Alas, in vain. Teacher was not to be won over, even though he admired my tenacity.

"You're very stubborn," he told me as I tailed him at one of the school dances, much to the amusement of his current girl friend.

In the meantime, Ian had warned the other boys to keep away from me, or else he would give them a good old-fashioned Glasgow 'doing'.

"She's mine," he put it about to any other young swain who might have fancied his chances with me.

Sadly, puppy love is fickle. His notion for me just a passing thought in his young life. Or maybe he just tired of my indifference. Because, it would seem, that I was the only one who was unaware of his ardour.

Then came Nihad Sattar Balata from Zanzibar.

Nihad was five years older than me, roomed in a house four doors away from ours, and had spotted me standing bored to tears at the playroom window.

He was small, swarthily handsome, and had a rotten habit of 'accidentally' bursting into his brother's, Whabi's, room whenever he

heard him bonking with his girl friend.

The first few weeks of our courtship were spent staring at one another through the glass. After the staring, came the meetings and the getting to know each other. Having been brought up without prejudices, the fact that he was coloured never occurred to me. Nor did it matter to my parents. So long as the boy's family was in the same income bracket as mine he was acceptable. In fact, I believe that my family was highly amused at this, my apparent first real love affair. Rather than put an end to my amours, they tended to take the piss. I remember my oma from Gouda making some disgusting remarks as she ladled chocolate pudding onto my plate,

"It's all black," she said. And I finished up thinking that was the colour of their sperm.

Is it?

Nihad really courted me. I was the envy of my peers whenever he came to collect me home from school. His lack of English could be really funny. Like the time he bought me my first 'long things for ladies' - stockings -, much to the shop assistant's amusement.

Yet, that same endearing failure of language could create embarrassing problems. Like the time he took me along to meet his 'Hollish' landlord.

"Go on. Speak Hollish to him," prodding me into this strange

man's direction.

My, "Hoe gaat het dan," was met by a blank stare.

Ah well, so the guy was Polish. How was I to know?

We courted through a long hot summer, me showing off the once

hidden assets to their full glory in skimpy tops. Until Nihad began to put on the pressure with a bloody minded determination. Lack of English was no problem here. But I, even more determined, let it be known that I was not about to hand out something so precious willy nilly. Not even his skill as a hypnotist was able to persuade me, as I repelled the eyes which tried to hold mine.

"If you don't do 'it' then I'll get someone who will," he threatened.

Not to be coerced, I replied, "You do that then."

He did, with a nice Irish girl who had no hang up about relinquishing her virginity. They married when she became pregnant and, so far as I know, lived happily ever after.

While I remained pure.

There were other boys. All equally obsessed with sex, while I foolishly held on to my precious virginity. Hell bent on saving it for the man I would one day marry.

If only God had given us foresight, then I would've know it was a waste of time and effort. Because, when it came to the bit, I discovered

that it hadn't been worth while hanging onto. It was a pain which could have been avoided had I not been such a prude.

Then there was Jack, one of the lads who hung around the local cafe. A crowd of us used to meet up just to have a pleasant time over soft drinks and coffee. Except for the occasional outing to the cinema or such, none of us really paired off. We were all friends together. So, when Jack invited me to a party I had no qualms about going. After all he was a friend, I naively thought.

Just so happened that the said party was for two.

Him and me.

We arrived at a house, which turned out to be his friend's. The parents were away on holiday. The friend skulked in the living room while Jack showed into one of the bedrooms. He locked the door. Pushed me onto the bed. And leered at me while he stripped off.

Despite the fact that, having little brothers, I was aware of the difference between boys and girls, his towering manhood still shook me to bits.

I'd never seen anything like it.

I hadn't realised that these things could grow so big.

I fought like an animal protecting its young.

He reacted by putting his hands around my throat, tightly squeezing the soft flesh.

"Bloody lie still, or I'll kill you," he snarled.

Without a moment's thought I chanced my luck.

A case of death before dishonour.

"Kill me then," I challenged him. "Go on, kill me."

He didn't. Just gave me a funny look. Stood up. Dressed. Took me home, never to be seen again.

Afterwards, all I remembered about Jack was the size of his prick, and that he bore a strong resemblance to Rasputin.

Now that my command of English was fairly fluent I should have been more confident. But my arrogance was a sham. Underneath this hard outer shell my heart and mind were in turmoil.

Homesick. Unhappy. Unloved. Paranoid.

Yet I was damned if I would let others know of my true feelings.

Not even those closest to me ever knew the depth of my despair.

I was sixteen when the Major suddenly decided he should adopt me,

to make me one of his own.

Why? What difference did it make? What difference might it have made? Besides, I loved my own father too much to agree to this arrangement. Nor did I intend to remain in this country. As soon as I was old enough to be outwith my parents' jurisdiction I was going home. I was going back to the Netherlands, and to pappie.

I wasn't going to hang about here any longer than I had to. Nice of him to finally think of it, but why bother. What was the point? Yet, might it have made a difference?

After that, things went from bad to worse. As though life wasn't already difficult enough, the relationship between me and my mother deteriorated further and further.

"You're so obnoxious. Your stepfather can't stand the sight of you," she never tired of assuring me.

I don't know what she told him. I do know that a terrible antagonism formed between him and I. I didn't know then that my mother was jealous. Insecure, and jealous because I was growing up. I was young. I was a threat.

One evening, after another row, I packed a cardboard box and ran away from home, to spend the next few hours dodging in and out of doorways whenever I spotted our car circling the streets in its search for the family's black sheep.

I became cold, hungry, uncaring as to my fate. I called to mind the Ukranian men I had met at an amusement arcade several weeks earlier.

"You visit us some time," as they gave me their address.

Now was the night to accept their invitation. That invitation to visit,

regardless of their intentions. That bridge I would have to cross when I came to it. Now, the time had come for me to rest, to sleep, to eat, to be warm, somewhere.

Therefore, all caution thrown to the winds, I made my stealthy way to St Vincent Street near the town centre, not really expecting a welcome. People often say things in the spur of the moment without really meaning that which they offer.

Stefan's girl friend opened the door.

"Ah," she cried, "A little waif. Come in, hen. You look frozen and hungry. You sit down, while I make you something to eat."

Typical Glaswegian hospitality.

Nicely relaxed, when the door bell rang.

How I knew, I don't know.

"Don't tell them I'm here. Please don't tell them I'm here."

She didn't. But I no longer felt relaxed. I felt betrayed. My so called friend Morag. She was the only one I had confided in. She was the only other who knew about the men and their whereabouts. Turned out that Morag, my only confidant, was in the car with my parents.

The being safe left me. I had to leave the comforting warmth, the caring of Stefan's Glaswegian girl friend, to return to the cold, dark streets of Glasgow. Exhausted. Pride gone for a burton as my parents' car lay in wait. My first attempt at independence, a dismal failure.

Chapter Twenty nine

Joan's Workshop

Despite the shenanigans I had miraculously managed to get away with, my parents were very strict, allowing me the minimum of freedom.

They had tolerated my relationship with Nihad, but at seventeen, after he and I parted, life once again bordered on the mundane between school and play room. I wasn't free to go far on my own, nor did my parents ever take me out.

So, when our new neighbours moved in they were a cause of great interest to me.

After the house next door had been abandoned, it fell into dismal neglect. No longer did the light shine through windows. Thick gungy greasy grime barred the brightest sunshine from seeking shelter. Stink of mildewed walls, where faded floral paper stretched towards the crumbling floor boards, had replaced the welcoming smells of home-cooked meals.

The gardens at the front and rear grew unchecked, until trees and bushes hugged mortar in a futile love affair.

Now, at last, after many a year of loneliness, except for myriad mice which ate their way through the walls into our house, it once more

bustled with humanity. Glasgow's first beatniks. Noisy, hairy, sense of dress deliciously individualistic. The most exciting people I had ever seen. The kind of people who were frowned upon by the rest of society for their unorthodox approach to life. For me they were the answer to all my woes. Anything or anyone who veered from the norm met with my approval. The more my parents objected, the more they appealed to me. They were the tonic for my rebellious nature. They might even have been my salvation.

Another 'if' had entered my life.

The problem was how to make myself known to them. My act of self-confidence might have been perfected, but in reality I was still too immature. I had not yet acquired my present day knack of going after what I want, of approaching the person or persons of my choice and introducing myself.

Patience would have to be the answer. And, with that patience applied, I did not have to wait too long before the opportunity presented itself, in the name of Carl.

Carl, a stranger, who was not a stranger to me. It was as though I had been waiting for him all my life, as he also had waited for me.

