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Coetzer, Diane

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Making The Invisible Visible

By Diane Coetzer

Introduction

As I was preparing to write this essay, my brother-in-law vanished at sea while delivering a catamaran from Cape Town to Phuket.[1] The incident, traumatic and ongoing, brought into sharp relief the most challenging practical aspect of having undertaken this Masters degree at the start of 2013. For more than three months since a sense of unease caused me to ask my partner, Jeremy, when he had last heard from his brother, I've had to put all non-urgent demands aside and focus on driving an effort to locate Anthony and his crew of two while trying to keep up with the deadlines of paying work and the needs of my four children. For the umpteenth time in more than two years, *Invisible Fingerprints* has had to patiently wait while my energies were directed elsewhere.

But the disappearance of the yacht touched on something even more important that I have grappled with over the MA process. That is, how to tell a family story through the genre of creative or literary non-fiction (more on the distinction between these two later); how to elevate the personal and intimate beyond being just a keepsake for an extended family group; how to draw in readers far outside a close, familiar circle in a way that will make them want to curl up in a chair and spend the whole of Sunday immersed in my words.

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[11] Contact was lost with Anthony Murray, Reg Robertson and Jaryd Payne on January 18th in the Indian Ocean after Cyclone Bansi passed close to their last known position. I reported the catamaran missing on February 12th and neither the crew nor the vessel have been found as yet.

In a drawer in my cupboard in my Johannesburg bedroom I have a small digital recorder in an ordinary blue reading glasses case. It was given to me by Anthony late in 2014. It is the first in a series of voice diaries that I asked him to make about the past twenty-five years that he has been a yacht delivery skipper. For the past three or so years we have talked about writing a book about his adventures and exploits, on land, but mostly at sea. I told him how I wanted to capture the life – the insanity – of an uncommon individual who lives for the next time he can set out into the ocean, on a twelve metre long yacht, and head towards a destination thousands of kilometres away. I didn't need any prompting to write about a man who, once he has handed over yet another multi-million rand yacht to its owners in pristine condition, goes back to his land life of excess – too much drink and many women filling in the hours until his next job that takes him into the only place on earth that Anthony respects. "I'm imagining the book to be called *Sex & Drink & the Sea*," I remember saying to him during one of our regular Sunday morning phone-calls, referring to the 1977 Ian Dury song. "It must describe your wildness but also how you put that aside when you're on the ocean."

He laughed when he heard the description. "That's it," the Pirate (as my children call their uncle) said on the line from his Cape Town flat. I told him that I would start work on our book once I*nvisible Fingerprints* was complete. What I had never counted on was Anthony becoming invisible before I had put the finishing touches to my Masters manuscript and begun the task of writing this essay. How could I ever have know that his literal fingerprints would be untraceable, lost in the unfathomably large body of water that he loved and knew?

Setting sail

What matters for the dialectician is having the wind of world history in his sails. Thinking for him means: to set the sails. It is the way they are set that matters. Words are his sails. The way they are set turns them into concepts.

Walter Benjamin. *The Crisis of a Novel*.

The biggest initial challenge in writing *Invisible Fingerprints* was to rid myself of the journalistic impulse that has driven my written work for almost thirty years. During that time, when I was first a political journalist and then a feature writer, I have always negotiated my writing around facts gleaned from events, interviews and my own observation. I've also learnt to write fast and lean, the latter particularly affected by the changing format from broadsheet to tabloid and digital requiring an ever diminishing word count.

I knew from the start that I would have to "set my sails" in a very different way with my first book and it was evident that I had a lot of work to do in this direction with my very first submission, Chapter One.

I had chosen as my starting place the restoration of Henri Matisse's *The Parakeet and the Mermaid* by Andre van Oort, an art on paper restorer based in the Dutch city of Haarlem. I chose it for two reasons: Van Oort — the son of my grandmother's cousin — represents the third generation of paper restorers in my maternal Dutch family and is still working. The Matisse is also the most valuable work of art that has felt my family's invisible fingerprints —– both in monetary terms and because of the ongoing importance of Matisse's life work (a fact borne out by the record-breaking *Henri Matisse: The Cut-Out*s at the Tate Modern Gallery in London in 2014, with a total of 562,622 visitors finding themselves standing before the six-panelled piece and many others in the most comprehensive exhibition dedicated to this crucial phase of Matisse's artistic life). [2]

The chapter came in at just over one thousand two hundred words – the length of a decent journalistic article. I believed that it had achieved just the right balance of Van Oort's personal story with the huge historical responsibility that he carried in restoring the background of a work of art made up of six hundred and thirty four separate pieces of paper. I knew it was a little on the short side but it felt like a comfortable read.

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[2] Brown, Mark. 2014. September 15. Matisse The Cut-Outs. *The Guardian*.

It didn't take long for my group to put me right, decrying the lack of vivid detail about the restoration as well as the specifics of that period of Matisse's life that is known as the Cut-Out Period. "Go deeper, give us more," was the recurring advice from everyone present. "This needs to be expanded to move more slowly with more detail about both Matisse and Van Oort's thoughts about the task," my supervisor, Professor Gerrit Olivier, wrote on the print out.

At first, I was terrified and, having had a successful and award-winning career as a journalist, had to steel myself against the critical comments that were sometimes levelled at my work. But it very quickly established a conscious effort in my writing to veer away from the journalistic short-cuts that have become entrenched over decades. Still, it took me a while for my vigilance to also become entrenched. For instance, back in August 2013, in Chapter Three, I wrote that "I came to know about the Rijksmuseum when I was a young girl living thousands of miles away, in the small village of Umhlanga Rocks". My readers wanted to know more. When did I actually hear about it? Was it possible to write a specific scene about this moment?

A flash fiction course run for the Masters group by Mark Behr in May 2013 gave me some much-needed confidence. I had not done any fiction writing since I was at school but I found myself embracing the task that Behr had set for the group: to write a piece of fiction that was no longer than 1001 words and that included or responded to the phrase *On the Greyhound between Jo'burg and Potch.* I titled the piece "Discharged" and it began, "From where I'm lying I can see the crest of a hill that's already showing the rusty stain of the approaching winter. The hospital is in a part of the city filled with houses stacked right next to each other, as if the proximity has a better chance of turning strangers into kindly neighbours who will come over with cake when an elderly relative dies."

Moving away from my habitual writing style also meant drawing on sources that ordinarily I would have resisted because they went against my journalistic instinct to work from direct observation or first-person interviews.

I confronted this most potently when writing about the German restorer Max Schweidler in Chapter Six as well as the early twentieth century Dutch artist and

cartoonist Albert Hahn, who became the focus of Chapter Fourteen. I had only decided to write fairly extensively on both when I was back in South Africa, after my second research trip to Holland in 2014. Unable to go to source material in Berlin and Amsterdam, I had to turn to the internet to get to know these two 'characters' and their work in paper restoration and the Sociaal-democratische Arbeiderspartij respectively. I was cautious at first and, had I been able to get a grant, would have travelled back to Europe to undertake my own research.

But I also had to accept that, used with caution, the internet can be a reliable place of source material and can offer its own, unexpected findings. One of these was when I discovered a drawing that I had been desperately searching for in the Rijksmuseum's online portal. "I'm thousands of miles away from the Rijksmuseum library when I finally get to see the Albert Hahn drawing," became my opening lines for the chapter about Hahn and my great-grandfather, Adrianus Marchal.

Writing a full-length work of literary non-fiction also required something more fundamental from me. For the past twenty years of my journalism career, I have written about music and the people who make music. In my long-form journalism for the now defunct *Rolling Stone South Africa,* I had taken particular care to keep myself in the background of whatever person I happened to be writing about, following the journalistic ethic of not foregrounding oneself. I have felt increasingly uncomfortable with the growing move towards writing where the writer mistakes his or her experience of the artist or the music as primary to the story.

It was therefore no surprise to me that – aside from the practicalities of making writing time as a mother of four children and a working writer — the next biggest challenge in writing *Invisible Fingerprints* turned out to be writing myself into the story with confidence.

For American writer and teacher Phillip Lopate, turning oneself into a character in personal essays and memoir is not an indulgence. It's in fact nothing short of a necessity. "On the Necessity of Turning Oneself into a Character" is the title of Chapter Two of the renowned essayist's book *To Show and Tell.* "The art of characterization comes down to establishing patterns of habits and actions for the

person you are writing about and introducing variations into the system. In this respect, building a character is a pedagogic model because you are teaching the reader what to expect." [3]

In the beginning I was a reluctant teacher and a wallflower character. When I first started crystalising the idea for this book, during my regular early morning walks around Johannesburg's Zoo Lake with a trio of my close friends, I was sure the restorers and their restorations would make up the bulk of the writing. If I imagined myself at all, it was as gentle guide through the research and interviews with people like Idelette van Leeuwen, Peter Poldervaart and Annelies van Bekkum.

But it soon became clear that the book's overarching structure would emerge from my personal journey. It was a journey that began with the need to find out the truth about *The Night Watch*. It took in several years, many different 'characters', multiple visits to the Netherlands and a large number of artefacts found both in South Africa and Holland — and it meant staying the long course.

My background as a journalist wasn't all lost. Addressing the topic of the personal essay, Lopate says " … you can never assume that our readers will know a thing about your background, regardless of how many times you have explained it in previous essays. So you must become deft at inserting that information swiftly — I might say 'I was born in Brooklyn, New York, of working class parents' - and not worry about the fact that it may be redundant to your regular readers, if you're lucky enough to have any. In one essay you may make a big thing of your personal background and very little of your religious training; in another, just the opposite; but in each essay it would be a good idea to tell the reader both, simply because this sort of information will help to build you into a character. In this sense, the personal writer must be a like a journalist, who respects the obligations to get in the basic orientating facts – who, what, where, when, and why – as close to the top of every story as possible." [4] This orientation was woven into much of *Invisible Fingerprints* but is

[3] Lopate, Phillip. 2013. *To Show and Tell. The Craft of Literary Nonfiction.* Free Press. Page 44.
[4] Lopate, Phillip. 2013. *To Show and Tell. The Craft of Literary Nonfiction*. Free Press. Pages 51 – 52.

mostly contained in Chapter Three, where I describe my childhood in Umhlanga Rocks.

There was no getting away from the fact that setting my sails right in the writing of *Invisible Fingerprints* entailed entering the realm of the novelist and using techniques of fiction in my writing. I was tentative to start off with but gradually became more confident in using description, scene-setting, interiority of characters, action, suspense, plot and other devices of the novel.

There were many aspects of *Invisible Fingerprints* that required me to re-enter the past imaginatively, for instance in Chapter Eight, where I evoke the journey my grandmother took from Rotterdam to Cape Town on board a ship, using a combination of her original writings and photographs as well as imagined description ("She joins a crowd of young girls in floral frocks, soaking up the sun on deck chairs set in front of a large striped canvas curtain that shields the ship's working areas from its passengers").

I reached the outer limits of this kind of writing in Chapter Twenty, describing the day that *The Night Watch* was first removed from the Rijksmuseum. I drew elements of the chapter from photographs of my great-grandfather, Adrianus Marchal, as well as others taken in September 1939 when the great movement of art out of the Netherland's museums had begun, ahead of a threatened invasion by Nazi Germany. I also had two invaluable references books – one, *Kunst in schuilkelders,* written contemporaneously and the other, *De Kluis In De Sint-Pietersberg*, first published in 2008 and recommended to me by the guide of a tour that my mother and I took into the caves during a two day trip to Maastricht. Using these source items, combined with fictional and imaginative techniques, I was able to write the scene that is, in many ways, the centrepiece of my book. Like a restorer presented with a torn and flocked artwork, I had to go back into the past to complete the picture that I wanted to evoke for the readers of *Invisible Fingerprints.*

Restoration

The theme of restoration runs through *Invisible Fingerprints* like a wire line that connected paper made in the same mould in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Most prominently, restoration provides the framework of a story focused ultimately on the position of restoration and restorers in my own family history

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live," Joan Didion wrote in the title essay of her 1979 collection, *The White Album*. The famed essayist was referring to the mechanism through which individuals survive "the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience". "We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices."

Story-telling also drives families and mine was no exception. The objective aim of my Masters project was to interrogate what I described in my proposal as the most powerful story that was told to me during my childhood – how my great-grandfather had not only helped restore Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* but had assisted in rolling it up and hiding it from the Nazis during their occupation of the Netherlands.

In Chapter Three, I write about how this particular story shaped me as a teenager growing up in apartheid South Africa as the daughter of two white liberals. From that perspective, the heroism, historical significance and righteousness of my great-grandfather's actions assumed a mythic stature. As I wrote in my proposal, "In doing so it cemented an emotional connection with him, my grandmother and the Netherlands that gave me spiritual comfort and a feeling of importance as I grew older in an especially repressive country."

At the onset, I imagined that focusing my book on the restorers would provide an element of distance. To this end, I focused on two actual restorations, both of which vividly illustrate my intention to bring to the fore the role of the art restorer in the current art world, which Sarah Thornton's ethnographic book *Seven Days In The Art World* describes as "a kind of alternative religion". The restoration of Matisse's

The Parakeet and the Mermaid as described in Chapter One and the restoration of the Nova Zembla prints as described in Chapter Five additionally were able to show the weight of history that rest on the shoulders of restorers who know that one wrong choice can result in an artwork being lost forever. As I moved through the writing, however, it became clear that the thread of restoration wouldn't be confined solely to the work of the three generations of restorers in my family and the supporting cast of Idelette van Leeuwen, Peter Poldervaart and Annelies van Bekkum.

Adriana Marchal

It is the men in my family who do the physical work of restoration in *Invisible Fingerprints* but I was fortunate to have a diligent recorder of the family history in the form of my grandmother, Atty Marchal-Reuvers. She kept visual diaries in the form of carefully numbered *Plakboeken*, (scrapbooks) with photos, clippings, postcards and other memorabilia. More importantly, Atty almost filled an A4 book of writing, which she titled "Memoirs". This was written from around 2008, when she turned ninety, until 2011, when her failing eyesight prevented her from continuing. In an entry dated 20-4-2011 she writes, "Dear family. This is as far as I can go on writing. It is not that my memory fails me but my eye sight is bad. Did I write that I went to the eye specialist? Nothing can be done about it. My right one is a dud. My left one is deteriorating. Had an injection to stop it deteriorating further. I am not worrying. Given up embroidery. Did think about that."

The entry is one of the few times that my grandmother mentions her personal plight. For most of the densely filled pages, the writing is made up of rich detail about her early life in Utrecht and Amsterdam and her move to South Africa just before the outbreak of the Second World War, and afterwards. At times she cross-referenced photographs in the numbered plakboek for increased illumination of something she was writing about. Every now and then there is a contemporaneous interruption, helpfully titled "Interruption", like the time her son-in-law's mother was attacked "while feeding the birds". "He tried to throttle her and scratched her arms and legs severely", she writes, ending the few paragraphs of description with this observation, "It is all very sad."

In one of those unexpected twists of life, as I was writing about my grandmother's life in *Invisible Fingerprints,* relying on her lively, detailed descriptions (like that of the strange "aunt" who came to live with the Marchal family in Chapter Seven) she was becoming increasingly frail. Over the three years that I researched and wrote the book, she moved from her own small flat in the retirement village into assisted living and, now, at the age of ninety six, into frail care. My mother, who had painstakingly typed out Atty's handwritten memoirs to ease my research, phoned in with increasingly hard-to-hear reports on my grandmother's health. It struck me that *Invisible Fingerprints* had become a loving restoration of my grandmother's life.

Stories We Tell

In the interview with *The Guardian* to talk about her powerful documentary feature, *Stories We Tell*, Canadian filmmaker Sarah Polley says "Telling stories is our way of coping, a way of creating shape out of a mess. It binds everyone together." In writing this book, I set out to use a story central to my extended family as the backbone.