It was a sunny day on which our glances met over the garden wall, to instantly become one. No longer was I myself. Grey-blue eyes pulled

me into their depth. Without question, I allowed myself to sink into them, and the gap in my life was filled.

There was no need for extensive conversation. He knew my thoughts before I voiced them. He was as a mirror. The same face. The same name. The same mannerisms. The same mind.

Carl was twice my age.

He had been part of a whole, until his twin sister died. Died on the day I was born. Now he was one again, and I was whole.

We became inseparable. Together we were alive. The rest of the world ceased to exist, yet it was all around us. It was like a love which could not be compared to any other. Unlike the love I held for my father. Unlike the physical love of touching. It was a love of the mind. Two minds which had become one, carrying us into a vortex of joy.

Through time, through him, I became accepted by the rest of the inhabitants of the house next door. The Theatre Workshop Company. Unknown. Unacceptable to the neighbourhood. Until Joan Littlewood's drive and talent took them out of obscurity into fame, to be fawned upon.

Such is human nature, that it does not recognise talent until it makes a name for itself.

Now I wandered freely around the house next door. The house which, like me, had been so desolate for so long, now lived again.

It's heart now filled with laughter, as mine was with contentment.

No longer in fear of my parents' orders, I defied their wishes time after time, to accompany the group when they displayed their acting skills in town halls and in schools.

At last I was complete. I was a part of something I could associate with, without the sham of the airs and graces in which I had been brought up.

This was real. These were real people.

There was Joan herself, vibrant, filled with the determination which made not only her own success, but that of many she took under her wing. Some acquired fame. Others remained in the obscurity from which she had tried to pluck them.

There was Gerry, Joan's husband, and their small son.

There was Harry with whom I flirted incessantly, in the knowledge that Carl would save me should things go astray. How I loved to embarrass him with my shameless 'kid-ons'. Harry, charming, tall and handsome. Harry, who found fame as a rag and bone man. Harry, whose heart died before he was ready to go.

There were many, now nameless and faceless. Many who became

my friends.

Most of all there was Carl. Carl, my brother. My identical twin. My soul.

Carl, my world.

Where did he go? Where is he now? If he still lives, he will be more than eighty years old. Would he remember me should we perchance meet again?

How often does Fate give us that chance of true happiness? The opportunity to meet someone who can have such a profound effect on one's life. And how often do we throw it away?

Came that day when they told me about their intended move to Stratford. I could have gone. They asked me to. I could have spent my life with Carl, with the type of people with whom I felt at ease.

I was seventeen. Desperate as I was, the need to go pulling me like a magnet, I was afraid. Too afraid to leave the place I called home. And I settled for the 'but'.

Regrets, they came later. They still are now.

After they were gone, all that remained in my otherwise mundane world were the few letters from Carl, until they too ceased to exist.

Perhaps he died. Or perhaps his path moved him into further avenues, and he forgot the teenager who became a part of him for such a very short time.

## Chapter Thirty

### Constrictions of Home

To give you another example of the idiosyncrasies of my childhood, one of the rules in our household was that, while the younger children were sent to the play room after dinner, my sister and I had to join our parents in the upstairs living room.

We had to knock on the door, then await our parents' summons before we were allowed to enter. The crazy thing was, that once ensconced in our chairs, we were not allowed to speak. That would have disturbed the Major's concentration while he read his newspaper or listened to the Goon Show.

So, you tell me, why the Hell were we made to join the olds then. What is it about some adults that they have to be so perverse? Is it innate cruelty, or does it boil down to a power struggle where they have to inflict their superiority onto little children without any thought of the long term effects it has on our lives? You know, 'One of those childhood memories which affects our behaviour pattern in our adult years'.

In this instance, I have retained an absolute dislike for that programme, along with the talented comedians who played in it. I never visit my

mother without making an appointment first. I still knock on doors, and probably have dozens of other silly habits relating to that particular part of my childhood.

So, for a little while, we sat quietly.

For goodness sake, we were sixteen and ten.

How long was that supposed to last?

So we sat, and looked an at one another. Wriggled. Looked again, before the laughter pangs took over. Muffled giggles. Mother threatened an apoplectic fit while trying to hush us up.

Why the Hell had she married him, when it made life so difficult.

Why indeed.

As I said, a strict code prevailed in the household.

Little did they know that I was already an old hand in the mysteries of the silver screen when I was taken on my first official visit to the cinema, a seventeenth birthday treat. Not the excitement of King Kong, but black and grey shadows of nice and boredom, deemed suitable for a well brought up young lady.

Dance halls were out of bounds.

An invention of Satan, I'm sure.

No big deal really, I suppose. Not with my two left feet.

Still, what did that leave?

Study, and making mischief with my bosom pal, Morag.

Inseparable, we were, after the departure of The Workshop Company.

Me and my shadow, we were known as.

Afraid of no one, except my parents.

A bane to the local shop keepers who cringed whenever we appeared on the door step.

Friends for thirty years until her untimely death more than twenty years ago. Another victim of fate. Another soul wasted by the bottle and a miserable marriage.

Even had I been allowed to gallivant like a normal teenager, I doubt if my two and sixpence pocket money would have gone far.

To Hell with dance halls, then. I much preferred to spend my money on

sweets; which wasn't as easy as it sounds. Sweets were still rationed at four ounces per person per week.

Not enough. I needed my sugar fix.

It meant that, one week's pocket money was used to purchase sweetie coupons from a school chum who had a preference for savouries. The next week I could buy half a pound of teeth rotters.

Everything was rationed. Two ounces of sugar per person. Two ounces of butter. Four ounces of meat. So many cigarettes, or so much tobacco for the pipe smoker.

See the girl I bought the sweetie coupons from, she was Irish, with a nutter for a mother. Her old lady was really jealous of Ella. Made her

wear her vest over her bra so that her boobs wouldn't show. This was supposed to keep her 'out of trouble'. Well, it didn't. She even went one better. She had twins with her mother's boyfriend, out of wedlock for goodness sake, not long after leaving school.

Me, I still didn't know what sex was about, bar the occasional grope.

Sometimes I managed to save my pocket money by depriving myself of sweets and comics. There was a time when I had actually managed to save three pounds in saving stamps. Twelve weeks' pocket money.

How's that for discipline. Three pounds was a lot of money then. In a lot of cases that equalled a week's wages. I lost the fuckin' book on my way to the post office to cash them in. I still hope that the bastard who found it choked on whatever he or she bought with my hard-saved cash. For fuck's sake, it would make a dishonest person out of you.

My parents were just as strict with the little ones as they were with me. Confined to the garden or the play room, on no account were they allowed out on their own, ever.

They were put to bed at seven o'clock. So was I. At seventeen, so was I. Sent to bed with the two, three, four, and eleven year old. Me, and my cuddly little teddy with its lovely little velvet paws. I wonder whatever happened to him. He was lost somewhere along the line.

At least I had been given a bedroom of my own.

See, they had to give me a room of my own after I offered to kill my

sister if I had to share with her much longer.

It was a case of getting her own back that brought it on one evening. Bored to tears, after having been sent to bed at seven, we applied our new found grasp of English by being very literate, as we were wont to do when bored, by making up poetry.

"A little piece of shite was hanging from the light," accompanied by stupid giggles.

Somehow we'd drifted into an equally stupid argument, finishing with me having the last word. A bad habit of mine, but I reckoned being the elder that is the way it should be.

On this particular occasion, Janni had obviously been pondering this over and had become really pissed off with having to take second place all the time. God knows what was going through her stupid head when, just as I was dozing over, something flew through the air to land on my face.

A shoe. Even in the dark her aim had been true.

I was indignant. How dare she. This was totally out of character. I was usually the one who clobbered her.

The ensuing uproar brought the olds running. Murder in the bedroom. Better separate them from now on. So she had to share with my other little sister who was an even bigger dork than she was.

And I gotta room of my own.

Sacrosanct? Hell no. Mother was forever poking into nooks and crannies to find the dirty books I'd bought from under the counter of a second-hand book store, after I gave up saving.

Janni had many a way of annoying me. Or perhaps I allowed her to irritate me through my resentment of her.

Mother often stated the truth of the situation.

"Carlie always rises to the bait."

So. Is that any reason to bait me.

She would niggle and goad until I went spare, until that day when she took it too far.

She was coming upstairs as I was going down. Or perhaps I was going up and she was going down. Whatever.

She said something to me. Something goady. I don't remember what it was that incensed me so. I don't even remember hitting her. But I did. Hard. Hard enough for the parents to hear above the sound of the radio in the living room.

I don't remember what happened after that, bar that she gave me a wide berth from then on. For a little while.

I suppose it was difficult for mother to run that large house. Three stories and a basement. Eleven rooms and three bathrooms in all, with just the help of a daily woman. A Mrs McNab, full of cups of tea and

Glaswegian anecdotes.

I was damned if I would lend a hand. I just sat with my feet up on the large table in the large kitchen, occasionally glancing over the top of

my comic to see if dinner was ready.

On top of everything, another baby arrived to add to the mischief. As though the six of us weren't a handful enough. One difficult teenager. One inbetweeny. And the four little ones always up to something. Truly, too much discipline creates rebellion. And, when mammie found some of the messes those wee ones made, it was an open rebellion at that.

"Who....., she would demand.

"Neil did it," mumbles Seeta.

"John did it," accuses Neil.

"Stewart did it," says John, very matter of fact.

Stewart just sneers.

So, who got the blame?

"You're the oldest. You should set a good example. If you didn't misbehave, neither would they."

So, as usual, it's all my fuckin' fault.

At least I know from whom I inherited my temper. When my mother started, she sure went mental. She could keep the ranting and raving up from morning till night. O.K., paps had a temper but I never knew

anyone else who could be so persistent, bar me.

It never occurred to me then, that she was human. That it was all too much for her. That house. All those kids.

The Major.

What really went on behind the scenes?

Whatever though, we never went without, no matter how tired, or how depressed she might have been. Whatever faults mammie might have had, she made up for it with her culinary expertise. As well as all

the talents already mentioned, she was also the most terrific cook; especially when you consider the limitations set by the ration books. No plain mince and stuff like that for us. Give her a pile of left-overs and she would produce cordon bleu.

In saying that, the two times she tried the local mince, we all had food poisoning. From the mince, not from her cooking it.

At the same time, youth with its inexperienced taste buds, tends to have a satiability for the simple things in life. Like fish and chips. We liked fish and chips. The fish didn't create a problem. But, the chips. Those simple wedges of deep fried potato were strangely beyond her. Whenever she attempted this delicacy, the kitchen was filled with evil smelling smoke, and the chips were beyond eating.

So what's wrong with a carry out, then?

Well, you see, one of the Major's idiosyncrasies was, that fish

suppers were for 'common' people, not for the likes of us. So we had to bide our time. To wait until he was away on business. Then mammie would send me to the local fry-up establishment for a secret treat; two large parcels of greasy chips, wrapped in newspaper, kept warm inside the lining of my new coat, to be devoured with relish ( enjoyment, not sauce ) as soon as I arrived back home.

However, nothing is so simple. It meant a lot of devious pretend when the Major's eagle eye spotted the large grease stain on the lining of my coat.

"What's that," he says.

"What's what," I answer innocently - or insolently.

"That mark on the lining of your coat," with voice sounding his irritation at my attitude problem.

"What mark? Where? I don't know," pretending to be more stupid

than I already am in his estimation.

"I know. I know what it's from," muffles smart-ass Janni from behind mother's hand while being manoeuvred out of the room. And so, his query remains unanswered, and the stain remains a mystery to him. Such is life, with all its stupid adult rules and regulations, and how do they know they've got it right anyway?

## Chapter Thirty one

### Battle of the Porridge

It was the Major who, strangely enough as it was totally out of character, made our breakfast, while mammie stayed upstairs to attend to the baby.

Those incessant babies who kept appearing one year after the other.

First, he'd take her up a tray with tea and toast, while we wished he'd do the same for us. Why couldn't he make us toast at the same time? Why did our breakfast have to be a disgusting mess?

Porridge. OK, so it's Scottish tradition. So, it was made once a week, poured into a drawer to set, then dished out in cold slices at breakfast. If you can imagine such gunge to start the day with, no doubt you'll say we should've been glad that he didn't follow that tradition, seeing he had the decency to make it fresh every morning.

Porridge. Boy, was he a dab hand at making this nasty, salted, watery, rubbish; almost as bad as the stuff at Rowardennan had been, now dished out to us in our own home.

He must've derived some sort of sadistic delight in ladling it out. Probably why he was always so keen to make the breakfast, I'll bet. Or, on retrospect, maybe he really meant well. Maybe he thought it was

good for us. Maybe he should've thought again.

I mean, we loathed it. All of us, as we gagged it down day after day, too frightened to rebel. After all, the Major's word was law and order. He thought.

Of course, it was left to me as the oldest to sort out the business of the porridge. Someone had to make a stand, and nobody else had the guts to do it.

Came that morning, when I banged my spoon on the table to attract everyone's undivided attention.

"I'm not eating this stuff any longer," knees quaking under the table. "We're not eating it any longer. We want cornflakes instead, from now on we want cornflakes," I added for emphasis. Cornflakes being the only cereal invented in those long ago days.

The old man never spoke a word. Just scowled at us all, daring the others to agree. Five little persons sitting in terror, spoons halfway to their mouths, porridge dribbling down onto the large wooden kitchen table, waiting for his wrath to explode.

Silence ruled supreme for about a minute and a half. Then, with the awaited wrath remaining silent, God bless them, they all put their spoons down.

"We're not eating this. We want cornflakes," almost in unison.

How could he resist us? How could he resist this open

rebellion?

He didn't. The battle had been won, and Kellogs gained a new customer.

It was the Major who always woke us for school in the morning, without fail at the stroke of eight, except when business took him away from home.

I don't really know what business he was in. I understood he was an engineer, which was quite grand in those days; whereas nowadays every man and his neighbour is one.

Mammie once said something about him being a glorified sales rep.

Whatever, he must've been good at his job, as it certainly brought in the pennies.

The first five years took him abroad on quite a few occasions. Then, when I think he changed jobs, he became office bound and I tended to be a regular visitor to his Glasgow office, encouraged by him, perhaps to build up some sort of relationship between father and daughter.

Give him his due. At least he tried. I didn't.

Anyway, from there on, he went from one strength to another, until he ended up as the chairman of an American oil company.

He's away on a business trip.

One morning I wake to the sound of the University clock, ding dong,

ding dong, eight times.

Mammie opens my bedroom door. I hear it open. I see her put her head around the door.

It's cold. Only my nose shows over the top of my blankets.

"I'm awake," I muffle. "It's all right, I'm already awake."

Instead of leaving, she crosses the room until she stands by the side

of the bed. She bends over me, pushing the covers against my face,  
bearing down hard.

I don't believe this. I can't believe it. I can't move. I can't breathe.

Everything turns dark, and I know no more.

I wake. It's only just after eight. Mammie's gone.

I don't remember anything after that. Whether we spoke or not when I  
went downstairs. Whether I went to school or not. All I know is that I  
became afraid of her. She wasn't like my mother any more. My mother  
had gone. And to this day I can't be sure whether it happened, or  
whether it was a waking dream.

In contrast to the fear of my mother, the feelings I had for my father  
were sublime. I loved him without question. He was everything I  
wanted and needed. He was perfection.

Perhaps I never knew him long enough to find his faults. Perhaps I  
didn't want to know them.

When I was very small, I was fascinated by a painting which hung on  
the wall of pappie's study. It was of a woodland scene, glowing shades  
of greens and yellows, through which meanders a stream.

In the right hand corner of the picture it passes under a little bridge,  
before disappearing into never never land.

Often pappie sat me on his knee, to tell me wonderful stories of the  
place to which the stream travelled. And I wished that he and I could go  
to that magic place, at the stream's end, together forever, to hide away  
from the real world.

Every night I lay in bed, thinking about our stream. Soon I floated,  
wrapped in a hammock, above the duckweed covered water, until I  
drifted into sleep.

As the years went by, I drifted further along the stream. Too far. It seemed as though my bed moved towards the bedroom door, to carry me away into nowhere. And I became afraid. Because, pappie was no longer with me to hold my hand. Pappie was gone.

I had to make myself look past the hammock, past the stream and the duckweed, until I no longer floated. And, as time went by, my dream was lost in shadows, and I could no longer find our stream, or the contentment it had brought..

Now the picture is lost. Pappie is dead. So often now, during troubled adult years, have I tried to recapture the scene in the picture,

to float over the stream, as I did when I was a child. Along the stream, over the little bridge, to the magic that I know is there.

If only, if only I could only find it one more time.

## Chapter Thirty two

### Heartbreak Holidays

Life went on in its usual dreary way. School, and what passed for home. The heartache for my father, the need for my country, never diminished. The sad years of youth were never ending, stretching into an unknown future. The only good times were the nights, when I lost myself in endless dreaming.