In the writing of *Invisible Fingerprints,* restoration became the meta metaphor, as it were, for an act of making whole a family history that, like most others, was fractured, skimmed of detail, and made up of a remembering that grew more opaque over the years. This was compounded by the geographical distance between the Netherlands and South Africa and the back and forth movement of my grandparents, Adriana Marchal and Julius Reuvers, between the two countries. My restoration of the past was hampered by what I *wasn't* able to unearth about the apotheosis of the book: my great-grandfather's role in safely storing Rembrandt's masterpiece, *The Night Watch,* away from the Nazi occupiers. I had thought that there would be letters between my great-grandparents in Amsterdam and my grandmother in Johannesburg that would illuminate the "real story" and provide me with personal details about how my great-grandparents survived the Hunger Winter, how they felt about their children being away from them and, most importantly, my great-grandfather's work at the Rijksmuseum. I quickly realised that I hadn't properly assimilated the historical events that govern this part of my book: the occupation of the Netherlands and the

war meant that the simple act of writing and posting letters was impossible. This meant that I had to fill in the gaps with historical research and the techniques of novel writing, most importantly in providing descriptions and writing scenes of events at which I was not present.

In fact, in restoring the family story I needed to summon all the elements that my great-grandfather would have needed to work on a print: contemplation of how to go about the work, gathering up the courage to make that first start and then carefully working through the process. But there was one thing that made my writing vastly different. Whereas Andre van Oort in his restoration of the Matisse was working off a structure that had been pre-defined by the artist, I had no such guide.

Structure

Unlike the novelists in my group, my contributions were scattershot, a new chapter most frequently holding no immediate connection to the previous one. It was, I have no doubt, sometimes an annoyance for some participants to have to attempt to figure out where a piece of writing fitted in.

At the very onset the only structural guide that I had was that I did not want to work chronologically. But I had no idea of what followed that decision. Where should I begin the book? Where should it end? Which storylines or threads should I follow? It wouldn't be a romantic stretch of the imagination to say that I felt, at times, like a restorer contemplating his or her plan for a damaged artwork.

This approach didn't always work. Chapter Nineteen focused on the role of Wil van Oort, my grandmother's cousin and the second generation of art restorers in my family. With no definite writing plan for the chapter, I was momentarily fascinated by a list of how members of the Molenaar family died that I had come across in my research and decided to include it in the chapter.

Here's what I wrote about a page into the chapter:

"Scrummaging amongst the piles on my desk, I also found an undated Familie Molenaar document. It is noted as being based on the memories of my grandmother and her cousin, Jan Visser, one of Marie Molenaar's six sons. Along with his brother Herman, Jan became a doctor and the two typed pages detailing the Molenaar family tree are bursting with the sort of medical information that a diligent doctor taking a patient's medical background would ask for. Next to Annie Molenaar's name there are details about my grandparents who 'trouwde met de handschoen' and my grandfather's wartime injuries as well as the age — 91 91 jaar! — that Atty was persuaded by her children to live permanently in South Africa after my grandfather's death. The entry also notes Frederick's death, at seventy five, from COPD with a short explanation, 'Heeft heel lang straf gerookt'. As I worked my way through each entry, I was startled to read that, unlike Annie herself who died aged ninety one, not many people in my maternal great-grandmother's family met their end because of old age. For a brief moment I re-examined the comment that I casually toss off when the matter of my grandmother's age comes up in conversation: 'She's ninety-five, can you believe it. People in my Dutch family live until a very old age.' The diseases that were scrupulously listed by Dr Visser include cardiacarcinoom (my great-great grandfather Hermanus Molenaar), hersentumor (Annie's sister Ger who died in the 'full bloom of her life'), emphysema (brother Jan, aged seventy nine), longcarcinoom (brother Adriaan), longembolie (sister Marie) and tuberculose (brother Wim). Other details sprung out of the pages like long-lost telegrams from the past. I learnt that my grandmother was Gerritje and Hermanus' second oldest grandchild. She followed her cousin Herman, who, like his father Dirk, became a hoofdmachinist for the NS. I also read about how another one of Tryntje and Annie's many brothers, Herman (another one!), married (and later divorced) Jo van Oort, Tryntje's sister-in-law. This Herman and his family moved between Apeldoorn, Utrecht and Den Haag where he became a councillor for the Communistische Partij. Then there was Adriaan's wife Nel Mantel who was killed in 1991 because of a misunderstanding with a sneltram while Oege Nieuwenhuizen, who married Riek Molenaar, is remembered as a waiter with a drinking problem."

I found my grandmother's cousin on her father's side as meticulous in his medical world as the restorer's on her mother's are in theirs. But on a second reading, what was a riveting read to me was, I realised, an unneccesary diversion from the aim of that chapter — to describe why Wil van Oort (whose connection to me comes through the Molenaar family) is still spoken of in the halls of the Rijksmuseum today, long after he retired and, later, died. It deviated from my desire to write a literary work that outsiders would be absorbed by and so I excised it from the chapter.

The experience with the Molenaar family medical list underlined another challenge: what to choose to write about out of a huge amount of material that is available to many non-fiction writers. I wanted to write more about my grandfather's experiences as a Dutch soldier in the Second World War. Why would a reader *not* want to know that he had, for some time during his conscription, been the driver for the Dutch Prime Minister in exile in London and then read about all the rich details that came with that part of my grandfather's life? But in discussion with my supervisor, I decided that this part of his experience as a Dutch soldier didn't pertain strongly enough to the overall narrative and so left it out.

Writing in an intuitive way means that the story creates its own set of priorities as the form and structure is exposed by the process of writing, as opposed to proceeding according to a predetermined plan. For instance, an unexpected – but important – part of the final work came to be the significance of socialism to my great-grandparents and many other members of my Dutch family. When I started out writing, if I thought of this at all, it was as a minor storyline. But as I fleshed out my great-grandfather as a 'character' by using the devices of fiction, it became increasingly obvious that this could not be accomplished in any full way without much more detail about his lifelong devotion to socialist principles, as detailed in Chapter Fifteen.

Undertaking a Masters while working a full day and being a mother to four children wasn't easy. There were times when I just didn't feel I could go on with the task I set myself but, again following an intuitive feel about where I could go with *Invisible Fingerprints*, I found myself writing *about* the process of writing. Chapter

Sixteen starts with these words, "By mid-November 2014, the task of capturing my great-grandfather's story began to feel overwhelming."

I momentarily checked myself for self-indulgence (a recurring step in my writing process that I attribute to my career as a journalist) and was relieved when I saw that writing about my process echoed that of other writers I admire, including W.G. Sebald. In *The Emigrants* he writes, "During the winter of 1990/1991, in the little free time I had (in other words, most at the so-called weekend and at night), I was working on the account of Max Ferber given above. It was an arduous task. Often I could not get on for hours or days at a time, and not infrequently I unravelled what I had done, continuously tormented by scruples that were taking tighter hold and steadily paralysing me. These scruples concerned not only the subject of my narrative, which I felt I could not do justice to, no matter what approach I tried, but also the entire questionable business of writing." [5]

I had grappled with where to begin and where to end *Invisible Fingerprints*. It wasn't deliberate but the answer turned out to be Matisse's *The Parakeet and The Mermaid*, with Chapter One detailing Andre van Oort's painstaking restoration of the masterpiece and the final chapter — Chapter Twenty One – describing how I took my children to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam to view the work. In this, and without intending to do so at the outset, the past and present come into harmony within this work of non-fiction.

Genre

When I submitted my proposal for *Invisible Fingerprints,* I had not yet come across the writings of Philip Lopate, the American essayist and teacher. The proposal I wrote was based on the genre of creative non-fiction as defined by Lee Gutkind in Y*ou Can't Make This Stuff Up*. For Gutkind the genre can be described as the

[5] Sebald, W.G. *The Emigrants*. Vintage Books London. Page 230.

"literature of reality". "The banner of the magazine I'm proud to have founded and I continue to edit, *Creative Nonfiction*, defines the genres simply, succinctly, and accurately as 'true stories well told', And that, in essence, is what creative nonfiction is all about."

Gutkind goes on to say, "The words 'creative' and 'nonfiction' describe the form. The word 'creative' refers to the use of literary craft, the techniques fiction writers, playwrights, and poets employ to present nonfiction - factually accurate prose about real people and events - in a compelling, vivid, dramatic manner. The goal is to make nonfiction stories read like fiction so that your readers are as enthralled by fact as they are by fantasy. But the stories are true." [6]

Within this approach, I worked hard to evoke scenes where I had no direct personal knowledge or insights, among them my grandmother's arrival at Johannesburg Park Station (Chapter Nine) and the Marchal family's relocation to Amsterdam when my great-grandfather was appointed the second paper restorer at the Rijksprentenkabinet.

But in the process of writing without structure, I realised that there were other aspects of non-fiction that I was adhering to that bring parts of *Invisible Fingerprints*, I hope, closer to Lopate's description of literary nonfiction.

"One reason I prefer it (*literary non-fiction*) is because it embeds the work in a tradition and a lineage. Instead of implying this is something new, it says this type of writing has been around for a long, long time. In English literature, there is the great tradition of the English essay, with Samuel Johnson, Hazlitt and Lamb, Robert Louis Stevenson and de Quincey, Matthew Arnold, McCauley, Carlisle, Beerbohm, and on into the twentieth century, with Virginia Woolf and George Orwell. By saying you write literary nonfiction, you're saying that you're part of that grand parade. Creative nonfiction is somewhat distortedly being characterized as nonfiction that reads like fiction. Why can't nonfiction be nonfiction? Why does it have to tart itself up and be something else? I make no apologies for the essay form, for the memoir form, or for

[6] Gutkind, Lee. 2012. *You Can't Make This Stuff Up*. Page 34.

any kind of literary nonfiction. These are genres that have been around for a long time, and we don't have to apologize for them, or act like they're new fads when they're not. A colleague pointed out that James Frey, in his defense, said memoir is a new genre. He said there aren't as many rules as there were when Hemingway and Fitzgerald were writing fiction. This is total nonsense because, in fact, Hemingway and Fitzgerald both wrote nonfiction as well. Frey showed his ignorance. Nonfiction is a very old genre. Go back to The Confessions of St. Augustine. For so long, individuals have attempted to understand how one lives and what one is to make of one's life."[7]

In my rejection of strict boundaries in writing my book, I felt drawn to Lopate's assessment of the genre as well as his emphasis on current non-fiction writing having emerged, not in a vacuum, but out of a very long and respectable literary lineage.

It is in my memoir writing, which is woven throughout *Invisible Fingerprints,* that I realised I was coming closer to Lopate's belief that "what makes me want to keep reading a nonfiction text is the encounter with a surprising well-stocked mind as it takes on the challenge of the next sentence, paragraph, and thematic problem it has set for itself."[8]

. Chapter Seventeen, which links up the assassination of filmmaker Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam East, where both my grandmother and grandfather's families lived, with contemporary politics, a contemporary exploration of the area by my mother and I, and my great-grandfather's socialism is an example of where I have attempted to achieve Lopate's benchmark.

In my proposal, I noted that "the biggest challenge that I face is in … knitting together the idea of identity and stories within a family with both history and an aspect of the art world (telling the stories of those who work behind-the-scenes to conserve art for future generations) that is integral to its ongoing relevant and vibrancy." I resolved this in the process of writing (which I have detailed in the section on Structure in this essay) as the movement from past to present gained its

[7] Lopate, Phillip. *To Show And Tell.* Free Press. Page 16.
[8] Lopate, Phillip.*To Show And Tell*. Free Press. Page 22

own rhythm. By threading through my own experience of tracking the truth about *The Night Watch* as a memoir element of the work, I allowed a personal 'detective story' to become the underpinning foundation of my book. There was no straightforward movement in the writing, or genre imperative, to guide me. As I unearthed new aspects of the story, like the artworks given by my great-grandfather to the Rijksmuseum that I write about in Chapter Fourteen, it gave me a new way of looking at the past and a different way of entering the present. "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again," writes Walter Benjamin in *On The Concept Of History*. He wasn't necessarily referring to personal history but Benjamin's belief in history being non-linear, as not being continuous, felt like some kind of guide for me when asked about my genre, structure and process. [9]

In taking an approach that didn't adhere to strict genre guidelines I was also inspired by Edmund de Waal's *The Hare With Amber Eyes,* which proved how supple a genre non-fiction can be. In an interview with *The Guardian* De Waal describes his book as being "about loss and diaspora and about the survival of objects", adding that "eventually I realised it is actually about identity: what do you know about who you are? And what kind of stories do families tell about themselves?" [10]

A more recent publication that again reveals the malleability of the genre and the appetite amongst today's readers for books that don't strictly adhere to genre is *H Is For Hawk* by Helen Macdonald. Like De Waal, who won the Costa Book Award for Biography, Macdonald's 2014 book about raising a goshawk after the sudden death of her father has earned critical acclaim, awards (including the 2014 Samuel Johnson Prize) and best-selling status.

In an audio interview with The Guardian, the author describes her approach to *H Is For Hawk*'s genre thus: "I think it's three things. I hope. There's the nature writing, there's the memoir and then there's the biography. I wanted to play around stylistically and formally with that as one of the things that grief does is really shatter the idea of a narrative. At the beginning of the book I have a chapter which is fairly

[9] Benjamin, Walter. 2009. *On The Concept of History*. Classic Books America.
[10] Laity, Paul. 2011. Edmund De Waal: A life in arts. *The Guardian*.

straightforward nature writing and then there is a chapter which is grief memoir and then there is a chapter which is a literary biography. As the book goes on all those different sorts of genres tussle and fight with each other. There is an energy that the book gets I hope from those three genres being brought into such close conversation."

Like *H Is For Hawk, Invisible Fingerprints* began following a personal crisis, as detailed in the book's Prologue. Like Macdonald's work, my book is also part memoir, part art writing, part fiction. It's a genre that is not a genre in any strictly defined sense and is part of a new generation of non-fiction that has a significant readership base globally.

The growth of non-fiction internationally is echoed in South Africa with Cape Town academic Hedley Twidle describing it as an area where authors are thriving. "Reading the Alan Paton Award for Non-Fiction list against the Sunday Times Fiction Prize for the last ten years, who would deny that in terms of ambition, risk, and sheer writerly work, the non-fiction winners comprise the more compelling and influential body of texts from southern Africa?" Twidle asks in an article for *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*. "Put another way: when the imperatives of testimony and the demand for a literature of witness were at their strongest, the writings of the Nobel laureates Nadine Gordimer and J. M. Coetzee were deemed most adequate to the task (at least by national, and then international prize committees). Yet in the decompression of the post-apartheid, or post-anti-apartheid moment, when it would seem that authors should have had more freedom to write what they liked, there has been a marked return to texts marked by topicality, immediacy, accountability and verifiability."

Twidle is not alone in his belief that non-fiction occupies an increasingly important role in South African literature. In a 2011 essay in *Current Writing* titled "Creative non-fiction: a conversation", Duncan Brown and Antjie Krog describe the genre as it manifests in South Africa as being "at the unstable fault line of the literary and the journalistic, the imaginative and the reportorial".

A recent example of South African non-fiction that adheres to this is Mark Gevisser's *Lost and Found In Johannesburg*. Described generally as a memoir, the

work is also a mix of history and commentary on contemporary South Africa that moves in a non-linear fashion and is guided by the author's desire to write a personal and social history of the city he grew up in. Jonny Steinberg's *A Man Of Good Hope* is another good example of a South African-rooted non-fiction book that lowers the barriers that often separate an author writing a biography (in this case the African odyssey of Somalian Asad Abdullahi) from his or her subject. Steinberg writes about his own visits to key locations in Abdullahi's life, like a truck stop in Dire Dawa, and the difficulties he faced in getting his main "character" to open up. "We were going around in circles, and so I changed the subject. But as I drove away from Blikkiesdorp that afternoon, it was still on my mind. Was Asad filtering away his subsequent, adult thoughts and simply reinhabiting his thirteen-year-old self?" [11]

In the way it straddles more than one country, *Invisible Fingerprints* is perhaps closer to the recently published memoir by Roger Cohen, *The Girl From Human Street.* The book sees *The New York Times* columnist travel from New York to Lithuania, England, Israel and South Africa in an attempt to "restore the past" and try and understand the mental illness that plagued his mother until her death. In this, Cohen's book is very much a search for identity and *Invisible Fingerprints* is no different.