Sometimes the monotony was broken by a visit from the uncles. Two of my mother's brothers. John who was true to the temper of his red hair, always grumpy and impatient with his nieces and nephews. I never forgave him after he belted me for waking him out of an afternoon sleep. After all, I had been sent by mammie to wake him for dinner, so what did he have to hit me for. I was too indignant to accept his apology. I was also unaware that he was reacting to four years spent in a Japanese prisoner of war camp.

The other uncle, Bert, was all right. He was only nine years older than me. He would take Morag and me to the pictures, and generally give us a good time.

At other times, he made me feel uncomfortable, behaving more like a man towards woman than as an uncle towards his niece. I didn't like it

when he drew his fingers down my spine.

"Does that make you feel sexy?" he'd leer at me.

I was too naive to cope with this, and gave him a wide berth after that.

Eventually, like everything else, he would desert me anyway, when he married John's ex girlfriend.

When the buds began to show their little heads, and lambs gambolled in the fields we, the family, went on weekend day trips, to picnic on the lonely banks of Loch Lomond. And, even though the water reflected my own loneliness along with the purple hues of the mountains, in a way they were good days.

Now, with new roads, more cars, and what have you, the tranquillity of the past has been spoiled by the bustle and exhaust fumes of the present.

We returned to the Netherlands for summer holidays.

Each year, those two weeks turned the screw even deeper into my heart when they came to end and, once again, it was time to return to Scotland.

We travelled in a Morris Oxford all the way to Harwich. Eight of us, in those day before motorways. Cramped and smelly. The little ones were sick most of the time. The baby shat his nappies some of the time.

And I, sick with excitement at the thought of going home, caused constant halts for peepees.

The Major, with one of his unusual flashes of humour, christened me 'Lavatory Lill' after I planted my bum in a bed of nettles one dark night.

It wasn't funny.

We would arrive at Harwich about a day and a half after setting out. There the ferry hooted our arrival, and the cabin awaited our occupancy.

On one of those journeys, the cabin booking had been messed up. It just wasn't big enough for us all.

No guesses as to who was to be bombed out. Bad enough that I, the only one with a Dutch passport, had to be separated from the rest of the family while going through customs, now they were abandoning me to a cabin of my own.

Bad. So what? I still philosophise, that out of something bad comes something good. In this case, the handsome Danish steward who was on duty that night. Even I, with all my naivety, couldn't help but notice him. Personality and sex appeal reared their ugly heads with a silent roar. More interesting, he noticed me.

Unfortunately, mother also noticed the noticing.

"I'll take your clothes back to our cabin," she said as she tucked me in for the night.

"Why," I asked, seeing my chance of romance disappearing along with the clothes.

"Because they'll get creased in here," she stated quite firmly as she shut the cabin door behind her.

That was at ten o'clock.

Eleven o'clock, a knock on the door. Enter the Danish Adonis.

"Let's go for a walk on deck," he suggested.

"I can't. I have no clothes."

"So?"

"My mother's an old spoilsport."

I was scared in case they were still awake.

"I can't leave the cabin."

Oh God, is he a dream.

Fuck my mother.

Or rather, fuck me.

But, I'm scared.

Of him?

No of my parents.

"Would you like something to eat or drink. Some coca cola or something," requests the Dane.

I wanted him to stay. I wanted him to go.

So much for romance. A coke. For Goodness sake, a bloody coke.

I want you to kiss me. I want to feel your body beside mine.

"Yes please, I would love a coke."

A few minutes later he returns with the coca cola. I'm about to drink it when I imagine I hear the Major's voice in the passage. I spill the coke. The bed is soaking and sticky. I'm sticky and soaking, sweating with fright.

"You'll have to go."

He goes.

Had I but known, that all the time, the Major was fast asleep.

When we holidayed in the Netherlands, mammie, the Major, and the little ones stayed with the oma in Gouda. Janni and I had to sleep at oude oma's - great grandmother's - old fashioned flat.

Like oma, she lived above a shop, a few hundred meters along the harbour from oma's house. A staircase, almost as steep as a ladder, led

up to the front door. Once inside, a long narrow passage ran towards the back of the house where the kitchen brought it to an end. The kitchen with its old stone sink and marbled sink board. Everything was old. Old, and barren.

Two doors presented themselves on one side of the passage. One was Tante - aunt - Mina's bedroom. In all the years we stayed there, not once did we catch a glimpse of what was inside. The other door took us

into the living room where oude oma was for ever perched on a chair in front of the window.

She was another oma who dressed in ankle length black, with the same black beaded choker around her neck. Her hair was thick and dark grey and, when not piled on top of her head, hung to below her waistline.

Despite her age, her eyes were clear, and her back straight, while she held court from the armchair. One week short of her hundredth year when she died, she outlived Tante Mina, her oldest daughter. The daughter whose whole life, except for one day, her wedding day, had been committed to the care of her mother, and to the house she had never left.

On either side of the window, where the old lady sat in state, there was a large mirror, like the ones you have on lorries, so that she could watch in all directions without any effort.

On the opposite side of the living room, facing the windows, two sliding glass doors hid oude oma's bed. The huge bed almost filled the small room which was like a glass-encased balcony overlooking a courtyard.

There was no bathroom in the flat. The one door on the other side

of the passage contained the toilet, akin to something found on an old Dutch farm. A wooden shelf with a hole in it, big enough for a bum,

and a tap for flushing. The water seemed to swirl down the channel for ever, before disappearing into the bowels of the earth, taking with it, if you were lucky, your deposits.

Quaint. Very quaint.

The house, like all the other houses on the Herengracht, overlooked the canal which had separated oma from the German headquarters during the war. It was a busy gracht, a cobbled street with little shops which huddled side by side. The shop below oude oma's house sold bicycles. On the other side of the gracht, across a wrought iron bridge, just around the corner in a little side street, was the baker's shop.

Warm and cosy, rich early mornings smells drifted high, all the way across the canal, until it reached our open bedroom windows.

We had to sleep in the attic, on huge feather beds.

I felt sorry for my little sister whenever we stayed there. Every holiday was spoiled for her, as she became mosquito dinner. Bitten, until she was covered in huge swollen blotches, causing a temperature which didn't exactly make for an enjoyable holiday.

Yet, that was her fate, year after year.

No worries for me. Obviously I had bad blood. Those beasties never laid a blood sucking tooth on me, whereas poor little Janni was quite neurotic whenever bed time loomed.

Every night was the same. I had do the big sister act by going into the

room first, to destroy any nasties which might be lurking about. Only

then was she content to go to bed.

Next door to oude oma's house was a nightclub. Many nights I lay in bed, listening to the keening sound of the accordion. Each note aimed at the pain in my heart. Each chord a part of the home which soon would have to be left behind once more. And, many a night I cried at the sound of that music which, for some reason, made me feel even more forlorn.

Despite the grief, there were times to be enjoyed, when sad thoughts could be put aside for a little while.

It was pleasant enough to meet up with the old aunts and uncles.

What is it about uncles? My favourite one, another much older Bert, used to talk about feeling my tits, before my blushes signalled that he was out of line. Then I had to reassure him that I wouldn't tell oma.

He'd look at me with this loving look he had.

"I suppose you'll be telling oma that your uncle is a dirty old man."

How could I hurt oma, or Tante Corrie, his wife.

"Of course, I won't tell."

Our holidays were timed to coincide with oma's birthday.

Birthday parties, to enjoy the spread which she had so meticulously prepared for her guests. The goodness of my own country's delicacies

to be enjoyed, instead of the Scottish stodge which still did nothing for me.

The highlight of the birthday party came at the end of the day when the large wooden boxes of fresh cream cakes were produced. And, even though we children were last to be served, there were still plenty delights to be found.

Yet, those good times were but a moment in eternity. Through it all

my heart still ached, because no one made any effort to contact pappie. No one thought to invite him to the party. Every day was spent in hope that he would somehow appear, but he never came. And too soon it was time to go back into the void which my life had become.

Every holiday I went in hope, unable to voice those wants and those needs. Pappie so near, yet so far away. The days back home, always too short.

Every time, the wrench of leaving my country brought nothing but grief. I needed to stay. I needed to be with my pappie. I didn't want to be forced to return to a land where I could never find contentment. But not once was I given a choice.

### Chapter Thirty-three

Peter

They say that every mother has a favourite amongst her brood. I don't know if this is so, or whether it applied to my mother or not. All I know is, that I wasn't, and that I did have a favourite.

Before the birth of Peter, out of my five siblings, I had formed a deep attachment to the middle boy, Johnny. He was the sweetest thing imaginable. The brightest, the handsomest, and the nicest of us all. How could I help but love him most. How could I stop myself from loving him. How many of you have control over your passions? Strong as I

was, I couldn't control the feelings I had for this brother. Everything else I had ever loved was lost to me. The thought of losing Johnny as well was too unbearable. I couldn't allow myself to love him.