Identity

If I were to select a starting point for this book it was when I began to investigate the imminent change in law in the Netherlands that would allow my siblings and I to become Dutch citizens. Late into the night, in the closing months of 2009, I would read obsessively about the progress of a lobby group formed in the Netherlands in 2004 that was challenging the Wet Op het Nederlandschap en Ingezetenschap. I knew that if the Stichting Ne(e)derlanderschap Ja! was successful in getting the legislative change they desired approved by the Dutch parliament we would be able to finally acquire the Dutch citizenship we had wanted for so long. I

[11] Steinberg, Jonny. 2014. *A Man Of Good Hope*. Page 80.

discovered that there was even a name for people like me and my sister and brothers. We were known as Latent Dutch.

"The issue of latent Dutch citizens concerns a group that was born of a Dutch mother before 1985, but who do not hold Dutch citizenship, because, at the time, Dutch citizenship could only be passed on via the father," is how an EU document describes people like me. "As of 1985, persons also acquire Dutch citizenship, if born of a Dutch mother and a foreign father. Despite the fact that there was a transitional scheme in place for this group at the time, not everyone made use of it. The new act regulates that those who are born before 1985 of a Dutch mother can as yet opt for Dutch citizenship. Grandchildren, i.e. persons whose parent(s) were born before 1985 to a Dutch mother, can also now acquire Dutch citizenship if their parent(s) opt for it or they can acquire it themselves through a declaration of option if the relevant parent has died. This, in the words of the government 'does justice to the basic principle that men and women are fully equal in nationality law.'"[12]

The more I read, the more amazed I became by the fact that a country that I knew as fundamentally liberal could have had only recognised the full equality of men and women in nationality law as recently as 1984. I tracked the final stages of the law, and started gathering the paperwork required for the application to the Dutch Embassy in Pretoria. It was extensive and included having to get a certified copy of my grandparent's marriage certificate from Jutphaas in Utrecht. When the certificate arrived, I was ecstatic. I spent hours feeling the smooth paper between my fingers and looking at the signatures on the official print out that had arrived unscathed through ordinary post – a remarkable feat in South Africa. Amongst the signatures was that of my great-grandfather and I began thinking about the stories that I had been told about my Dutch family when I was growing up. There were many, but by far the most prominent was about my Opa Adri, my grandmother's father, who, just a few years after he had signed his daughter's marriage certificate, had used those same hands to hide Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* from the greedy, grasping hands of the Nazis occupiers during the Second World War. Or so we were told by proud grandparents, aunts, uncles, and my mother.

[12] EUDO Citizenship. 2010. Netherlands: Revision of the Nationality Act.

During the writing process, it felt important to detail this process of becoming Dutch and the result is Chapter Ten of *Invisible Fingerprints*. When I presented the chapter to my Masters group, there was resistance from some members. They expressed an uncomfortableness with what they saw as the nationalism contained in it and urged me to rewrite that chapter. As a former political journalist, it wasn't hard for me to understand the dialectic that exists between veracity and political correctness, but I didn't rewrite the piece. Instead I used the chapter to examine the interconnectedness of my Dutch and South African identities by including a recounting of The Sharpeville Six, a story that I had reported on during my years working as a struggle reporter.

It was a disruptive and distressing act arising out of my work as a journalist working in South Africa that set me on a quest to explore the meaning of the Dutch identity associated with my past. I detail this event in the Prologue. Coming around the same time as my children and I became Dutch citizens, the money I received as a result of the incident propelled me into an investigation about the sustaining myth of my family (my great-grandfather and *The Night Watch*). But, looking back, I can see that being attacked in my dignity and privacy for something I had written disrupted my sense of identity as a South African, and sent me on a journey to find a safe haven. It brings to mind what T.S Eliot said about poetry. That it is "not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not an expression of personality, but an escape from personality" .[13] It would not be wrong to say that by writing *Invisible Fingerprints* I began journeying into the past to arrive at a different moment in the present. I found a form that was able to carry my private thoughts and emotions in a way that were then able to exist external to me.

My impulse to explore the Dutch part of my identity was also driven by my increasing uneasiness with the post-apartheid period. When it became clear to me during the writing process that personal memoir (primarily in the form of the detective work I was doing) would be an important aspect of my book, it was impossible not to include the disappointment I felt at the outcome of the liberation

[13] Eliot, T.S. 1976. *Selected Essays*. Page 21.

struggle, which I had been part of as both an anti-apartheid journalist and a minor activist. I touch on this in Chapter Sixteen and at various other places in the narrative — reflecting occasions when the incessant world of politics was impossible to ignore and, consequently, caused me to examine my identity as both a South African and a Netherlands citizen in a considered way.

In a recent newspaper article, Ivor Chipkin outlined the main thrust of his 2007 book *Do South Africans Exist?*. "The book explored the different ways that the unity of the nation was conceived, especially from within the anti-apartheid movement. It discussed several tendencies, including a civic tradition that sought to found the unity of the people on the basis of progressive and democratic values. South Africans were those people who treated each other as equals and worked towards social justice. It was a far cry from the natonalism of the past, which founded the state on the basis of race and ethnicity." [14]

In the same article, Chipkin goes on to state that the politics of identity in South Africa has "taken another disturbing turn". "As the ANC loses electoral support across South Africa, it has turned to chiefs to shore up its rural base." He concludes, "The figure of the foreigner in this violence is not simply that of the illegal immigrant from beyond our borders. On the streets, South Africa's borders are being redrawn. The foreigner is also potentially me and you, depending on what standard of African authenticity is at work in the here and now."

Achille Mbebe points to a hybridity of identity that is visible in post-Colonial societies, South African included, and makes a case for a different kind of thinking about identity.

In an interview with the magazine *Esprit,* Mbembe states, "This Afro-modern thought is one of interconnections and of the in-between. It maintains that an appeal to the world can only truly be made where, by force of circumstance, one has been alongside others, with others. Under these conditions "returning to oneself" is above all "leaving oneself", leaving the night of identity and the lacunae of my little world.

[14] Chipkin, Ivor. 2015 May 10. Who Is African, And Who Gets To Decide? *Sunday Times*

So here we have a way of reading globalization that rests on the radical affirmation of the density of proximity, of displacement, even of dislocation. In other words, consciousness of the world arises from the actualization of what was already possible in me, achieved through my encounter with the lives of others, my responsibility towards the lives of others and towards seemingly distant worlds and, above all, towards people with whom I have apparently no connection: the intruders." [15]

My family has always been in the "in-between" space — physically moving between the Netherlands and South Africa as well as living out a hybridised family culture . It is a space that is also occupied by others, including artist Marlene Dumas. In 2015, I visited her exhibition *The Image as Burden* at the Tate Modern Gallery in London. In the giftshop at the exhibition's exit was a collection of written works that have either influenced Dumas' creative process or contain expressions of the duality that infuses her work.

I picked up a day-glo orange book titled *Citizens and Subjects: The Netherlands, for example*, and read an interview with Dumas in a chapter titled "Ik is een allochtoon: A Conversation with Marlene Dumas". In answer to the question, "I recall you saying 'South Africa is my content and Holland is my form'. Do you ever think of yourself as a Dutch artist?" Dumas replies: "This brings me to the issue of dual citizenship, a theme currently discussed in the Dutch parliament. Ideally I would like us to care about everybody, ideally I would like us to have a universal mankind, but one cannot, it's like having too many lovers or something … Unfortunately, there are limits to how cosmopolitan one can be. Loving your neighbour is already impossible. But that is nothing to be proud of. Everyone should love at least two countries. That one physically cannot be in two places at the same time is one of the saddest truths of life. But that one's spirit can be in more than one place at a time, that makes for imagination. If you ask me if I am Dutch, and I think about all the things that I don't like about the Dutch, then I'll say no, I am not Dutch. But when I go to South Africa then they say I've become quite Dutch." [16]

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[15] Mbembe, Achille. 2008. What is postcolonial thinking? *Esprit*.
[16] Mondrian Foundation. 2007. *Citizens and Subjects*. Page 114.

Like the genre I chose to write in, identity in the modern world can be seen as both fluid and a hybrid. My family ensured mine was both Dutch and South African. The latter is what I was born into and primarily live, but the former was an inherited one that was reinforced by the distinctly Dutch rituals and habits that infused my childhood and is impossible to cast off.

Family

A comment that surfaced a few times in the Master's workshop group was inspired by the question whether everyone in my family was "nice". Some readers seemed to want a skeleton or two or even just someone who was just rude or selfish. I wondered if these comments were driven by the trend in confessional memoir writing that is so present in non-fiction writing: books, like those published by Melinda Ferguson locally and James Frey internationally, where the protagonist has done something nearly unforgivable or just plain horrific. With a few exceptions — Nick Kent's *The Dark Stuff* or Jerry Stahl's *Permanent Midnight* for example — I have found that it's the compelling content (drug use; jail; prostitution; stealing from family members) that draws a readership for these creative non-fiction works, not the writing itself.

Invisible Fingerprints is not that sort of book. It is, instead, a work of literary non-fiction that doesn't intend to expose and reveal embarrassment. My book is, I hope, a loving reconstruction of people that I love — something that I felt more intensely as I watched my grandmother age significantly during the years of writing. The poignancy of examining, with a magnifying glass, photographs of a youthful Atty and reading her descriptions of being a young new bride in a strange country saturated some of my writing. This is especially so in the closing chapter of the book, where I contrast an image of my children, now Dutch citizens, in front of Matisse's *The Parakeet and the Mermaid* with my grandmother in a nursing home. I had a very real sense of *Invisible Fingerprints* being not just a restoration of the role of three generations of art restorers in my family, but a tribute to my grandmother's life and

memoirs and her pioneering role in my family's life in South Africa. Working in this temporal space brought into sharp focus how writing can be a race against time and death — and an attempt to capture things and people before they disappear.

I also had to grapple with who and what to write about within the family story. It struck me whilst reading Gevisser's *Lost and Found In Johannesburg* that in his recollections of his childhood and the Dispatcher game he played there was scant mention of his siblings. If Gevisser had maintained a rigorous focus on the social, political and sexual aspects of his life, this might have not presented a gap. But the book is threaded together with stories of his Jewish immigrant family and details of the lives of his family's domestic staff and it felt like the narrative needed some exploration of his relationship with his brothers. My sister Catherine was the first person I spoke to about using the funds I had come into to go on a journey in search of the veracity of the story of our great-grandfather and *The Night Watch.* She surfaces in the Prologue and again in Chapters Two, Four and Fifteen and plays a supporting character role in much of the detective work I did for my book. My mother is another character who resurfaces at different times, most especially in Chapter Seventeen when I join her on a walk around the Transvaalbuurt where she lived for several months during a trip that she took with her siblings and parents back to Holland.

It was during that trip that my grandparents were first investigating the prospects of moving back to Holland — something they eventually did in the late nineteen seventies but without their now grown-up children. A consistent theme in my childhood was "what if my grandparents had settled back in Holland with all the children" and "what if my grandfather had emigrated to Canada instead of South Africa." Even though we had a father with his own family stories and heritage, these kinds of thoughts, about how chance decisions by my Dutch grandparents had resulted in us being South African, were a powerful impulse during my childhood.

When I became Dutch, in 2011, I was at pains to tell everyone that this was "not about the passport". The Dutch identity that had been imprinted on us by my maternal grandparents meant that we felt an invisible thread linking us to the Netherlands, and specifically Amsterdam and Utrecht — from the time we heard our grandparents

talking Dutch to each other, or heard their strong accents when they sang typical Dutch songs to us.

Invisible Fingerprints is then also an act of curation of the stories our family told themselves over more than fifty years. To do this, I've travelled in the footsteps of my family members — my great-grandfather in the Rijksmuseum, my great-grandparents in Amsterdam's Transvaalbuurt, my grandmother in Utrecht, my grandfather in Amsterdam, and my grandparents in the Waterberg. I've done this though an underpinning story of restoration — both in the professional art world and my family's personal story — in a writing style that, I believe, should captivate both a South African and Dutch readership. I hope this book will place me in what Esther Captain and Guno Jones refer to as trans-national genealogy. "Instead of proposing the cultural patrimony of a static Dutch nation, the hybrid and multiple identities of postcolonial and the migrants, 'rooted' in trans-national genealogy, can (continue to) nurture us as a source of inspiration for the production of art. The arts can see both as a vital representation and critical companion of an ever-changing, never finished, Dutch society."[17].

Without realising it fully when I first embarked on the writing, I have sought to make my family's past my own, to earn my right to be a Dutch citizen — to show my love, as Dumas puts it, "for two countries", aided by the memories of people like my grandmother.

Memory and Perspective

"Though often reliable, human memory is also fallible … It is suggested that memory's misdeeds can be classified into 7 basic "sins": transience, absent-mindedness, blocking, misattribution, suggestibility, bias and persistence." Daniel L. Schacter. [18]

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[17] Mondriaan Foundation. 2007. *Citizens and Subjects: The Netherlands, for example*. Page 91.

[18] Schachter, Daniel. L, The Seven Sins of Memory: Insights From Psychology and Cognitive Neuroscience, American Psychologist, May 1999.

In journalism, the governing element of a story is mostly always fact but a great deal of my writing is based on memory — both my own and those of others, making this a book built around collective memory.

As suggested by the work of Schacter, memory is unreliable but excavating it can be a thrilling experience. "Memory is not an instrument for surveying the past but its theatre," explains Walter Benjamin in his short essay *Excavation and Memory*. [19] "It is the medium of past experience just as the earth is the medium in which dead cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging."

In the writing of *Invisible Fingerprints* I was conducting myself like a woman digging, and in this I was aided by my grandmother's memoirs which my brother Mathew and I had asked her to write as she entered her nineties. At the time I had not yet conceived of this book but had a sense that, because of the dispersal of our family across two continents and the back and forth movement over the decades of my grandparents, the stories of our Dutch heritage would come to wear thin and be missing in places, like a seventeenth century print.

Still, there were times when memory wasn't enough and I chose to use the techniques of novel writing - writing imaginative scenes and description. I even allowed myself to invent very small and infrequent pieces of dialogue, denoted by quotation marks, even though the use of manufactured dialogue is contentious in the non-fiction community. "Atty, hier ben ik," my grandfather calls in Chapter Nine when he sets eyes on his new bride on the platform of Johannesburg's Park Station. In doing this, with the attendant punctuation, I agreed with Gutkind's observation: "I like using quotation marks in recreated dialogue. Since my readers know it is recreated, it's clear I am not trying to bamboozle them — and I think quotes make test the text read more smoothly. Readers have been programmed to hear the words in

[19] Benjamin, Walter. 2005. Selected Writings, 2005. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

their minds when they see the 'quotes' and I want to establish and maintain such authenticity." [20].

I was also at ease with approaching the memoir parts of my book — for instance, Chapter Two and Three, which detail aspects of my childhood and teenage years — with what Lopate calls "double perspective". "In writing memoir, the trick, it seems to me, is to establish the double perspective that will allow the reader to participate vicariously in the experience as it was lived (the child's confusions and misapprehensions, say) while benefiting from the sophisticated wisdom of the author's adult self." [21] I also agree with Lopate's assertion that "the marrow often shows itself in those moments where the writer analyzes the meaning of his or her experience". "The quality of thinking, the depth of insight, and the willingness to wrest as much understanding as one is humanly capable of arriving at — these are guarantees to the reader that a particular author's sensibility is trustworthy and simpatico." (Page 60). In Chapter Two I write, "Our Paris itinerary contained everything that my grandparents deemed important. Camping, memory, walking, vistas, Catholicism, history, sex and art — and budget-friendly packed lunches. We dipped in and out of these things as we traversed Europe in the camper van." Looking at this sentence now, I can see that intuitively I was moving in the direction described by Lopate.

Chapter Two also proved the importance of relying on both memories and photographs. The trip I describe took place more than thirty years before I wrote about it but I was significantly aided in my memory by a plakboek of my own, that my grandmother — the devoted diarist, letter writer and photo album keeper — and encouraged my sister and I to make while we in the last days of that European trip. Atty had even given it an edit, I saw when I was paging through it whilst writing, correcting spelling mistakes made by my seventeen-year-old self and adding in short pieces of information. I am not sure if I was a typical teenager, reluctant to take her grandmother's advice, when my sister and I made our albums. I do know that I could not have written Chapter Two without the collection of photographs and mementos that marked our first journey through Europe.

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[20] Gutkind, Lee. 2012. *You Can't Make This Stuff Up*. Page 84.
[21] Lopate, Phillip. 2013. *To Show And Tell*. Page 59.

Photographs

In concluding, I wish to make a few remarks about photographs. I started my submissions without including photographs that were relevant to what I was writing about. But in my second year, my mother presented me with a pile of albums and loose photographs, and continued to ply me with more as the months went on. I began to include photographs in my submissions, from that time onwards, starting with what would become Chapter Nine. I enjoyed writing about the photographs but I received a caution from my workshop group. "Your descriptions and evocations are far better when you write without including the actual photograph," commented one participant - and many others agreed. The input of the group alerted me to the danger of using photographs as a replacement for the story that I was telling. The inclusion of photographs ran the risk of taking the narrative in a direction that in the mind of the reader that I perhaps had not intended and so I have removed them in this version of my book.

I am still not absolutely resolved about the presence of photos, should this book be published. As a reader I frequently turn to photos first to get a picture in my head of what the subject of a book and the supporting characters look like. This action frequently urges me forward in the story that I am reading. I am considering a solution where, like the *Hare With Amber Eyes*, a more beautifully designed, hard cover book could include photographs and reproductions of the art works I write about, should permission for this be granted. For now, I have taken out the photographs and reworked the text without their presence.

Conclusion

In *Becoming a Writer*, written by Dorothea Brande in 1934, she says, "Writing calls on unused muscles and involves solitude and immobility. There is not much to be said for the recommendation, so often heard, to serve an apprenticeship to journalism if you intend to write fiction. But a journalist's career does teach two lessons which every writer needs to learn— that it is possible to write for long periods without fatigue, and that if one pushes on past the first weariness one finds a reservoir of unsuspected energy—one reaches the famous 'second wind.'" [22]

In completing *Invisible Fingerprints,* I have indeed experienced that "second wind" several times over — and I am thankful for a nearly thirty year journalistic career that has enabled me to continue . It has taken an enormous amount of resolve to return to the world of restorers, socialists, the Second World War, Europe circa 1981, the Rijksmuseum, and more when my brother-in-law and his two crew mates are still missing. The demands on my time have been extraordinary and this is not the way I had envisaged concluding my Masters Degree when I started it in 2013.

But, as at least some of my book shows, life is unpredictable. Could Rembrandt have imagined his incredible work of art would one day have to be stored in the clammy cold of the St Pietersberg cave? How could my grandfather ever have known the bus he was traveling in would find itself in the exact descending path of a bomb? Did my devoted socialist great-grandfather predict a time when he would have to choose between not seeing his daughter and her family and refusing to visit a country where racist values were entrenched in the constitution? Did Andre van Oort know, as he sliced into the Matisse's incredible cut-out for the first time, that concealment and ego would see him restoring *The Parakeet and the Mermaid* again, just a few years later?

I think about navigator, cartographer and explorer Willem Barentsz and his crew who set off in 1597 to discover the North East passage to China but found themselves

[22] Brande, Dorothea. 1934. *Becoming A Writer*.

trapped on Nova Zembla through a tortuous, dark winter. Like my brother-in-law, the Dutch explorer — a character in Chapter Five — embraced what the sea could offer but the famed navigator never made it, dying in a small boat, on a big ocean.

Finally, there is this. “In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only in flashes. The text is the thunder rolling long afterward.” With those beautiful words Walter Benjamin expresses my deep desire for this book, written by a great-granddaughter and grand-daughter for Adrianus Marchal and his daughter, Atty.

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DIANE COETZER FAMILY TREE

GREAT-GRANDPARENTS

Adrianus Marchal (Opa Adri) *m* **Anna Molenaar** (Oma Anna) *(married 9.9.1915)*
b 19.6.1887 b 23.5.1890

Adriana Antje (Oma)
b 3.7.1918

Frederick (Fre)

Frans Reuvers *m* **Maria van Coolwijk**

Frank Reuvers

Julius Reuvers (Opa)
b 15.11.1914

REUVERS

Franciscus Lodewijk Christiaan Reuvers *m* **Maria Catharina van Coolwijk**
b 7.12.1878 – d 21.11.1924 b 13.10.1884 – d 2.4.1969

Francisus Jacobus
b 28.11.1912

Julius (Opa)
b 15.11.1914

MOLENAAR

Johanna Molenaar (Anna/Annie) *m* **Adrianus Marchal**
b 23.05.1890 b 19.06.1887 – d 23.01.1975

Atty (Oma)
b 3.7.1918

Frederick

Tryntje Molenaar *m* **Willem van Oort**
b 7.8.1891

Wil *m* **Jo Bossing** *(married 20.6.1945)*
had five children

Wil van Oort
b 21.10.1919

Herman

Gerrit

Andre van Oort b 13.12.1947

GRANDPARENTS

Adriana Antje (Oma) *m* **Julius Reuvers** (Opa) *(married 12.12.1938)*
b 3.7.1918 b 15.11.1914 – d 21.12.1996

Emma Reuvers
b 3.11.1939

Julius Reuvers
b 12.1.1942

Robert Reuvers
b 11.11.1947

Anne-Marie Reuvers
b 27.5.1950

PARENTS

Emma Reuvers *m* **Owen Coetzer** *(married 26.11.1960)*
b 3.11.1939 b 11.12.1937 – d 8.1.2003

Catherine Coetzer
b 5.5.1963
one daughter

Diane Coetzer
b 9.7.1964

Mathew Coetzer
b 31.12.1966
one daughter
one son

Nicholas Coetzer
b 29.8.1970
one daughter
one son

Jami Ella
b 6.9.1991

Jeremy Savage
partner

Hannah Rae
b 8.10.1998

Zachary Neo
b 17.11.2000

Emmylou Harper
b 2.1.2005

Invisible Fingerprints

By Diane Coetzer

Prologue

One Monday evening, in July 2011, I left the usual school night mix of homework and fridge rummaging in my Johannesburg home and headed back to my office for a last look at emails. There, in my inbox, was a message from an acquaintance. “There is a twat who seems to be on a warpath with you,” she wrote. “You've probably seen this, but just in case you hadn't.” There was a link to a Facebook profile that didn’t look immediately familiar. The profile, open to anyone who cared to look, belonged to someone I vaguely knew from my work as a music journalist, a video director and producer whom I had last seen at the launch of a show he was directing for a local rock band.

Underneath a picture of a menacing vehicle he had written “ON A HAPPIER NOTE ….I am going to build something like this! Using my Subaru as a base for the chassis and HELL as the inspiration …. then I am going to drive over Diane with it!!! Build will start on Saturday!”

Although for a moment I didn't recognise myself, he’d also posted a photograph of me that he had found online. I looked startled and uncertain, as if whoever had taken it had intruded on a private moment. Underneath was an invitation: “So after this bitch pissed me off to the end [sic] degree today I decided to put a snap shot of miss happy on facebook, so should you feel the need to walk past her and give her a PK [poes klap] you know who [to] dish it out to!”

It felt like my heart was being dragged through mud. Now way out of reach of the children’s calls about dinner, I kept reading. “This bitch must get hit by a fucking 18 wheeler...and then the 18 wheeler must hit her daughter – her husband and then DIE ANTWOORD.” By the time I got to the comments (“Emmy Winehouse is dead … let’s see who’s next!!!” offered Sammy SingleTon), Hannah, then twelve, was coming up the passage to find out what was delaying me. Before I could stop her, she read the threats against us both and she, too, was shocked. From the distance of several years it now seems overwrought but we both burst into tears.

At the time, I was the South African correspondent for *Billboard* magazine in the United States and was writing about music for several other publications, including *The Daily Maverick*. The online publication had recently run my review of the show that my Facebook attacker had directed, under the headline “The Parlotones' Dragonflies and Astronauts: Lousy theatre, great music”.

Writing in the space where social media meets journalism, I wasn’t naïve to the way the politely worded Letter to the Editor had given way to unfettered, often harsh and personal, commentary. Still, as I later told the online publication iMaverick, “Everyone was shocked by the level of it. If he'd just said, 'fuck Diane Coetzer, what the fuck does she know, she's a bitch,' that's one thing. But it escalated over a period of hours. This is unacceptable behaviour. I wasn't the only person to review (the show), and I wasn't the only one to review it badly. There was nothing personal in it.”

Several lawyer’s letters later, he had only managed a half-apology that included a conceited attempt to liken his distressing public outburst to the small-screen antics of Entourage’s combustible agent, Ari Gold. By mid-August, the photos with the threatening captions remained in an album on his Facebook profile.

I obsessed over them. Daily I gathered evidence that his contriteness – in more Facebook posts – was a sham. I'd start each morning by taking multiple screen shots of both pictures. I looked at my startled face over and over again. Who had seen this, I wondered? Could I be punched in the street by a stranger? Might my family be run over by a car?

In the end, there was little else to do but take legal action. It sounds easy but that’s not how it felt. The tabloid magazine *You* called with the suggestion that they photograph me at my computer, looking distressed. They asked if they could take a photo of Hannah pretending to cry. I refused this melodrama but a story ran nonetheless. *The Argus*, the Cape Town daily newspaper my father was working for when he died, ran a front-page article under the headline “Facebook Rant: Critic Sues”. Even though I was convinced I was doing the right thing, I felt nervous and strangely dislocated.

When iMaverick ran a news story on the summons (for defamation and/or injury to my dignity and reputation) that had been issued against him by my lawyer, the abusive online comments by his supporters muscled back in. Why had I taken it on, some people, including friends, asked? Critics should be allowed to do their job, I answered simply. I was secretly happy when writer and ethicist Tariq Moosa described my *Daily Maverick* article as well-reasoned and falling within the boundaries of a review.

There was also something else."[He] went too far," I told *Destiny Man* magazine for an article the magazine ran early in 2013 titled 'Policing The Net'. "He made disparaging comments about me as a woman and about my daughter, who was 12 at the time. I am trying to raise my children at a time when social media is prevalent and am cognisant of bringing values we instill at home into them. I needed to show my daughter that this is not OK."

When the summons was drawn up my lawyer asked for R150 000 in damages. He could have said double that amount, or one tenth of it, for all I cared. But as it became clear that the settlement our legal teams had struck would include a public apology and a small payment to me, I knew exactly what I should do with the unexpected windfall. When the money landed in my account early in November, I called up my sister in Cape Town. "We're going to Holland," I said. "We're going to find out the truth about *The Night Watch*."

Chapter One

For a full fourteen days, André van Oort has been pacing around his studio at the Stedelijk Museum.The project that is lying ahead of him is daunting for a paper restorer not yet in his thirties. What he is being asked to do calls on everything he has learnt ever since he was a teenaged schoolboy, racing home on his Gazelle bike through the green gardens of Amsterdam's Oosterpark.

There, in a studio in the basement of their home in Oetewalerstraat, he would find his father, Wil, intently bent over a print. The son would watch his dad, so tall and focused, working on another drawing or print that had been sent to him for restoration. Framed by pots of small brushes, paints and chemicals on shelves against the far wall of the studio, André watched as his father's big hands work to conserve whatever was lying on the slightly tilted table in front of him. He knew his father was the only paper restorer working in private practice in the Netherlands and, from the age of fifteen or so, he had spent hours in the studio learning his father's craft.

He knows too that he would need to summon the full weight of knowledge that he acquired when working at the Boijmans van Beuningen after leaving his conscripted year in the Dutch army. Then just twenty-two years old, he was very happy to be apprenticed to the Rotterdam museum in 1970. It wasn't hard to see how the respect given to his father stemmed directly from Wil's earlier career at the paper restoration studio at the Rijksmuseum – first as an assistant to his uncle Adrianus Marchal after the Second World War and, later, as its head. After a year or so, the chance to move to the Stedelijk Museum opened up and André grabbed at it. The transition to the Amsterdam modern art museum was an easy one. Because it was inaugurated by a former colleague of his dad's, the studio follows methods and systems that were familiar to him. What's more, his father has returned to head up the Rijksmuseum's paper restoration studio earlier in 1971 and is now an easy stroll away, should André be confronted with a particularly tricky problem that his father's decades of insight could solve.

He is relishing the interaction with the museum that the paper conservation studio at the Stedelijk offers. Since his arrival he has worked on many different exhibitions – artworks that were headed out on loan, or placed in the museum's different collections. It is a dynamic environment that contrasts sharply with the Boijmans where he sometimes felt like a monk in the studio, situated away from the main building.

Even so, André knows that all of this might still not be enough for the undertaking that is now confronting him. In 1966, the Stedelijk, which under director Edy de Wilde was eager to cement its reputation as the leading modern art institution in the Netherlands, acquired Matisse's *La Perruche et la Sirene*. Unlike other recent purchases at the time, works by the likes of Willem De Kooning, Jean Dubuffet and Robert Ryman, the decision to purchase the artwork was a risky one. More than a decade after he had created it, Matisse's expansive artwork was not in the greatest shape and the Tate Gallery had already passed up the chance to buy it after it was acquired by a consortium of young British and American art dealers through Sotheby's on June 23rd 1966. At the time, the artwork was the largest ever sold at the auction house and the dealers bought it for £32 000 in what was a particularly tense auction. An article in the Sunday Times of August 9th 1966 blamed telephone technology for the consortium's success. "When the Matisse cut-out *La Perruche et la Sirene* came up at Sotheby's in June it might well have gone straight to an American museum. Such, however, are the shortcomings of the Venetian telephone system that, for the lack of one vital connection, the necessary backing was never secured and in the event the picture was bought by a consortium of young English and American dealers."

A few months after the purchase, London-based dealer Lawrence Rubin, representing the consortium, wrote to De Wilde giving details of what he called one of the greatest Matisse gouache decoupes and offering it for sale to the Stedelijk. "There are only two works of this size done by Matisse and I am sure that this is the best. It will definitely go to a museum and I am wondering if the Stedelijk might be interested," wrote Rubin. In a follow-up letter, dated July 21st, he gave more detail, noting that Matisse had made the collage with "the intention of hanging it on two separate walls". The dealers' asking price was $150 000,00.

Rubin invited De Wilde to come and view the piece, which had been loaned to the Tate Gallery for an exhibition that would run for three months. *La Perruche et la Sirene* was displayed in the lower floor room of the gallery, along with a tapestry made for British Petroleum by Harold Cohen. "Decoration in the basement," was the headline for art critic Nigel Gosling's review, which described the exhibition as raising a "question mark which hangs over modern art". After some examination the critic concluded that the Matisse piece is "lightweight", describing it as "on the wrong side" of the "definite, but unmarked frontier that decides where decorativeness begins".

But other critics were not swayed by the placement of Matisse's work alongside Cohen's, under the banner of decorative art. A review in the Times noted that "the artist's aim was to obtain the maximum intensity of colour without any forcing of effect. He achieved this result with seemingly effortless simplification, behind which one may discern the disciplined effort he had for many years applied to his paintings." By far the most positive reception came from The Sunday Times' John Russell. "In the canon of the cut-papers 'La Perruche et la Sirene' ranks high for size and high for spawling invention, though it has not the terse monumenal structure of the Tate's own 'L'Escargot'."