Somehow I had to rid myself of this emotion. This need to cuddle and kiss him and tell him how much I cared. Instead of holding him and giving him the loving he deserved, I was cruel. I shouted at him, and I hit him when he came to close. Until he was afraid of me. The bond we might have had broken, smashed into tiny pieces before it was wholly formed. We don't communicate at all now. I can't remember the last time we met. He, also, has become just a vague memory of a past which is best forgotten.

Peter, a fat, healthy baby, was the last to be born before I left home. He was too small to shout at, and despite myself, and although I didn't particularly care for babies, I made an exception here whenever mammie needed breathing space.

She was in her early forties by now. Still beautiful. She was beautiful until the day she died. But jaded from trying to cope with the large house, as well as her ever increasing brood.

It was at those times, when she was on a really low ebb, that she didn't mind me playing hooky from school, so long as I spent time with the baby to give her just a little respite.

You'd think I had a jinx about me. Or perhaps God reckoned that this brother didn't deserve even the nine allotted lives.

It had already started during his moment of birth. The doctor hadn't arrived. The umbilical cord threatened to strangle him, turning his little face blue while he struggled for life. Perhaps it was an omen. Perhaps it wasn't fortunate that a midwife rescued him before he gasped his last. Instead of death, his lungs sang loud and clear, perhaps lamenting the

short life which lay before him.

When he was a few months old the same doctor, who had been negligent by not being present at the birth when he should have been, vaccinated him against smallpox. Just one of the normal baby's initiation

into pain. until mammie discovered that the discarded ampoule was out of date.

Once again his time on earth had not yet expired. This he also survived, despite doing an imitation of a smallpox victim, as the baby rash on his bum exploded into virulent, painful, puss eruptions. But, as with the trauma of birth, he survived.

Then came that day. A Tuesday. I remember it was a Tuesday because the shops had their half-day closure. That day, my mother had made another futile attempt at making chips. The Major didn't show any signs of going away on business, and we fancied chips that day of all days.

Peter, seated in his pram in a corner of the large kitchen by the window, had become irritable, crying as the smoke made his eyes water. Nothing I tried was of comfort to him. It was almost time for his afternoon sleep anyway, so mammie took him three floors up to the bedroom and tucked him in for a nap.

Four o'clock. She went to pick him up. He had been sick and his eyes were funny. The doctor was called. The same stupid doctor who had neglected him on two previous occasions.

"Colic," he said, giving me a prescription to take to Boots the chemist in town because the local pharmacy was closed for a half day.

"Hurry," he said. "The sooner you come back, the quicker he'll be

out of his misery."

Never a truer word. Out of his misery. But not as was intended.

Peter was in a coma.

That night I went to bed at ten o'clock, still thinking that all that was wrong was a tummy ache. I prayed. One of the few times I prayed. It was the last time I prayed.

"Please God. Let Peter be all right."

How innocent I was. How bloody naive. Or else, maybe, he was better off dead. Maybe his life would have been lousy. But he was so little. So alive. So loving.

Eleven o'clock. I hear mammie calling. I go through to her bedroom.

She is holding Peter. Holding him close. She has a mirror in front of his face. There is no sign of breath on the mirror. My little brother, my healthy little brother, is dead.

Mammie is crying. It's the only time in my whole life that I have known my mammie to cry. I don't like seeing mammie cry. I don't like seeing Peter so still. So quiet. He's only eleven months old. He should be crawling. Gurgling baby talk. He should be alive.

It's a quarter to twelve. Our doctor refuses to come. We call the doctor who stays two doors away. He has a son the same age as Peter. Sadly he signs the death certificate.

Peter lies on the big bed in the guest room. He's smiling. Is he really happy? His eyes won't stay closed. His big blue eyes. He doesn't look dead. After I close his eyes he looks as though he's asleep. I don't believe he's dead. He looks so small on that big bed. So small and

lonely. I can't leave him alone. He's too small to be left alone on that big bed. I stay with him. I hold his hand. Every so often I have to leave the room to eat, to go to the toilet, and every time mammie asks me,

"Is Peter dead. Is he really dead."

She can't bring herself to go into the room. And I can't answer her. I don't want him to be dead.

I stay with him, holding his little hand, until it is cold and heavy. His body is now an empty shell. Peter is gone.

When I come out of the room mammie asks me again,

"Is Peter dead."

And I say,

"Yes, mammie. Peter is dead. He is no longer with us."

Then the police come. Apologetic. They have to inquire in matters of sudden death. Mammie is crying again. I shout at them to leave her alone. Why don't they leave her alone. Can't they see they are making her even more unhappy.

The day of the funeral. The little white coffin in the back of the car. Just mammie and the Major. I stay at home with the little ones. I don't

want to go anyway. Not to see Peter deserted in a hole in the ground, all alone, to be left to rot.

Janni says something to me. She irritates me. I lift one of the heavy wooden chairs which stands by the kitchen table. I lift it high above my head. I want to kill her. To smash the chair over her skull. Peter is dead. Why should she live.

At the last split second I draw back. The chair splinters into pieces on the floor. Janni is still alive. Peter is dead.

Later they come back from the cemetery without Peter. Peter has been left behind in his lonely little grave. Mammie is distraught. I had

always known her to be so strong. I was used to her moaning and shouting. But I have never experienced her tears.

Over the years I have had to cope with my own unhappiness. I have hidden my own feelings with anger. But, on that day, I couldn't cope with my mother's tears.

On the day of my brother's funeral I showed the world my feelings.

I don't know what happened. At some point I vaguely remember the Major giving me a brandy and putting me to bed.

I don't know what I must have said to him. All I know is that he asked, "Do you want to go back to Holland, to your father."

And I must have cried, "Yes."

Why couldn't Fate have been kinder? Why did my brother have to die

for my dearest wish to be granted?

I've always reasoned that life, nature, Fate, had a balance.

There was no balance there. That day, there was none.

Or was there? If there was. Then somebody tell me about it. Explain it to me, because I will never understand this kind of cruelty, the unreasonable actions of Fate, or God, if that's what you want to call it.

So, tell me.

Chapter Thirty four  
Now the Nightmare Begins

The following weeks passed in a daze while arrangements were made to send me home.

I wonder, did my mother feel that I was abandoning her. She had just lost one child, now she was about to lose another. Or maybe I kid myself. It was probably a blessed relief. Maybe they were all pleased to be rid of me. As I was glad to go.

How could I have known that the answer to my wish, the end of all those years of longing, which were about to become a reality, would be the beginning of a nightmare. Better that I had continued in my innocent unhappiness, than to experience what was to follow over the next seven months. Better to have lived with my dream, than to have reality slap me in the face the way it did.

The day finally arrived when my mother and the Major took me to Prestwick to catch my plane.

At seventeen years old I had never travelled on my own before. So nervous, that I almost backed out, yet at the same time, so

overburdened with excited at the thought of seeing my father that

I could hardly wait to see his smile and the feel of his loving arms around me.

The old gentleman who sat beside me on the plane unsuccessfully-fully attempted to pacify me. He must have been feeling air sick at the way I kept bobbing up and down. Christ, I was so nervous, that I spent most of the flight in the toilet.

Finally, after a two hour flight that seemed to last for ever, the ancient little plane shuddered to a halt at Schiphol.

There they were. My beloved pappie. And his wife; face like the back of a Glasgow bus, scowling at her darling step-daughter. Boy, was she ugly. Ugly by looks. Ugly by nature. After being married to someone as beautiful as my mother, what on earth had possessed him? The answer to that question would be a long time in coming, if it ever did.

In the meantime, I was left to wonder, where were the longed for hugs and kisses? Why was she scowling at me? Could it be the way I was dressed? Was it the stupid shoes my mother had made we wear? So, Dutch fashion was way ahead of Scotland's. Yet surely I looked smart enough to be my father's daughter. O.K. so I do have a habit of imitating a slob, but this time I had heeded my mother by wearing the clothes she had chosen. At the same time,

"Doesn't matter how expensive I dress you, you still manage to look

a mess," mammie always used to say.

It was plainly obvious that I did not have this woman's

approval. So what. Of what concern were my clothes to her. What do clothes matter, anyway? Underneath my grown-up tailored suit there beat the heart of a little girl who still needed to be reassured. And loved. I had waited so long for this moment. So why was pappie being so off hand? At long last, I had returned, to be with him, to stay with him. Had that not been his wish also? If not, why had he agreed to have me?

I couldn't understand it at all.