The Parakeet and the Mermaid, as it was known in English, was created two years before Matisse died. Measuring a massive 337 x 768.5cm and made in a year that the French artist was unremittingly prolific, the cut-out came to represent a glorious, freeflowing counterpoint to the physical state that the French painter found himself in towards the end of his life. Over the period that Matisse was perfecting the composition he also made space for the positioning of *Blue Nude II*, one of several cut-out forms that the artist tried in the left hand space of the arwork and which is now part of the most famous series of Matisse cut-outs, *The Blue Nudes*. But when he reached for his scissors and began slicing through a piece of ultramarine gouache to reveal the exhilirating shape of a mermaid in profile, it was the most perfect counterpoint to the hushed, stately form of the parrot on the artwork's far left panel.

It's likely that the artist created the forms whilst in bed, or in his wooden wheelchair. Since the early 1940s, Matisse had been suffering from crippling abdominal pains, necessitating a series of medical procedures – including a life-saving one in 1941 – beset by complications that compromised the health of this vigorous man in the last decade of his life. Then in his late seventies, a man known for being an innovator of twentieth-century painting turned to the childlike technique of cutting shapes from paper. For this he used paper that was painted – on instruction – by his assistants with gouache diluted with water. Although he wasn't wielding the paintbrush himself, Matisse lost none of his genius as a colourist, working with rich colours like vermillion, cadmium red, lemon yellow, violet and, recurring over and over again, ultramarine blues, to make his shapes. Once cut, he oversaw the arrangement of the shapes on a studio wall in a process that might take months before he settled on the final configuration.

In what one of Matisse's biographers described as "the last great liberation of his life" [i] this form of creation invigorated the artist, coming in the wake of a war that felt like it had sucked up all the colour that saturated his earlier work. It transported him away from the physical pain that intruded on his sleep and curtailed his ability to travel outside his home and indulge in the outdoor activities that he'd always loved.

It was literally drawing with scissors. Matisse's ability to cut through paper that had been painted on drew on his considerable expertise in etching that had once earned him the commission to illustrate James Joyce's *Ulysses*. It also took the master painter closer again to the many lithographs and drawings that were interspersed like exquisite bridges over his career, mostly through the many illustrated books he created or was commissioned to work on. For a work created as Matisse was living in the shadow of death, *La Perruche et la Sirene* is unrelentingly alive. Its central parakeet and mermaid (both suggested by the simplest of ultramarine shapes) are surrounded by the fronds and pomegranates that lie strewn throughout his cut-outs, as if nearing his death he was sowing life around him.

It is to these shapes that André keeps returning as he paces the floor of the paper restoration studio. They number one hundred and fifty and are made up of six hundred and thirty four separate pieces of paper. Each of the shapes carries the energy

of Matisse's free flying fingers on their edges and the conservator can feel the pulse of life charging each one. He hopes his plan will steer him through an unknown so laden with history that one wrong turn would relegate him to the backroom before he had got in the front door of paper restoration.

The prospects do not look good. When the Stedelijk purchased *La Perruche et la Sirene*, its condition was shabby. The artwork was sent to Paris, where a former assistant of Matisse's attempted a restoration. It was returned for display in 1969 but barely a few years later, the white background that Matisse had wanted his shapes to live on was discoloured. Streaks of brown were visibly growing, threatening to consume the whole work in a cruel mimicry of the slow eating diseases that eventually exhausted the life out of Matisse in November 1954. The irregular browning on the white background was disturbing and raised the perennial question confronting the conservator: how much of an artwork to restore and how much to conserve.

Poring over the intact artwork time and time again, André cannot shake off the thought that his job might have been made easier – or might not have existed at all – if his father had assented to the Stedelijk's request, in 1967, to restore the Matisse before it was shipped to Paris. In private practice, after walking out of the Rijksmuseum in protest against the lesser renumeration accorded to paper restorers compared to painting restorers, Wil was certainly tempted to run his fingers over the paper shapes that remained once Matisse was done with his scissors. He submitted a short ten-point restoration plan for the artwork to the museum. But taking on the commission would have meant leaving aside the regular commissions that sustained his private restoration studio, and he ultimately decided against taking on such an all-consuming task.

There was also the matter of the value. By the time André was given the task of taking out his own scissors and cutting away Matisse's shapes, the work was worth 20 million guilders. It was already a star in the Stedelijk's gathering galaxy of twentieth century art. What had started in 1895 as a refined institution displaying the collection of antiques, coins, jewels, timepieces, silver knickknacks and other curiosa of Sophia Augusta de Bruyn was now a beacon of modernist art and design.

In preparation for the task, he has made his own restoration plan. In the studio are six light wooden box frames, each with silver handles for easy transport, and each one stamped with the word Matisse, the number of the panel it would contain and arrows indicating the right way up. These are for storing the panels during the restoration process. He has already unwrapped each individual panel and placed it on a plastic wrapped worktable. Using a long screwdriver, he has removed the hanging strip from the Perspex frame, followed by the unfastening of the sides of the Perspex itself. With the help of his assistants, he has turned over each panel, coming face-to-face with Matisse's work, now free of any barrier, for the very first time. To be so close to the colours, to see the places where a brush had been put down, where an assistant's fingermarks had been left and where the many pins had been stuck in the different shapes was breathtaking.

Some months ago, he had also begun the time consuming work of tracing the shapes with paper that he had ordered from America. Always from the outside (to ensure that the thickness of the pencil line didn't matter) he drew each shape's outline, and gave it a colour and a number. Before he began cutting out each tracing, he made small vertical marks in the outline to further aid the task of gluing the shapes back in place. Using the knife he'd been given by his father, he slowly cut each of the shapes away from the tracing paper.

The next step was unstretching the panel by removing all the tacks that held the artwork in place. Even at this point, André knew he could still turn back. He could hammer the tacks in again, put the panel back in its frame and step back from the whole affair. It was clear that the previous restoration had been the kind of disaster that was threatening to turn Matisse's masterpiece into something fit for nothing more than a dark corner of the museum's storeroom. When he was preparing his plan he worked with a team of experts to attempt to establish why the new background had been invaded by brown streaks and spots. The paper that had been used in first Paris restoration had been placed in a dry stove, with a very high temperature and low humidity. The tests had shown that it was in good condition and a decision was made to use the rolls that still remained in the museum. Further tests had shown that an animal-based glue had been used for adhering the shapes to the background paper as

well as the paper to the linen. This surely was the reason for the discolouration, the team involved in contributing to André's restoration plan concluded.

But standing in the studio he knows he can't stop now. Visitors to the gallery are already beginning to ask where the Matisse had disappeared to. And he knows that a work of such immense scale is going to take months, if not years, to restore. How could he delay getting the Matisse masterpiece back on the walls of the Stedelijk unnecessarily? It would seem disrespectful to an artist he believes to be one of the century's greatest.

With scissors similar to those Matisse favoured when slicing through a piece of painted paper, he begins cutting the shapes away from the mottled background, leaving space around each one. Each of these will be stored in a specially prepared numbered envelope. For a brief moment, he allows himself to look at the remants of the background that have fallen on the expansive worktable. He thinks about the photo of Matisse, taken in the Hôtel Régina, in Nice in 1952. Sitting in a wheelchair with his right hand resting on the acquamarine button-through jersey he's wearing, the artist appears to be refining a green shape – a frond? – that he's holding in his raised left hand. Beneath his bare feet and stretching around him like a field of wild, untamed flowers, is a scattering of blue, pink, red, orange and green paper negatives. On the wall beyond his left shoulder is a single pink leaf, drifting between a mirror and what would become the nearly fifteen feet tall cut-out, *The Negress*. Suddenly an image of Matisse's assistant Lydia Delectorskaya flashes into Andre's mind. Was she the one to remove the cut-outs from the walls when Matisse was finally happy with the arrangement of the shapes? Did she do the tracing of the composition before it was sent off to the Parisian art supply and restoration firm of Lucien Lefebvre-Foinet for mounting? Was she among the few others who had held the one hundred and fifty shapes in their hands, feeling the texture of the gouache under her fingers?

There is no avoiding the next step. He must now remove the shapes from the background without damaging them, especially those that are thinning in places. It's going to be ok. It will be alright. It's all going to go ok, André keeps thinking as he circles the Matisse, his heart beating a little faster each time he runs the moment of no return – the first parting of the shapes from the paper – through his mind.

The moment has come when he cannot delay it any longer. On a spring day, with his ungloved hands touching the paper for the first time and his white coat fitted snugly around his body, André van Oort summons the spirit of Matisse and begins pulling the linen and first layer of paper away from the oversized, brilliant blue plant frond that he is holding in his hands. It's done, without any tears, and his heart slows down a little. Holding the shape up to the light he can see that the frond is comprised of several parts that must be separated. Gently laying it on his table he dips a large paintbrush in a pot of water and begins moistening the join in preparation for using his palette knife to scrape away the backing paper that remains on the shape. The one hunded and fifty shapes consist of six hundred and thirty four separate pieces of paper and each one must be separated to remove the animal glue that has been be causing the background discolouration. It's an excrutiating task that cannot be rushed. Neither can the removal of the second layer of paper, again by wetting the back of each shape with a paintbrush and then taking a sharp blade to what remains stuck on the back. On the floor next to the worktable is a plastic dustbin into which he drops the slivers of paper as each one comes away in his hands. A pasting of starch allows him to remove the last remnants of paper and then he reaches for a small ball of moisted cottonwool and dabs it on the shape to remove the last bits of glue.

The next step is easy in comparison. He walks over to a table and places the shape, now nearly totally clean of linen, paper and glue, between two pieces of paper and slides a clear piece of glass over it to aid the drying and flattening process. Behind his workstation is a lifesize replica of each panel on a sheet of tracing paper, noting the joins, pinmarks and weak spots that were visible even before the work of detaching the shapes from the background began. In a set of artist paper drawers behind the work table is a file for each shape, containing photos, tracings and notes.

Ahead of him is the work of making the new background – three layers of paper on linen. His plan has laid it all out. The making and straining of the starch. The moistening of the stretched linen and the first layer of paper, on both sides, and then the glueing together with the starch before going over it with rollers and a spatula to make sure there are no bubbles or ridges. Repeat. And repeat again before leaving for three weeks to dry and acclimatise before affixing the background to the panel

stretcher with a staple gun. After that would come the crucial moment of rolling the full length of tracing paper over the panel, making sure that the connections of the shapes are right and transferring the position onto the new background. André thinks ahead to the pasting back of the shapes and then the work of rubbing them flat. That moment is lying months ahead – but the time when Matisse's shapes would be brought back home is coming within his grasp.

He didn't know it then, but that restoration – which stretched from 1976 all the way to 1978 – was not going to be the only time that André felt the hundreds of different shapes that had fallen away from Matisse's scissors. Six years after the Matisse had once again gone up on the walls of the Stedelijk, the discoloration started again. André was aghast. How was it possible? He had used different glue and all tests had shown that the paper was stable. But new technology was showing that it wasn't the glue that had caused the mottling after the Paris restoration after all. It was the unbinded iron in the paper that had resulted in the brown smears. To undertake the restoration again, André would have to embark on a journey through paper unlike any he ever had to take.

This time, in the late nineties, conservation technology had advanced significantly and he would be able to put the papers he was considering through several tests. He would begin with a purely visual test, replicating several cut-outs on seven different paper options, and asking the museum's curators and director to make their choice of three after viewing them on a wall. After the top three had been decided on, the full quantity needed for the restoration would be ordered and put through all kinds of tests – glued onto a linen backing, placed on a stretcher, put behind glass and then put in a climate paper. The paper used in the two previous restorations would also be tested using the new scientific methods that were unavailable to him back in the seventies. More tests were done, including on Andre's first choice – a paper from England that turned pink in the climate chamber. The last one left hanging was paper produced by the same French factory from which Matisse had bought his paper in the ninety fifties. But even then, tests would show the presence of too much iron, although this time, completely binded. With the world waiting yet again for *La Perruche et la Sirene* to re-emerge, he would have to make the best choice given the options available to him.

The task was no less momentous than two decades before. But because he had done it before, André wasn't put off by the small window into the dedicated restoration studio that the museum management had created to allow the public to look at the work he would do with his two assistants, Wout de Rooij and Robin Beekhuizen.

But the weight of history that he carried on his shoulders would increase, with the growing recognition of Matisse's cut-outs as a transforming moment in the artist's career, and in art history, influencing Andy Warhol and Elsworth Kelly, for starters. In fact, at the time André had been busy with his first restoration, the first wide-ranging exhibition of the cut-out work made by Matisse – including his illustrations for the 1947 book *Jazz* – was touring the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the Detroit Institute of Arts and the St Louis Art Museum.

Years later André would also discover that the battle he twice fought to get the background of *La Perruche et la Sirene* right might have been averted. A file found in the office of a retired curator at the Stedelijk after the second restoration contained something unimaginable: three small parts of the original background. To his amazement they showed that the paper had been painted white. There was even a smudge of blue paint on one of the pieces. Within half an hour André would find the exact spot on the monumental artwork where that particular piece was cut from. It would dawn on him that, in the ongoing battle for position between the painting and paper departments in a museum, he had been a victim. Had it been revealed that the background of *La Perruche et la Sirene* was painted, the restoration might have fallen out of the hands of the paper department at the museum and into those of the painting curators and restorers.

He would always be grateful for the chance to be one of the few people in the world ever to feel the back of those hundreds of shapes; to be in the position that Matisse was at the moment the scissors fell away from the paper and he was left holding something beautiful. Twice he had seen the charcoal lines and pencil marks on the back of some of the cut-outs. Twice he had imagined that the remnants of children's drawings in blue ink on the back of some cut-out were made by Picasso's

children during the visits Matisse's great artistic rival made to his studio. In spending days, weeks, months and years toiling to ensure the master's work was precisely as he envisaged it, he would come to feel a part of the interdependent system that Matisse had created through his cut-outs – between the artist, his assistants and professional mounters. As Lydia Delectorskaya would say long after Matisse's death, "These three elements – the contour, the composition, the tone of the gouache – are the components of the original work, they come from the art of the painter." [ii] The mounters, she said, must treat these as sacred. More than anyone since the great studios of 132 Boulevard Montparnasse, Paris, Villa La Reve in Vence, and Hotel Regina, Nice, André van Oort had done that.

Chapter Two

I first heard of André van Oort when I was a teenager in the early 1980s. Just before my seventeenth birthday, my Dutch grandparents, Adriana Marchal Reuvers and Julius Reuvers, took my sister Catherine on a five-week European trip. As the oldest of what eventually turned out to be eleven grandchildren, we were the first that they were showing the Netherlands, where they had both grown up and were again living after more than forty years in South Africa.

When we boarded the Luxavia airplane on June 17th 1981, my sister Catherine and me knew we were about to embark on an adventure quite unlike anything we, or any of our friends at Danville Girls High, had ever experienced (unless you counted the international exchange students who, even in the heyday of apartheid, periodically turned up at our all girls, whites only school in Virginia, just outside Durban). On the eve of our departure, telegrams from family members around the country were delivered to our home in Umhlanga Rocks, wishing us bon voyage.

The message was spot-on. After my grandparents had collected the two of us and our luggage (one large red suitcase and two matching blue togbags with red and black trim) in Luxembourg, we got into their VW camper van and headed straight for the Joinville-le-Pont campsite, nearly ten kilometres outside the centre of Paris. There we got out of our travelling clothes (below-the-knee skirts, matching warm jackets, stockings and, inexplicably for teenagers on a long plane trip, shoes with a small heel) and bedded down for the night. The next day we pulled on jeans, sweatshirts and moccasins and set off sightseeing.