What I didn't realise then, was that I was no longer a little girl. I was a young woman who had come back from the past to claim the love which I reckoned was mine. I was competition. He was afraid to show the depth of his feelings in the presence of this jealous wife. Jealous of her husband's daughter. Jealous of his first marriage. Jealous that he had known me and loved me before her.

If I had been confused before as circumstances overtook my life, I was even more confused now. It has never been my nature to be jealous. Nor was I able to understand this emotion emanating its evil from someone else. After all, who was I that someone should be so jealous of me? This woman didn't know me, yet she already hated me. Her hate for me continued, with all her heart and soul, until the day she

died many, many years later. Yet, what had I ever done to her, but be my father's daughter.

While pappie went to pick up my luggage she told me,

"I want you to call him uncle. I don't want the neighbours to know who you are."

I could only look at her as though she was crazy. Was it not obvious? Could the silly bitch not see that she could never deny me as

my father's daughter? We were as alike as two drops of water. Twitchy noses and all. Off course, I wouldn't call him uncle. He wasn't my uncle. He was my dearest, dearest, pappie.

They took me to their house to meet the three half brothers. They were two, four, and six years old. Maybe too young, yet they must have picked up their mother's vibes. I don't think they liked me either. But then they didn't know I was their sister. They were never told. It was only after my father's death, when the will was read, that they discovered they had two half sisters. And it would be many years before they dared to incur their mother's wrath by contacting us.

At the time they were made to believe that I was some horrible interloper, to be suffered. Well, I had to suffer them as well. I had left one lot of brats, just to be surrounded by another lot. Whatever they thought, or she thought, I had what I wanted, I thought. So I might as well settle down and like it.

It didn't take too long to realise that the grass on the other side wasn't going to be as green as it was supposed to be. And that dreams don't really come true. Fate was not prepared to make my path a smooth one. It had decided that my life was to be my battle ground where I would have to prove myself a fighter.

So, as usual, let battle commence. I was getting used to it.

Bad as it was that I had to suffer my father's wife when he was home, it was even worse to be stuck with her while he worked in the Hague. During the week he stayed in a bachelor flat in the city, to come home at weekends only.

The first week was pure shit.

What was I doing here? What was the point?

That first week was eternal, Friday a million light years away, while I waited for my father to come home. As soon as he came through the front door, God help me, I couldn't help myself, I flung my arms around his neck, and all the years of separation were enclosed in that hug.

"You dirty little bitch," Antonia shouted as she dragged me away from him.

Now what exactly was that supposed to mean?

Was she sick or something?

No. Believe me, she was livid.

In case I hadn't heard her the first time round she repeated herself,

"You dirty little bitch."

Of course I was glad to see my father. I had waited seven years to be with him. And now I was a dirty bitch. You figure that one out, if you can, because I reckon she was one sick bastard.

As time would prove, one sick evil bastard.

Although the weeks were far from heavenly, at least the weekends were something to look forward to. So long as I refrained from showing any physical affection, she put up a front while my father was home by remaining reasonably pleasant. And, although I knew that all Hell would break loose after his Monday morning departure, for a few short days I was close to my father. Here, in the same house as him, instead of a million miles away, I could watch all his endearing ways, and love him here, instead of only being able to remember him from afar.

The weekends were magic. Almost like that dream come true.

But, the weekdays with her.

They weren't real.

She wasn't real.

Hard as I tried to love her for my father's sake, so far as she was concerned it wasn't on. There wasn't one ounce of affection in her for

me. Yet, when it came to materialism there was no problem. I lacked for nothing there. Beautiful clothes. A real fur jacket, which I wouldn't entertain nowadays. A new bicycle. The best that money could buy. All

for show. All to let the neighbours see how well she treated her husband's daughter. Because I didn't call him 'uncle'. All show. Behind the closed doors of her house she was evil. She was the wicked witch.

Why?

What was the truth?

Was it what she told me? Or was the truth in her mind?

Was she a psychopath, a masochist, or was she stating what she genuinely believed to be facts? Facts which made her fear for her sons.

Who was the bitch here, Her or my mother?

Had my mother sent the letter in which was written that I was pregnant, had caught venereal disease from my Iranian boyfriend, and had killed my baby brother to spite the Major?

"I burned the letter so that your father wouldn't know how bad you are," she told me after she had finished her reciting the contents.

I was already hurt and confused, and this latest bit of information tore me apart.

Was the letter real? Or was she even sicker than I thought?

To speak of these things which were untrue, and blame my mother in the process. How full of hate she must have been.

Yet, where had she received this information from? How could she have known about Nihad? My mother must have written something. Had my mother written so foul a letter? Had her grief for Peter's death

twisted her beyond reason. Did she resent my return to the man with whom she was still in love so much that she wanted him to hate me? Was my mother capable of writing such a letter, or was this woman lying to confuse me even more. Was her hatred of me so intense that she was trying to drive me insane?

I looked her over, trying to catch her eyes, to see into her soul, to find if she was telling the truth. How in God's name could my father have married this, stupid, bovine looking woman after having lived with someone like my mother? What a come down.

"Don't look at me like that," she screamed.

Ah, I've got you now. You can't look innocence in the face, can you, you bitch, I thought

Looking at her 'like that' became my only protection whenever her nature matched her looks. Ugly. Stupid. But street wise. Always one step ahead. Scheming. Ugly. Hateful. God help me.

### Chapter Thirty-five

### And Goes On and On

The dream is dead. The nightmare continues. And there is no waking.

My mother has read in between the lines of my letters. She must have asked oma to come visit me. Poor oma who's come all the way from Gouda isn't allowed past the front door.

Face like the back of a Glasgow bus beams at me,

"Your oma came to see you, ha, ha."

Crazy bitch won't allow me to speak to her. She's even confiscated my passport in case I decide to leave. She doesn't want me here, but she won't let me go either. Not to Gouda. Certainly not out of the country.

What has pappie done that was so bad that he deserves her? Why is he afraid of her? He used to be such a macho man. Look at him now. Just in the door after a hard week's work. His first month's salary since my arrival unopened in the top pocket of his army uniform.

She takes the pay packet out the pocket, opens it up.

"This is for your cigarettes. I'll pick them up tomorrow as usual.

This is for housekeeping. This is for the bank."

Mentally rubs her hand at the thought of the accumulating funds.

"And this is your pocket money."

She hands him the pittance with a flourish. What's he supposed to do with that? Would barely buy him a couple of glasses of jenever.

Paps used to enjoy his jenever; granted in excess, until she decided otherwise. She nearly caused his death when they were in Indonesia because she wouldn't allow him to drink. He had malaria. The doctor said it was because his body was used to alcohol. Depriving him of it in a warm climate could have been fatal.

Wouldn't allow him to drink, for goodness sake. What it is to have power over a man. To take away his manhood and his dignity. What a cow.

In Indonesia, she had this ape, a baboon or something, who had a

crush on her, she said. She told me that every time pappie came home from work the ape would go berserk with jealousy whenever pappie kissed her. Yuk. Imagine kissing someone who's fancied by a monkey. Come to think of it, she strongly resembles the baboon.

My apologies to the Glasgow bus.

She manages the bank accounts. Numbered statements, sent in his name, to be opened by her. No wonder he could never sent mammie any money for Janni and me. She, who must be obeyed, wouldn't let him. So far as that greedy cow was concerned we didn't exist

It's a damned shame. Paps is a railway enthusiast. A few weeks ago he took some money out of his own account, to buy a new engine. He held the statement back so that she wouldn't find out. When she

discovered what he had done she went fuckin' spare.

"Who gave you permission," she yelled, turning an interesting puce colour.

Snuff it you bitch. That's right Tonni, have a heart attack. And good riddance.

Poor pappie just stands there, smiling apologetically at me. His nose is twitching.

So's mine.

Whatever has he done to deserve this. Any other wife with a behaviour problem like hers would have been sent packing ages ago. If this is atonement, please let it end. It's been seven years now. Isn't that enough. Fucking, controlling bitch. Well seeing she married money. I mean, pappie is a judge. A captain on the Bennelux. She's a sergeant's daughter with airs and graces which don't belong to her. She actually has the nerve to tell me that I can't befriend working class people. Is this why she bombed oma out. Is oma a reminder of her own

background. Is she too ashamed that the neighbours will find out. As though they don't know already. Do you know that she locks me in my room if I befriend anyone who doesn't meet her misguided standards. I've only been here for a few weeks now, but I'm quite convinced that the woman is mentally deranged. No one behaves the way she does. Maybe her mother dropped her on her head when she was born.

Or maybe she caught syphilis from her German officer friends. I mean, she's so unstable. One minute she's nice as the proverbial ninepence, the next she goes completely bonkers.

So it goes on.

I've started a course in business management. Takes me away from that lunatic asylum for a while.

Another excuse for staying out. One of the monks from the nearby monastery came to the house the other night.

"I hear you have a young girl here with time on her hands. She wouldn't mind selling some calendars, now would she."

Would she not. Anything to get away. Especially when it meets with her approval. Besides, it's nice going to the monastery to pick up more calendars and to hand over the money I've collected. The abbot always takes me into his office, offers me a sherry which I accept, of course. All the same, what a waste of handsome young men. Break a young girl's heart, so it would.

Pappie's secretary got herself pregnant. Well, not really herself. You know what I mean. Surprised that Tonni didn't accuse paps. Anyway, she had twins. So pap and I go to visit her at the convent. There's a little baby boy in a cot who looks just like a little old man. The nun tells me that his mother is only fourteen years old and his father is also his

grandfather. I ask the nun if I can get a job with the mothers and the babies. It's difficult for me to get a job, even with pappie pulling strings, because I come from Britain and the Dutch think that the Brits all have reds under the beds. The fact that I'm Dutch doesn't seem to make any difference here. So far as they're concerned, I've become a foreigner. Anyway, I'd quite like to work with the babies. Poor little things. But the mother superior says I can't because I'm not a Catholic. I'm not a Protestant either, but that doesn't make any difference.

Pappie is a Catholic now. I mean, Tonni is a Catholic so pappie has to be one as well. Anyway, pappie is a very good Catholic. Me, I'm not interested. I mean, nobody's ever tried teaching me. Mammie's a lapsed Catholic. She has no time for religion at all. She says she turned against her religion because she always had to wear thick stockings and long sleeves, even in summer, when she was a little girl, as Catholic girls aren't supposed to show any bare skin.

"For goodness sake," she used to say, "A little girl. Imagine having to be covered up like that when you're only six or seven."

I must say that it's one of the few things to which we are in agreement.

The only religious instructions I had was at school. We had this teacher. She had a moustache and she sprayed spit all over the pupils who sat in the front desks, like me, when she read from the bible.

It used to wake me up after she had droned me to sleep in the first place. It's enough to turn anyone away from religion.

One thing I do approve of, is that no one, pappie, not even Tonni

tries to convert me. They say I can go to church with them if I want to,  
but I don't have to.  
So I won't.

## Chapter Thirty-six

### Interlude

It's winter now. The farmer's fields have been flooded and have frozen over. The frozen fields are floodlit. In the evenings I skate. Racing. I'm a good racing skater. No fancy boots either. They haven't been invented yet. Wooden blocks with blades attached tied very tight, otherwise

you'd break an ankle, with cloth bands around my shoes. Off we go. Swishing along the ice at several kilometres per hour.

One night one of the floodlights fails. I fail to notice that that part of the field had been cordoned off and, as I race into the darkness, crashing into the rope barrier, I keel over backwards, cracking my head on the ice.

Bliss.

My time has come. I am to meet my maker. To sleep. Perchance to dream no more.

I hear bird song. Surely that's only a thing of comic strips.

But no, I do hear the twittering of birds.

Someone slaps my face.

"Word wakker. Op staan. Vooruit."

"Wake up. On your feet. Come on."

Someone tries to pull me onto my feet.

"Laat me slapen."

"Let me sleep."

I don't want to get up. I want to stay on the ice, to sleep.

Someone has other ideas. I try to focus. Hazy at first. My hero. He's an R.A.F. sergeant. Is the rank of sergeant acceptable to Tonni? Fuck her. He's trying to save my life. He's good looking too. He's still slapping my face. Tries to pull me upright. I give in, allow him walk me round the ice. Walk? Dragged along, more like it. I think he's left my legs behind. He slaps my face every time I nod off.

"Blijf wakker."

"Stay awake," he shouts at me.

I think he likes me.

With me apparently wide awake now, he takes me into the cabin for

hot chocolate.

There, in his company, unnoticed time passes.

The phone rings.

Yes, there's a phone in the cabin.

It's her.

"What the Hell do you think you're at. Do you know what time it is."

It's only ten o'clock, you stupid cow.

"You get home, now."

Yes mistress. Immediately.

The sergeant takes me home on the crossbar of his bike.

He delivers me to the front door. She slams it in his face.

Is she unreal. Or is she.

He probably saved my life. I suppose that would be enough to annoy

her. Or, not to be too melodramatic, he at least saved me from

concussion or something equally nasty, like frostbite.

Maybe that's what's happened to her. Maybe she cracked her head, and

there was no one to look out for her. That's why she is the way she is.

Anyway, whatever he saved me from is inconsequential to my father's

wife.

"Don't you dare see him again. A common sergeant indeed."

Wasn't your father a sergeant, madam. -

I didn't see him again.

I didn't dare.

You can imagine that when I met Louis I didn't make him known to

her. After all, Louis was a bricky. Thirty years of age. The older man

theme again. I met him while he was digging up the road.

I fell in love with a Belgian bricklayer. And this time I think it might have been for real.

A relationship of clandestine meetings. Not only due to my fear of being caught with this common working man, but also due to his fear of being found out, as he told me one early evening in the park. He confessed that he was a married man. He knew, that by doing so, he would lose me. My first love had to be honest, and broke my heart.

Despite my riotous upbringing, at seventeen I was naive enough to think that marriage was sacred. That it was for ever. That adultery was a crime to be punished by law. Sadly, I couldn't allow myself to continue this relationship with another woman's man.

Louis broke my heart.

In turn, I broke his, when I formed a relationship with a young friend of his. I couldn't love Chris as I had loved Louis, but he was nice and treated me as a gentleman would a lady.

Yet, once more, Tonni intervened. Chris wasn't good enough.

Transpired he was just a working class boy, studying to be a ship's engineer.

So was Jaap. Studying to be an engineer that is. However, unlike Chris who studied at college, Jaap was at private school.

Whereas Chris was a gentleman, Jaap was a bastard. But Jaap was upper class. So he had Tonni the snob's approval.

Chris never laid a finger on me. Jaap knocked me off his motorbike, into a ditch, and tried to rape me.

So much for the approved upper classes.

Jaap was so angry after I kicked him in the balls, and he couldn't have his way with me, that he crashed his motor bike.

The road was like a sheet of glass. He didn't give me time to lean with the bike when we turned a corner. The bike skidded. Fell on top of us. The safety bar, a triangular bar placed on either side of the handle bars, saved his arm and my leg.

Even at that, the bike had cut the several layers of clothes through which Jaap had hoped to rape me, slicing skin and bone.

Then there was the boy whose name I can't remember. Probably because he was not of my choosing. He was the son of one of my father's friends, which made him highly approved of, so far as Tonni was concerned.

One evening, after taking me to the cinema, he returned me home without even so much as a kiss. This gentlemanly behaviour encouraged me to invite him in for a cup of tea.

After all SHE approved of us going out. She had asked him to take me. So, why not.

She had taken herself off to bed with one of the recurring headaches from which she suffered. Boy, did she suffer, which goes to show that no one is let off scot free.

Whenever she took one of her headaches she walked about with her head wrapped in a head scarf, making her look even more stupid than

usual. At those times, God forgive me, it was my fervent wish that there was really something seriously wrong with her. Something which would cause her to drop dead at my feet.

Unfortunately, the headaches were more likely caused by the pressure of her constant scheming, as she managed to outlive my father by a hell of a long time.

Anyway, here we were about to have a cup of tea. I'd gone into the cupboard, which opened up against the living room door, to look for some biscuits. I was kneeling down to one of the lower shelves when the living room door crashed into the cupboard door, knocking me to the carpet.

Behold, an apparition from Hell.

It ranted. It raved. It accused us of all kinds of obscene behaviour, when all we were doing was drinking tea and hoping for a biscuit. So, what's so awful about that, eh?

"You're disgusting, Fucking like that in the living room."

She must've thought that he was some sort of contortionist.

I mean, he was at the other end of the room by the fire place, miles away from me, while I stood right next to her. Had she been normal she would have known it was a physical impossibility.

It didn't take too long for the boy to come to the obvious conclusion that he was in the company of the insane and, having recovered from

his inertia, he sidled past her out of the room and out of the front door, never to darken her doorstep again.

Living with that woman was becoming more and more unbearable.

Seeing my father's degradation and suffering at her hands, even more so. Perhaps I could have chosen to stay in the Netherlands with my grandmother, allowing me to visit my father from time to time.

But, strangely enough, this was one of the few times in my life when I needed my mother.

I had to go back.