During our first days on the continent, my Opa took a photograph of us looking self-consciously sheepish on the Paris Metro. We walked to the second stage of the Eiffel Tower where, under a grey sky, we gazed out across the Seine. We braved the circling traffic for yet another photograph in front of the Arc De Triomphe, smiling broadly as boxy Renaults and racy Porsches whizzed by on either side of us. We ambled across the Pont Alexandre 111 Bridge, and decided the instant we laid

eyes on it, that Notre Dame Cathedral put our churches to terrible shame. Bypassing the men in smocks and berets selling lavender from baskets set on either side of a small donkey, we stoically walked up the long stairway leading to the Sacré-Cœur Basilica and marveled at the view of the Paris skyline from the summit of the small hill. In 1940 my grandfather had been conscripted to the Dutch army's Prinses Irene Brigade, the fighting brigade of the Dutch government in exile, and so we paid a sombre visit to the Mémorial des Martyrs de la Déportation on Île de la Cité. A day later, in stark contrast to our visit to the memorial to the 200 000 Jews deported from France, we giggled at the topless dancers at the Folies Bergère, and ambled past the sex shops ("Video Hard" was advertising a job for a "projecteur permanente") in Montmartre. We took a day trip to Versailles and I stood happily in front of a smooth marble statue of my namesake, the Goddess of the Hunt, Diana. We spent hours wandering through the gardens of the Rodin Museum at Hôtel Biron, astonished at our first encounter with artworks that we'd only ever read about in books.

Our Paris itinerary contained everything that my grandparents deemed important: camping, walking, vistas, Catholicism, history, sex and art – and budget-friendly packed lunches. We dipped in and out of these things as we traversed Europe in the camper van.

Wearing thin, white takkies and warm, puffy beige matching jackets that were, I recall, triumphantly unearthed by my mother at a bargain price in a Durban factory shop, we experienced our first snow on the slopes of Mont Blanc in Chamonix. Down on the French coast, we walked amongst the sculptures and trees in the garden of the museum at Auguste Renoir's home in Cagnes-sur-Mer and closely examined the studio he used in the last dozen years of his life. With a daring that surprised us, we tanned and swam topless on the beach in Nice. We took a boat over from the campsite in Fusina to Venice where we got lost and argued with my hot-tempered Opa about which way to go before a handsome young gondolier in a cut-off black t-shirt ended things with the offer of a ride. We tramped through Rome in the blazing heat, hardly believing the price of a can of cold Coke (R1) while trying to assimilate the fact that the Roman Forum was built "Before Christ" In the Sistine Chapel we bumped into five women from home ("A group of Africans, Indians and Coloureds from good – or bad – old South Africa," I noted in my photo album) and, quite unbelievably to us, in

St Peter's Square we ran into a friend we had made on our yearly visits to Cape Town to see our dad. In Switzerland we ate chicken (a rarity, my caption reminds me and a year before I became a vegetarian) at the pull-out table in our camper van in the picture perfect Camping Jungfrau in Lauterbrunnen. A few days later, I celebrated my seventeenth birthday in a country I described as "nearing perfection in all aspects in the whole world". In Germany, we fell about like drunks on top of the biggest wine vat in the world in a schloss in Heidelberg.

Finally, a month after we landed, we arrived in the Netherlands. My grandparents couldn't hold back their delight and set about immersing us in all things Dutch.

With Opa at the wheel of our camper van, and Oma navigating with the help of a well-used, oversized foldout map and fresh broodjes packed, we headed out on day trips. We visited Marken, Monikkendam and Volendam. We explored Loosdrecht, the Afsluitdijk and the Oranjesluis. We fell in love with the criss-crossing canals and the modest church towers that we recognised from the prints hung on the walls of our home. We walked past pretty green and white houses bordered by rows of bright orange, red and yellow flowers and took turns steering a steel boat through the waters of Giethoorn. Where it was precisely I can no longer recall, but I can still hear my grandparents proudly showing us the house where the Dutch royal family lived. "Look at the low fence. You could just hop over it if you wanted," they said, with a look that made it clear how they felt about the high-falutin ways of the royals across the English channel. We ate smokey mackerel and vinegary rolmops and Vlaamse frites and bought sweets at the Jamin snoepwinkel. My Oma told us the story of how her paternal grandfather, Opa Willem Marchal would bring her and her brother Frederick, five cents' worth of koekkrummels from C. Jamin (as it was then called) when he came to visit. "The broken biscuits and crumbs were sold cheaply. We called him Opa 'Koek'," she recounted as, after much contemplation, we plucked out our favourite from the endless mouthwatering selection of colourful sweets and oil-black, salty drop.

It was to Utrecht's Vogelenbuurt that my grandmother's cigar making grandfather would head to visit his son's family. That is when he could pull himself

out of the bar. “This grandfather liked his ‘zoopje’ and as a result the family was very poor. All his weekly wages went to the kroeg,” Oma confided. “There must have been a lot of misery in the family. The amazing fact is that all eight children in my father’s family swore never to touch a drop of alcohol. To their dying day, my parents never touched a drop of alcohol.” Atty was born to Johanna Molenaar and Adrianus Marchal in the historical Dutch city on July 3rd 1918 and she stayed in Utrecht until the Marchal family moved to Amsterdam when she was fifteen.

Opa, on the other hand, was a dyed-in-the-wool Amsterdammer, born in the suburb of Watergraafsmeer on November 15th 1914 to Franciscus “Frans” Lodewijk Christiaan Reuvers and Maria Catharina van Coolwijk. His father, who died in 1924, was first a cutter and polisher, and later a trader in the diamond business. The family were devoted Catholics so it was no surprise that we were shepherded into at least one church in every city we visited on our trip. “On Sunday mornings Frans used to take his two sons, Frans (Frank) and Jules to early mass at the Papegaai Church in the Kalverstraat,” Oma told us. “And from there he would take his boys to the diamond bourse where he would do some trading.”

When we finally headed into the city of Amsterdam in July 1981, my opa walked with the confidence that only being on home turf brings. Knowing that we were no ordinary tourists, we followed proudly as he strode down the Kalverstraat, dodging the Hare Krishnas, with their blue drums and miniature cymbals, and the followers of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh who had flooded Amsterdam that summer. Catherine and I were fascinated by them. We had picked up whispers in our campsite that Bhagwan’s devotees, always clad head-to-toe in red, were drawn to the Indian mystic for his freewheeling approach to sex. Thirty years later, on our trip to Holland, my sister happened upon a video discourse from a mystic she liked, called Osho, on an obscure Dutch TV channel. To our amusement, we subsequently found out that Osho had previously been known as Bhagwan.

But back in the summer of 1981, Jules would not be intimidated by the strangeness of the “red people”, as my sister and I quickly dubbed them. On one of our day trips into Amsterdam, he boldly stopped a couple and asked if he could take their photograph. They posed, with smiles, on a canal bridge, their red bags, red hats,

red shirts, red pants, red skirts and red stockings a bright, if odd, contrast to the murky green of the water flowing beneath them. The red light district was also no barrier to my opa's desire to show us his home city. Far from the sanitised place it has become, the area was then home to Amsterdam's heroin users and my sister and I were panicked at the thought of being snared by a "pusher", and never returning home to our suburban South African life – a scenario that had been suggested by a fear-mongering anti-drug seventies film shown to us at school. It didn't stop us from following Opa as he strode down the Oudezijds Voorburgwal, having instructed me, Catherine and our oma to maintain a short distance behind him so we could see how the women in the windows "approached a man". I can still picture Opa, his camera bag slung on his side, slowing his gait as he neared the windows bathed in red light, smiling at the women behind the glass and slowly waving his hand, his head tilted ever so slightly to one side.

Thoughts of drugs and prostitutes were far from our minds on the day we headed for Museumplein to explore the trio of Dutch museums located there. Catherine and I knew that, as much as Amsterdam was my opa's town, this part of the city was where my oma's family could claim a place few others were able to. As we walked down the grey brick road towards the Rijksmuseum, its fairy castle turrets and white brick frosting coming into view, my heart skipped a beat. The Dutch national museum was where Atty's father, Opa Adri as he was known by his great-grandchildren, had worked as a restorer. I knew this story from as far back as I could remember but the Rijksmuseum had been unknowable and out of reach in faraway South Africa – until now. "Up there was the studio where Dad worked," Oma said, pointing to a turret on the back right hand side of the building. We looked around in wonder. More than any of the tourists streaming off the yellow Contiki Tour Bus, with its winking sun logo, we knew we had a special relationship with this place. It made us bristle with pride.

What we didn't know just yet was that our connection to the epicentre of Dutch culture, spread between Jan Luijkenstraat, Stadhouderskade, Hobbemastraat and Hobbemakade, wasn't just confined to my great-grandfather.

A little later that day, in the spacious, light-filled rooms of the Stedelijk Museum, we stood in front of Henri Matisse's *La Perruche et La Sirene.* My sister was studying art at school and she knew something of the importance of Matisse in art history. We were awed by the scale of the work, stretched across six panels. The pink, green, blue and orange fronds made me think of the gently waving seaweed growing in the rock pools of the Umhlanga Rocks beach in which we had spent hours playing as children. "The mermaid looks like she's flying," I whispered to Catherine and my grandparents.

Opa looked across at me with a smile. "Do you know that someone in your family has actually held that mermaid cut-out in his hands?" he told us. Now Catherine and I were rivetted. "Who? Opa Adri?" we said, feeling sure it would be our great-grandfather. "No. He only ever worked at the Rijksmuseum," came the reply. "Like my cousin, Wil van Oort," Oma added. "Did we ever tell you that Wil trained under my dad and, just like him, also became the head paper restorer at the Rijksmuseum?"

Catherine and I weren't sure we knew this part of our family history. But Wil's name was instantly familiar to us. We knew that he and his family had lived at Oetewalerstraat, a property owned by our grandfather's mother, Maria. The Van Oort's house was used by my grandparents as a central point for post and other communications when they were on their many camping trips through Europe. We wrote letters to them during their nearly year-long tour of Europe in 1977 and always carefully addressed the letters "care of Mnr W. van Oort". But we never knew that Wil had worked with Opa Adri and occupied such an important position in the Rijksmuseum. The news made us feel even more proud. We looked back at the Matisse. If not Opa Adri or Wil, who could have restored this wondrous artwork?

"It's Wil's son, Andre," Opa said. "He restored this when he was only in his twenties, can you believe it. He had to take it apart and re-assemble it and he couldn't mess up because it's the only one in the world. It's worth millions of guilders you know. Quite an achievement for one so young." It was clear that even though André wasn't a direct relative of his, the discipline, skill, artistic gift and commitment that the restoration of such a historic artwork had demanded stoked my grandfather's

nationalist pride. Look at what the Dutch can do, he seemed to be saying. See how important your family is.

That July day in 1981 was the very first time I heard of André van Oort. It was to take another thirty years before I met him.

In September 2011 I got off the plane at Schiphol airport and immediately caught a bus to Haarlem. Before long I was trundling my suitcase behind me on the way to a semi-detached house in an undistinguished street in the city's suburbs. Andre met me at the front door with a warm hug and we entered the home he shares with his partner, Frida Molleman, and their dog and cat. As I might have imagined, the walls were covered with framed prints, art photographs and original artworks. Sculptures sat on top of shelves and tables. André pointed to pieces by Dutch artists Willem Sandberg and Sjoerd Buisman as we walked through to the open plan lounge. We immediately set about talking about the declining health of his mother, Johanna, and my grandmother, then ninety-three. Since her husband's death, and with all her children in the country, Oma had reluctantly moved back to South Africa, and was living in a retirement village in Umhlanga.

Over a cup of coffee and koek André and I began visually tracing our connection through the photo albums that were waiting on the table. In one photograph, the family Molenaar is sitting in front of a dark cloth backdrop, posed formally for a rare portrait that included all twelve children, six boys, six girls. "See, there's my grandmother, Tryntje, and her sister, Johanna, your great-grandmother," André said, pointing to the two young women in high-necked white shirts to the left of father Hermanus and mother Gerritje.

In our email exchange I'd told André why I wanted to meet. It wasn't just that he was a distant cousin, though I was thrilled to be establishing a direct connection with this side of my Dutch family again. I want to write a book about art restorers, I explained. Specifically the art on paper restorers in my family – and you're one of them. Several months after I had contacted him, I began asking André about his journey to becoming the chief paper restorer at the Stedelijk Museum and a restorer in private practice. He looked at me and shook his head. "I've been thinking about this

since you emailed me. I'm just amazed that anyone would be interested in the lives of art restorers. Are you sure about this, Diane? No-one's ever asked before."

Now it was my turn to look surprised. "Do you not know the importance of your work?" I asked. "I know it," I said. "I grew up believing that Opa Adri was special. That his work was doing something for humanity. And you've seen the queues outside art museums. People have an insatiable craving to be up close to artworks like the Matisse. If it weren't for your bravery and skills that wondrous cut-out might have fallen apart and be lost to us forever."

André looked sheepish while Frida nodded in agreement. Then look at these, he said with a smile, pushing a different photo album towards me. There, on one single page, were two photographs that I had never seen before. In both, a short man with white hair and glasses, and a much taller man with close-cropped dark hair, are bent low over a work table. They are both wearing what look like dark-coloured lab coats and are framing artworks. Propped up against the wall, next to a velvety couch in a recess, is a stack of oil paintings in gilded frames. The topmost one could only be a seventeenth century landscape and I instantly know I was looking at a studio in the Rijksmuseum. I was thrilled beyond words.

For a moment, I just stared at the photographs. "That's Opa Adri and your Dad in the Rijksmuseum," I said, looking across the table at André, my eyes sparkling. He nodded. After decades of hearing stories about my great-grandfather and the Rijksmuseum, I'm finally looking at him, working quietly and out of sight. It's confirmation of the pride I had felt that day on Museumplein. It's also the very story I want to tell, in two moving pictures.

Chapter Three

I came to know about the Rijksmuseum when I was a young girl living in the small village of Umhlanga Rocks. Back then, in the 1970s, South Africa was a strange place and Umhlanga, a short twenty minutes drive north of Durban, even more so. With its deep strip of beach that ends where the warm Indian ocean smooths out the sand, the town was a haven for sunseekers at all times of the year but in December, it came into its own as an enclave of idyllic summer living. For a couple of weeks each year, throngs of holidaymakers from the Transvaal would head down the N3 for a brief escape from a life hemmed in by highways, mine-dumps and the pursuit of money. At least that's how our gang of locals saw it when we watched yet another victim of skin-crisping sunburn waiting for a lifesaver to dispense enough soothing lotion to buy them just one more hour of beachtime.

Lying face down on the beach, with the smell of coconut-scented suntan oil drifting by and hearing the muted shrieks of children in the distance, it was easy to forget that, inland, there was an entirely different world. Just a few kilometres away lay the townships of Phoenix and Inanda. This was where the Indian and Zulu staff of Umhlanga's many hotels, restaurants, shops and garages lived, in houses most of us had never seen, even from a distance.

Umhlanga styled itself as the hedonistic playground of South Africa's rich, white and famous. I remember standing on a balcony, aged ten, watching as the newly crowned Miss World, Anneline Kriel, emerged from a helicopter and sunk her high heels into the lawn of the Cabana Beach Hotel, waving at the cheering crowd. In the isolation spawned by apartheid, we could scarcely believe an Afrikaans girl from Witbank, whose father was a prison officer, had won the favour of people overseas. We didn't doubt Anneline's beauty, but how she had managed to convince the world to ignore the racist policies of the country she represented, I never quite understood.

Despite the village's aspirations, these moments of global glamour were intermittent. The truth is that Umhlanga was defined by the things common to small

towns the world over. Gossipy neighbours. The same friends in the same school, from infancy to the final year of high school. Watching out for each other's kids and pets on streets that were safe to roam and ride our bikes in. Complaining to each other about another rain of black cinders as the sugarcane plantations that surrounded us were subjected to yet another controlled fire. The doctor who had seen to your stubbed toes on your nine-year-old feet and the hockey injury inflicted when you were fifteen. The shopkeepers who were happy to let you pay for your ice-cream the next day.

It also meant that most of us enjoyed an easy familiarity with the town's working population. A wave, a 'hello chief', a tip placed in an outstretched hand. We called them by their first names. Reggie, Petrus, Jane, Morgan, Esther. In white suburban homes Zulu or Xhosa surnames were stripped away and first names replaced by those that were just so much easier for the boss and madam to pronounce. Those who served us were never to be seen walking, unhurriedly and content, along the seashore as the sun sunk away to another part of the world. Like the almost imperceptible spray of water that remains suspended in the air when a wave races towards the shore at spring tide, the workers were part of us but never with us.

In 1977, when I was becoming a teenager, apartheid was everywhere. I can't recall it now with any measure of clarity but the wooden benches that dotted the Umhlanga promenade could only have borne the description "whites only". I do remember, with a vividness that sometimes makes me startle, the "whites only" and "non-whites only" signs above the two different doors that led into the local bottle store. When, as an eighteen-year-old, I was eventually able to go into that shop, I realised how deceiving the doors were. Behind the one meant for whites was a space large enough to trundle a trolley through as you reached for the variety of booze on the shelves. The "non-whites" had to make do with a single, wide counter, behind which stood one reluctant man. To those making the laws we lived under, only whites could possibly enjoy the exotic flavours of Coco Rico mixed with coke, or chilled dry white wine. Everyone else was arbitrarily gathered under the appellation "non-white" – a term we deliberately and proudly excised from our new stories when I joined the Press Trust of South Africa News Agency after university and began working as a struggle journalist. After they had entered the side door of the bottle store, the choice

black people had was limited to a quart of beer pulled from the crates stacked behind the counter like containers on a small ship.

Unease was nothing special in apartheid South Africa but there was a particular reason why an undercurrent of discord stalked my teenage years, even as I twisted out the water from my towel after yet another exhilarating ocean swim. My parents were liberals.

Back in the seventies, being liberal hadn't accumulated the aura of well-meaning impotence that it has these days. To grow up in a family like mine was to feel different from most of my friends who didn't mind calling their house-help "the girl" when demanding a white bread peanut butter sandwich and cold Clifton juice for their after-school lunch. From as early as I can remember, Emma, my teacher mother, never wavered from treating people with respect, no matter who they were. Time after time, when observing some injustice in the newspaper or on the petrol station forecourt, she'd gently guide us on what was right (we're all made equal) and what was wrong (apartheid).

Owen, my father, had an altogether different approach. His liberal beliefs came with a bohemian flavour. He was the only father for miles who went out for cigarettes in a kaftan, his hair loose and long. He was certainly the only dad in the village who hosted folk musicians in his lounge – musicians and singers who brought with them an unconventionality that was intoxicating to us children as we watched them play their guitars. It was a difference that probably played no small role in my parent's divorce when I was thirteen.

On a whim, Owen would fling me, Catherine and my two brothers, Nicholas and Mathew, into the back seat of our grey VW Type 3 1500, registration NJ 9090, jam the car into first gear and pull out of our red brick driveway. At that moment we knew an adventure was ready to appear through the haze of cigarette smoke that was never far from my dad. One day it was to listen to folk music being played by guys and girls (with kaftans and even longer hair than his) in someone's garage. At other times we'd find ourselves parked near the water's edge in the Durban Harbour, binoculars pressed against my dad's face as he scoured the entrance for a pilot boat

making its way out to help another tanker safely to the quayside. My father had started his journalism career with the Argus Group at the Diamond Field Advertiser in Kimberley, where my sister was born, followed by a stint in the Orange Free State, at the only English-language newspaper for miles, The Friend. This is how I happened to be born in Bloemfontein. The fact of my birthplace was always guaranteed to provoke some teasing at school when it came up. Apartheid didn't just separate whites from blacks, Indians and Coloureds. A line was also cleaved between English and Afrikaans communities, and my friends found it funny that I had been born in the heart of the Orange Free State. Go and get on that bus with the barefoot kids, they would sometimes gently tease, pointing to the one carrying the Afrikaans children to their school.

When I was just a few months old, my small family moved to Durban where Owen took the position of shipping reporter at The Daily News. Who was gliding into town, with what payload, never ceased to grab his attention, even after he had long left that beat and become a feature writer and then a sub-editor. When he died, in 2003, he was working on two big paintings – one of Cape Town harbour and the other of Durban's. Both are now hanging in my home, their unfinished cranes, ships and buildings a reminder of Owen's sudden death, at sixty-five, that left me broken for two years.

Every now and then we'd venture into one of Durban's townships to go to a Hindu temple, or to visit one of my dad's colleagues at The Daily News. Usually he'd just have Catherine and me in tow, perhaps sensing that my younger brothers were better off at home if the police were to catch sight of a wild-haired, chain-smoking white man and his two daughters trawling through the streets of a township in a banged-up old car without permission.

I remember a night the three of us were invited to dinner at one of Dad's Indian friends. Catherine and I were used to the smell of incense and Indian music, both of which often greeted us as we entered our own home. Many evenings Owen would light a stick and sit cross-legged on the floor and play his sitar, a mizrab on his index finger and pure pleasure on his face. A stack of Ravi Shankar records was always near the turntable set on a dark wooden bookshelf in the lounge that also

contained Led Zeppelin, Bob Dylan and Freedom's Children, Owen's favourite South African prog rock band. We had driven for a while to get to the dinner – it was probably in the Indian township of Chatsworth – and a spread of Indian food greeted us. On the table, small and big silver bowls with handles offered up food in hues of earthy orange and saffron yellow with soft folded rotis. My sister and I kept eating as the adults spoke – about what I can't recall – and I vividly remember looking across at one point and seeing my sister turning a deep shade of red as she politely tried to pretend the heat of the curry wasn't causing her pain. Quickly our host called for a glass of cooling milk from the kitchen and Catherine's complexion gradually returned to normal. Everyone laughed, but the knowledge that young white girls didn't often share a meal with a table full of Indians in seventies South African hung in the air like a low-slung cloud.

It was on these trips that I first saw the cramped structures that passed for homes in the stretch of land at Umhlanga's rear. I knew that, no matter what the Nationalist government said about how everything was separate but sure as hell equal, the mass municipal houses that gave Phoenix a crushing monotony were a country, a planet away from the lush gardens and sparkling pools of many of my friends. And so, between chasing boys, suntanning, and shining at school, a feeling of guilt nagged at me. I was white and privileged. When I stopped to give it some thought, everything around me felt tainted, starting with my all white, all girls school in the neighbouring suburb of Virginia.

As I got older my unease with apartheid became a determined, hopelessly naïve conscientising, although I would not have known the word back then. In high school I chose Mahatma Ghandi's Satyagraha as the subject of a history project. His philosophy of passive resistance was developed while he lived in the Phoenix Settlement, in what later became Phoenix. My horror at the injustices of apartheid was only heightened after I visited the original site of his commune and newspaper press. Later, in matric, I discovered Athol Fugard's *Hello & Goodbye* and insisted on directing it for our annual house play competition. I was out of my depth with the subject matter, the acting talent I had to work with and my own skills as a stage director. Still, I wasn't to be deterred from making a statement by using a playwright whose work made plain his opposition to apartheid and some of whose plays were

banned by the government. My one true ally in this was my childhood friend Gwynne, whose dad was a journalist colleague of Owen's and whose family shared a similar outlook on apartheid. I still can't buy a Fattis and Monis product at the supermarket after Gwynne's brother Eric – then a university student – explained why we should join in the boycott of the food company that was being driven by the student organisation he belonged to. Together we concocted small volleys of protest, pointedly refusing to sing the national anthem, Die Stem, during school assembly and furtively reading the banned ANC in exile publications that Eric kept in his bedroom. Looking back now, I'm sure our righteous zeal stoked its fair share of gossip in Umhlanga's suburban houses and went unnoticed by those who were actually affected by apartheid. But we didn't care. We knew our efforts were small and they never intruded on our teenage world of the beach, boys and schools, but we convinced ourselves that we were at least doing something to show our protest at the system that we were forced to live under.

It was in this uncomfortable, schizophrenic world that I found the Rijksmuseum. That's the wrong way around. It found me. And when it did, it gave me a feeling almost unimaginable in apartheid South Africa, which was already being isolated from the rest of the world. I experienced a deep, pure, personal pride of the kind that could be shared with the world. For within the walls of the national monument with its seventeenth-century paintings, my great-grandfather had worked as an art restorer. My grandmother would sometimes recount to us how daily, from 1933 until he retired, her father made his way into the small side door off Jan Luijkenstraat and headed up the stairs to the paper restoration studio in the eaves of the museum where he'd set about coaxing paper back to life.

There was something else too, something that I could never, ever keep to myself when discussions of great art or the Netherlands or the Second World War came up at school. When war broke out in Europe in 1939, Opa Adri – as I used to imagine it – put on his grey, heavy-duty working coat, and walked down the stairs leading to the three-storied museum library. From there he moved a little faster, in the direction of the Gallery of Honour, to the very place the architect, Pierre Cuypers had created for Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* in 1885. In the Night Watch Gallery he joined the team of co-workers who, with extraordinary care, were detaching the

massive painting from its frame and preparing it for transportation far away from the museum, to a place where Hitler's art raiders couldn't touch it.

If there was one thing I knew for certain in the uncertain time of my childhood, it was this: My Opa Adri wasn't just a brilliant restorer of artworks. He was also a hero.

Chapter Four

It's May 10th 2012, and my sister Catherine and I are deep in the bowels of the Rijksmuseum. Surrounding us is a darkness so dense it's as if we have plunged off the edge of space and not walked into a cool room still scented with the lingering smell of damp concrete.

For the first time since we entered the museum, awed and awkward in ill-fitting blue hard hats and oversized luminous green reflective safety jackets, all thoughts of Rembrandt and his Night Watch, now just a couple of hundred metres away from us in the temporary public area, are gone. "Should we just wait here?" I whisper to our companion, Idelette Van Leeuwen, remembering that one of the builders had warned the head of the Rijksmuseum's paper conservation studio of the impending power shut down when we walked this way with her an hour or so earlier.

As I say this, I stab at my cellphone, coaxing just enough light out of it to reveal the door to the corridor leading towards the builder's exit. Before Idelette can answer me, the fourth member of our group, Peter Poldervaart, opens it and takes a few small steps forward into the inky passage beyond. "Come on," he yells. "We can make it." "No, Peter, come back. Let's wait until the lights come back on," Idelette replies sensibly. But Peter has had enough of our uncertain hovering at the corridor's threshold and has other engagements ahead of him. "It's OK," he reassures us. "I can see".

In the silence we hear the unmistakable sound of metal clicking. A small burst of yellow sparks ahead of us confirms my suspicion: Peter is using his cigarette lighter to find the route forward. "No lighter please, Peter. Please". The urgency in Idelette's voice ripples through the stillness and I know she's having the exact thought that I have. Here we are, standing in the heart of a building where eight hundred years of Dutch history has been meticulously assembled, and its past head of paper conservation has a potentially lethal instrument in his hands.

A few heart-pumping minutes later, Peter spots another door. In the gloom, Idelette, Catherine and I can also just make it out. “If you open that door, we will have light,” Idelette calls to Peter – and he does. When we stumble into the daylight, we laugh. “You’re a brave restorer, Peter,” I say to him. “You saved us from being trapped in the Rijksmuseum forever.”

As we walk back towards the paper conservation studio on Hobbemastraat, we pass through a vast atrium topped with a glass roof that looks down onto polished Portuguese stone. The triple volume area is lit up by the natural light filtering through suspended white frames that architects Antonio Cruz and Antonio Ortiz dreamt up for the Rijksmuseum, one hundred and twenty eight years after Pierre Cuypers watched his building rise up in Amsterdam. When the museum eventually reopens nearly a year after our visit, this nest of oversized, upturned kid’s playpens – stark modernist chandeliers, they’re being called in the architectural reviews – turns out to be the most strikingly bold and contemporary addition to the building. With its ripple of lights on the bottom edge of each chandelier, these structures now light up the two inner courtyards that had been turned into galleries in the nineteen fifties and sixties but are now part of the light-filled Atrium where visitors enter the building.

Before we had made our escape through the dark, Idelette and Peter had taken Catherine and I up into the old paper restoration studio where my great-grandfather and his nephew, Wil van Oort both worked. As we climbed the stairs, past the lead windows, I looked at Catherine. All those years of imagining our Opa Adri at work were about to disappear and a three-dimensional shape of his studio was tantalisingly waiting for us at the top of the steps.

For my sister, this had particular poignancy. “Catherine, you should come to Holland and study restoration with Wil and André,” our grandfather had said to my sister many times when her last year of school approached. Catherine had a meticulous approach to everything she did. It had caused some explosive fights when we shared a room for the entire length of our childhood and teenage years. But she also had an unassuming artistic talent and my grandparent’s instincts were right: with both these traits Catherine had the qualities to represent a new generation of restorers in our extended Dutch family. The odds were not in her favour. When she finished

school in nineteen eighty, it appeared unlikely we would ever be able to acquire the Dutch citizenship that my cousins – the children of a male family member – had been able to claim since birth. When, in 2011, she finally acquired the citizenship that would easily have enabled her to study in the Netherlands, Catherine was close to fifty – too old to start studying for a profession that now requires a five-year degree.

Idelette had warned us there was little to see of the old Restauratieatelier van Prenten and, when we moved through the open door, we saw she was right. The studio had been excavated during the restoration and was now an empty shell, freshly painted white and ready to be used as an office. We didn't care. We walked over to the windows looking out onto Jan Luijkenstraat, and touched the heavy wood that criss-crossed them. The windows that had helped turn Pierre Cuypers' building into one of the most elaborately decorated facades in the Netherlands seemed to bring us closer to our great-grandfather, and Wil. As we gazed, in silence, at the rooftops and the trees, we knew we were seeing what their eyes saw when they looked up from the work lying before them on a trestle table placed in front of the window like an altar. The only major difference was the temporary entrance into the Fragmentengebouw out of which a queue of people now snaked towards the street. During the decade that the Rijksmuseum was closed, it housed an exhibition of 17th-century works – The Masterpieces – to ensure that the museum was still able to draw visitors.

Peter breaks the silence. "When I was in Paris, I heard that that Van Oort was doing an experiment with choride dioxide that didn't go well," he says, demonstrating the pouring of liquid with his hands. "Apparently he was standing at the table by the sink and there was an explosion that blew out the windows in this very studio. Even downstairs they heard a big bang."

It's a funny story and it inspires Peter to tell us about the hazardous working conditions of paper restorers hidden beneath the three triangular roofs in the western corner of the building. When he took over as studio head from Wil van Oort, he immediately got rid of the Thymox disinfectant that was used to keep the atelier clean. "That was the first thing I threw out. The whole print room was smelling of this awful stuff. Toxic!" He also requested that the machines in the climate room be relocated. "Imagine if there was a spark from one of them while we were working

with alcohol," Peter says, raising his eyebrows at us. "Poof." Idelette and Peter look at each other and laugh. Although she spent the early days of her career in this old studio, since 2007, Idelette has been working in the Atelier Building in Hobbesmastraat, which was the first building that Cruz and Ortiz designed as part of the Rijksmuseum project. The building is now the main centre for restoration and conservation in the Netherlands and is very different to the self-sufficient environment that Peter, Wil and Adri had thrived in.