Until the very last moment, Antonia displayed the type of person she

was. She was thoroughly evil, in thought and in deed, and had to have one last chance to prove it.

I was even more hurt, and even more confused than I had been at any time in the past. I had lost my brother, I was about to lose my country, my dream, and my father for the second time. I was about to return to the very thing which I had wished to leave behind. Yet, any second thoughts of staying, which I might have had, were soon to be dispelled for evermore by that insane woman.

My flight was scheduled for early morning, making it necessary for us to overnight in the Hague, at my father's digs where the landlady had been kind enough to let me have her daughter's room for that one night.

Once more I had dried my tears, on the verge of falling asleep, when I was startled by Tonni bursting into the room.

"Look at this," she yelled, holding a pair of shorts aloft.

"Look at this. Your father has been womanising again."

It didn't occur to her that paps might be more comfortable in civies when he finished work for the evening. That the shorts were all he could afford from the pittance she left him out of his wages.

I mean, shorts. Hardly the right kind of apparel to encourage a romantic relationship. Bloody sick cow, always ready to think the worst, ranting on all night long, depriving the whole household of sleep. Poor pappie, all embarrassed. At least I had a choice. Coward that I was, I was ready to desert him. After all my dreaming, I had come to a truly rude awakening.

## Chapter Thirty-seven

### Return Journey

With that last unhappy memory, Tonni's voice still screeching through my mind, I left my homeland to return to the country which I had hoped never to see again. The country which I would never call home. Scotland, which took decades to grow on me. Years of yearning. Years of grief. Years of a cash flow which wouldn't even allow me a fleeting visit.

During the years which followed, many an hour was spent in daydreams, in which I schemed on how I would rescue my father from that woman. Once I was grown up and able to face her head on I would take him away. I would give him the loving care which he so much deserved. We would be two, together for always.

Alas that this would never be. As always, I was too late. Always, too late. I never saw my father again after I waved him farewell at Schiphol. He was gone. All the beautiful things which had been bought to impress the neighbours remained behind. Without even a single reminder, there was nothing. Only memories. All I took with me was his dejected look and sad smile, and the guilt of my cowardly desertion of the only man I would ever love. After that all that remained of my

pappie were the odd letter and postcard which soon ceased, and were lost through time.

The strain of living with that woman took its toll. My pappie died twelve years later, at the age of fifty five. All that was left now was a futile love, and the letter from the solicitor which arrived six months after his death to inform me of my inheritance; or rather, his request to sign it over to Tonni.

My father took fifteen months to die. yet he was six months cold before it was deigned that his daughters should be notified. For more than a he year he lay in a hospital bed with his pain before he found peace. Not once, during those fifteen months had her conscience told her that I had a right to know, that I should be allowed one last glimpse of the man who fathered me. It never entered her mind, or that of her solicitor, that we should know the cause of his death. If it did, the thought was discarded. Many years would pass before I discovered that cancer had taken his life away. The cancer which, I am sure, she stoked up in him. The constant worry of living with that woman, and the grief she brought him, were surely the cause of his death.

Why did pappie, who had been so alive when he and mammie were together, wait fifteen months before allowing death to take him away? Why did he linger so long, when three months had been his life expectancy? Did he extend his suffering in the hope that I would come

to him? That we could have had just a little while together before he left me for ever?

How sweet Tonni's revenge must have been, knowing that even that

last comfort had been denied to me. Unknown to her, one comfort did console me. Because I never saw my father dead, and refused the money he left me, I have kept him alive. For ever, alive. For me he still lives. And the day dream is now a part of the night.

Pappie is close to me when I sleep. I can sense him beside me, so near to me while I relax in the night. Yet, no matter how hard I search I am unable to find him. Even though I know he is there, no matter how hard I search, I never reach the place he calls from.

In my dream he is alive. Many times I go to call him on the telephone. But, something is always wrong. The phone won't dial. The line is dead. I can't reach the sound of his voice. The voice which I need to reach, so much.

From night he moves into day. From dreams he has come to fill my daylight hours with his presence. I know that he watches over me. People with second sight see him. They describe him to me, wearing his army uniform, as he looks at them from over my shoulder. And, if I turn round I'll be able to see him. But I know that if I do, he won't be there. Yet he remains with me, for ever more.

## Chapter Thirty-eight

### Childhood Ends

As the little plane landed at Prestwick Airport, I could see my mother and the Major waiting for me.

I had such a need to be with her. Yet, on seeing her, I felt nothing. As beautiful as ever, she seemed as cold towards me as she had always been. Seven months I'd been away. A lifetime of wishes and dreams had

been broken beyond repair, and nothing had changed.

There were the same quarrels. The same restrictions. The same dislike for this country and for the dirty city to which I'd returned. Except that now I was more confused and unhappy than I had been seven months previously. The ache inside me was now even more intense. A screaming, helpless pain which made me want to die.

I distanced myself from my mother. It was like living with a stranger. I couldn't talk to her as I had done before. In the past I had been able to confide in her when something troubled me. Like the sex thing. Now I couldn't tell her about the discharge which was becoming worse. I know that had I talked to her she would have told me it was normal. But I could no longer communicate with her.

I was still too much of a child. I didn't realise that I'd grown up, and

was suffering women's problems. Instead, I fretted needlessly, allowing it to become an obsession.

When I had mentioned it to Tonni she'd said, "You've caught venereal disease from your darkie boyfriend."

I didn't know you had to have intercourse to catch it. I thought I'd caught it from touching and kissing. Or, perhaps, I had inherited it from my father. She should have consoled me, instead of aggravating the problem. I wonder, if she as an adult, was aware of how much agony untruths cause the child. More likely, had she known, she wouldn't have cared.

The doctor said, "It's just nerves."

"Don't worry," he said

I'd never heard of anyone having a nervous condition down there. So I wasn't consoled. I suffered agonies before I realised the symptoms

went with the cause. My illness had been caused by Tonni's sick mind.  
Once I accepted that, the problem disappeared.

The olds wanted me to go to university. I rebelled.

I wanted to be a lawyer. But, why bother with Uni. As a foreigner I wasn't allowed to practise law in this country. So I opted for a job which would give me a degree of independence.

Mother insisted, came with me to the employment office.

Nothing was good enough for her offspring.

Id never get a job at this rate. For goodness sake, the way she went on. It was an embarrassment.

At some point Id just had it. Hell, I was eighteen.

"Why don't you go away and leave me alone."

I can still remember the look on her face, as I left her standing alone at the corner of the street, while I stomped off in a determined temper. And I still remember how hurt she was when I returned home to tell her, with great satisfaction, that Id managed to get a job. All by myself.

Another turning point in life. Or was it a punishment for wanting to hurt my mother. Had I not taken that job, I wouldn't have met the man I was doomed to marry. I wouldn't have suffered for the following nineteen years. But, as I said, that's another story.

I was eighteen years old when the pain in my legs began. The pain which floored me with its aching grip. The pain with which I waged war for the remainder of my life.

"It's psychosomatic," said the doctor. "After effect of the car accident when you were a child."

Psychosomatic, his dick. It took them eight years to diagnose rheumatism, and by then it was too late.

I was eighteen when I left home.

I couldn't take it any longer. I was eighteen, working, and they still

treated me like a child. I wasn't allowed to do this. I wasn't allowed to do that. I had to be home at ten o'clock, which meant that when I went to the pictures I missed the end of the film. I was almost engaged, and they still treated me like a little girl.

It was the final straw.

I told my mother that in future I would stay out late. I told her how much I would pay for my keep. I told her a lot of things.

Whatever her faults, mother had never slapped me, until now. At some point during my tirade she lashed out in temper. The shock brought an immediate reaction. I stopped in mid stream. She was as shocked as I had been at the slap, when I came home the following evening to inform her I was moving out.

I had found myself a room, and I was GOING.

So I left home. Not to return to my father. Nor to the land which I loved. But to make my own way in life.

Yet home, bad as it had been, was a hard place to shake off.

It's been so long now, yet still the dreams won't leave me.

Sometimes I wander the town. Up and down streets which are strange to me. I know the house is there somewhere. But I can't find it. I can't find the home which I shared with my parents, my brothers, my sisters, who have all become strangers to me.

Other times I am inside the house which now stands derelict. Cold

and empty, as I run through its corridors and up stairways.

In the darkness I sense people in the house. I hear voices, rustling movements of strangers. Only strangers. Not my parents. I can never find my parents. They are gone. They have deserted me.

So it was, that I left a confused childhood, only to find the adult world even more confusing. I had tried to run away from the child. But the child refuses to die. And the dreams won't cease. The dreams will never cease.

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