The older restorer suddenly notices something. "The trees! They have been chopped! Every year I would see the trees growing taller. I suppose they don't want them to fall against the building." There's a trace of wistfulness in Peter's unfailingly energetic voice as he looks out of the window towards a view that's imprinted in his mind like the outline of a shell in sand. It returns when we go up into the roof towards what used to be the wet room and which now houses part of the museum's climate control system. The low ceilinged space was hazardous to tall restorers, Peter points out before he suddenly remembers another story. "The book binding restoration was also done up here. At one time, there was a hole in one of the lead windows and a parrot flew straight through it."

It's a light-hearted image – a bird, a book, a binder – and Peter follows it up with a story of climbing out through a small escape door that is visible beneath the low-hanging roof. "We would go up and over the roof into the other departments," Peter says. "Of course it was completely not allowed but it was the quickest way of getting there." I think about my great-grandfather working in this part of the museum during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands in the Second World War. Did he climb through the small door and make his way along the roof to the small turret that looks out towards the old city? Did it feel, for a moment, like freedom? Did Adri look towards the horizon and imagine his daughter – my grandmother – far away and safe in Africa? My thoughts are broken by Peter. "They've done a nice job here," he says as he surveys his old stomping ground. "That was lovely," he remarks as we leave the roof and make our way downstairs.

It's two years before I am able to return to the Rijksmuseum. This time, the workman have packed up their ladders and tools, there are no unlit walkways to

fumble through and Antonio Cruz and Antonio Ortiz's vision for transforming the building has been completed. What's revealed, as I descend the stairs from the bicycle and pedestrian passage that bisects the building, is an intensely visual, wondrously sensuous experience that is as much about the art and artifacts contained in the Rijksmuseum as the building itself.

I'm in a hurry to get to the library to make the most of the short stretch of time I have to research my great-grandfather and Wil van Oort's years at the Rijksmuseum. But it's impossible to move with speed through the building and I slow down to take in the results of a decade's worth of work that cost – I read later – €345 million. For first-time visitors, the aluminum cages suspended above each courtyard are likely to be the most striking feature, unequivocally signaling the building's twenty-first century intention. But I had already seen these on my visit in 2012 and want to discover new surprises. I'm rewarded when I emerge out of a stairwell on my way to the Night Watch Gallery and look up to see an ocean of stars that have been painted on the ceiling by British Turner Prize-winner Richard Wright in a work of art called *Ceiling Painting with the Optical Illusion of Vaulting*.

As I walk through the museum, I am struck by the feeling of floating through centuries of history that have formed my ancestors. With the hand-drawn museum plan in my hand, I explore the floors, now divided up into different centuries: 1100 – 1600, 1600 – 1650, 1650 – 1700, 1700 – 1800 and 1800 – 1900. I never make it up to the top floor where the last century is housed because I'm too gripped by images and artifacts that I can imagine my great-great-great grandparents seeing and using.

There's a document that I have back in my Johannesburg home that traces the lineage of my grandfather, Julius Reuvers, as far back as the seventeenth century – the very time of the unfolding of the Golden Age of Dutch culture which is the centrepiece of the Rijksmuseum. The first name on the five pages is Jan Peters Reuvers, who married Hillekun Gerits on November 29th in 1657 in the small town of Kerkdriel, eight kilometres outside of s'Hertogenbosch. Jan Peters is followed by Peter Jansz De Reuver and then Christianus Reuvers, also born in the seventeenth century.

I close my eyes and summon them all to this Museum of the Netherlands. I had come in search of something specific – the when, where and what of my great-grandfather's employment at the museum. But I haven't prepared myself for the sheer bliss of walking through centuries of objects, buildings, landscapes, vessels, waterways, food and drink that surely must have been in the lives of the families that are my maternal ancestors – the Reuvers, the Marchals, the Molenaars and the Van Coolwijks. Here a piece of Dutch porcelain, there a doll's house, and just ahead, coins, ships models and tapestries. I emerge as if from a dream when I finally get to the library entrance on the first floor.

With its exquisitely restored design and ornaments, the library is the part of the Rijksmuseum that has been most untouched by Cruz and Ortiz's re-imaginings. It is in this room, together with the grand staircases, the entrance hall and the anteroom to the Gallery of Honour that Cuypers' original decorative scheme has come alive again. These are the locations in the new museum that bring to life the architect's notion that a national museum should not shy away from being a place where there should be reminders – around every corner, above every threshold, on every floor – that the artworks on the walls were never created in isolation. In this way, a decorative scheme was an integral part of Cuypers' plans, perhaps signaling as well the role of art and decoration in the lives of ordinary Hollanders: people like my grand-parents, my great-grandparents and my great-great grand-parents.

I did a lot of thinking about decorative art when writing about André's restoration of *The Parakeet and the Mermaid*. As he progressed further into his cut-out period, Mattise upended the division between decorative and fine arts that practitioners of the latter had held onto so steadfastly. He reclaimed paper as a medium of art that was as much capable of permanence and power as a canvas with paint. The seeds of the modern day master's second artistic life were sown when he began having his cut-outs placed on the light brown wall of his bedroom in his apartment at No. 132, boulevard de Montparnasse in Paris. Starting with a silhouette of a swallow, Matisse was soon covering the walls with decorations. His works didn't depict a national story, like Cuypers' in the Rijksmuseum, but an intensely personal one, mostly derived from the sky and seas of Tahiti, which the artist had visited some twenty years earlier.

On the way out, I buy a small book published by the Rijksmuseum titled *The Building As A Work of Art.* I read that the stained glass windows in the Stadhouderskade frontage, the coloured tiles, delicately painted mottoes, sculpted figures, carvings and interior wall paintings were so important to Cuypers that he brought in outsiders to execute them. Belgian sculptor Francois Vermeylen and the Viennese painter George Sturm arrived in Amsterdam and ran workshops for the people who constructed the building's sculptures and its monumental decorations. A school of design for apprentice craftsmen – the Rijksschool voor Kunstnijverheid – was set up in the west tower as a way of ensuring that Vermeylen and Sturm's skills were passed on to future generations of Dutch craftsmen. This wasn't the only school that emerged out of the Rijksmuseum project. In 1891, the Teekenschool was opened in Hobbemastraat. The moss green and gold tile panel on the front of this building still reads, "Teekenen is Spreken en Schrijven tegelijk" ("drawing is speaking and writing in one").

In a bold move, Cuypers envisaged these schools as places where the national art education of Dutch youngsters would flourish through the stimulation of the collection in the museum. He could never have known that the Rijks Normaalschool voor Teekenonderwijzers and Rijksschool voor Kunstnijverheid would be the forerunners of the admired Dutch fine art institution, the Gerrit Rietveld Academie. Nor that his notion of a museum as a place of education would be one of the guiding forces when the Dutch government put the Rijksmuseum project out to tender in the opening years of the twenty first century. The current Teekenschool was opened in 2012, a year ahead of the Rijksmuseum's grand opening a year or so later. These days schoolchildren, teachers and families make full use of the building, just as Cuypers had envisaged. There is even a modern-day motto to go with the museum's centre of public education – "learning to look by doing".

But there is something about the new Rijksmuseum that Cuypers could not have anticipated. During the decade it was closed for an upgrade, what also happened was the painstaking return of Cuypers' richly decorated walls and ceilings, his terazzo floors and grand nineteenth century galleries, to their original state under the guidance of restoration architect Gisbert Gijsbert van Hoogevest. The building is now itself as

consuming a work of art as the works that line its walls. What took place here, away from the eyes of the millions of visitors who came to the smaller, south wing of the museum to view its masterpieces from December 2003, was a restoration at the hands of a whole new generation of Dutch conservators.

Chapter Five

For what seemed like hours, Peter Poldervaart regards the elongated lump of paper before him. Hard and densely compacted, you could knock a man right off his feet with it, should you be so inclined.

The paper stack is lying on a plain white table in the restoration studio of the Rijksprentenkabinet, the part of the Rijksmuseum where the biggest collection of drawings, prints and photos in the Netherlands is kept. It is September 1977. Around Peter are sitting the other restorers, including the studio's head, Wil van Oort – a man he knew is regarded as one of the most experienced paper restorers in the Netherlands, if not the whole of Europe. On one side of the studio stands a large wooden paper press and, next to it, two shelves heaving under the weight of bottles and brushes of different sizes.

The restoration studio is hidden away in the eaves of the Rijksmuseum. With some disappointment, Peter has begun to realise the studio's location is a fitting one, at least in the view of the museum's directors. Even before he first rang the bell at the side entrance and walked up the three flights of stairs that led to the studio, Peter knew something of the hierarchy in the museum. Men with strong hands was what the directors said they required when looking for workers for the studio. Technicians. Quite different to what was needed for the painting restoration department, where being an artist was considered essential.

Just beneath the studio is the museum's balconied library, a four level space stuffed with art books, many accessible only by navigating the narrow wrought iron spiral staircase that runs up one side of the room. Peter thought about what treasures were to be found there when he finally had the chance to run his hand along the upright spines of the crowded shelves. The son of an antiquarian bookseller who had also hauled books around a similar bookshop in Utrecht as a teenager, he knew he would feel right at home as his fingers strummed the soft edges of the stacked books.

But there is no time for such indulgences. A start must be made on the squat lump that, right now, looks like nothing more than an ageing amateur papier maché project with no discernible style.

As he looks down at the table, Peter starts pushing aside the uncertainty he has been feeling. He examines the tools he arranged next to the block of paper when it was delivered to the studio from the Rijksprentenkabinet's underground stores.

The most important for the first phase of the task is a stainless steel palette knife that provides a long enough handle for him to grip and ends in a fine probing tip. It is the kind of instrument one encountered when nervously looking up at the dentist. Peter loves his knife. From the moment he was gruffly told by his first paper restoration teacher to "take this piece of steel and make a knife", he has known the central position of the instrument in his work. He takes up his knife, its light weight familiar between his fingers. He is pleased with the expectant shine of the steel.

Alongside a small brush and a roll of plastic is a small pot of enzymes. Maxatase, mixed into a solution with ethyl alcohol. The mixture has been created by the Central Research Laboratory for Objects of Art and Science in Amsterdam a few years back after a thin layer chromotography examination had revealed the proteins of the glue that was binding the block of paper together. Peter wasn't around when the scientific technique – which he knew was used to separate mixtures – began to reveal the secrets of the paper block in front of him. But he is eager to test out the enzyme solution and see how he might make it better fit the needs of the paper pieces that are mashed together like a bug trodden onto a pavement.

At the time the scientists were making a start on the mysteries of the paper lump, Peter was working on the Frits Lugt drawing collection in Paris. The ten years that he worked there meant that Peter knew that his success with the project that lies before him would depend as much on his tools as the nerve to make all the right moves at the right time.

Now lost in thought, he remembers that it was at the bottom of the spiral staircase in the Rijksmuseum that the offer to work on the Lugt collection was made

in 1968. On that particular day, he was attempting to secure a full-time position at the Rijksprentenkabinet. Told there was nothing going, he was about to leave the building when a little old man he had never seen before appeared from nowhere and offered him a job at the Fondation Custodia in Paris. When can you start, the man asked? Monday, Peter replied.

If he was to be truthful, Peter didn't know too much about the collection when he arrived at the beautiful building on Rue de Lille. But he quickly grasped the importance of his new role as restorer of the more than seven thousand drawings, fifteen thousand prints, old books, paintings and tens of thousands of artists' letters that had been assembled by collector and connoisseur who had relied on nothing but his intuitive feeling and love of art when assembling his collection in the early part of the twentieth century.

When he heard about Lugt making a catalogue of his self-created "Museum Lugtius" at the age of eight, Peter knew his new boss was an obsessive. But the pleasures of the collection were many for the twenty-five year-old. He had always been eager to examine the Rijksprentenkabinet's hundreds of Rembrandt drawings and he was happy to discover a substantial amount of the master's work in the Lugt collection – particularly his etchings. There were also plenty of drawings and prints by Rembrandt's students and contemporaries, people like Govert Flinck, Ferdinand Bol, Nicolaes Maes and Lambert Doomer.

As the only restorer at the collection – which had been given to Foundation Custodia by Lugt and his wife Jacoba Klever in 1947 – Peter had to rapidly build on the knowledge he'd gleaned from a short, unpaid stint in the Rijksprentenkabinet a little while back. He remembers, with unusual clarity, Lugt coming into his workshop and handing him a drawing. Restore it like this, the older man instructed, pointing his finger at the work. Peter looked at what Lugt was holding. No, he replied. To do it right I must do it a different way and if you don't think I'm good enough, give it to someone else. But it's my drawing, Lugt replied, surprised that someone would disagree with him, an internationally acknowledged expert on prints and drawings. That moment was a turning point in Peter's work as a paper restorer. Summoning all the conviction he could, he looked back at Lugt and said, "It might be your drawing

but I'm responsible for it". Finally Lugt relented. Then do it your way, he conceded, and left the workshop.

But Peter has never encountered anything quite like the mushed up paper in front of him. He doubts if anyone has, except maybe whoever had a go at it in the fifties and then gave up. He can't help thinking that perhaps that person was working in this same space, and maybe in the same season, with the days getting shorter and the room losing its sunny warmth. He glances out towards Jan Luijkenstraat. It would not be long before the white tendrils of winter would start inching their way down the buildings across from the museum. Soon Vondelpark, just a few streets down, would draw down its mid-year lushness for the last time, and welcome skaters to its frozen lakes.

The thought of ice jolts him from his reverie. Ice, unending, shifting, unmoving menacing mountains of it, is the reason why he was asked to report to the Rijksprentenkabinet studio for half of every weekday for … well, no-one honestly yet knows for how long. He looks back at the paper lump. As the child of a man whose lack of business acumen turned him from being a respected bookseller into doing mail orders out of a farmhouse, Peter has known days so cold it felt like your blood had frozen in its tracks. But it had nothing on the experience of the men whose hands had touched the paper hidden in the block before him.

Nova Zembla. Novaya Zemlya in Russian. New Land. He runs the words around his head as he traces around the outline of the block with his finger. When he looked it up on a map he thought that Arctic Ocean archipelago in the North of Russia resembled the embryo of a prehistoric creature. A strange and otherworldly being, its tendrils encasing a piece of rocky land near the very top of the world that was only rarely inhabited.

Like most Dutch kids, he had grown up hearing the story of navigator, cartographer and explorer Willem Barentsz and his fellow explorer Jacob van Heemskerck who set off in 1596 to discover the North East passage to China. The project was funded by the Amsterdam Town Council and Amsterdam merchants who made sure the ship was stocked with trading goods. It wasn't Barentsz's first attempt

at finding a quicker route to Asia. Journeys had been attempted in both the previous years but, in both cases, the ships had to return to Amsterdam, their crews more experienced but ultimately defeated in their quest. The 1596 epidition would turn out no differently in the end. But this time, Barentsz, Heemskerck and their crew would have to face unimaginable hardships and not all of them made it back home.

The idea of a madcap adventure into the unknown always appealed to Peter. He left school early because of his dyslexia. Then, when he was eighteen, his distaste for authority made him stop eating for more than a month because he didn't want to serve in the Dutch army. No-one would order him to shoot someone, he told them. After thirty three days of outright refusal to comply, he was finally told he didn't have to come back. Not knowing what else to do, he went on an adventure of his own, finally ending up drinking tea in the Libyan desert before an encounter with an itinerant Dutchman sent him back to Holland. Peter asked when the man was going back home. With no happiness, he simply replied: "Never". "I can't do anything useful and I'm too old to learn," the man told him on that hot day.

This rebellion seems small now, the childish folly of a young man. What the thirty-eight-year-old Barentsz, his captain Jacob van Heemskerk and their crew set out to do close to four hundred years later is beyond imagining, Did they know, Peter wonders, when they sailed out of Amsterdam in May of that year, that a scant few months later their vessel would be in the iron grip of icebergs, unable to shift a few centremetres left or right or up or down? Another map he has seen, the one Barentsz reportedly took with him, showed no impediments on the journey northwards, save for a clutch of frolicking, spouting whales awaiting the explorer able to finally make that north east voyage.

He closes his eyes. He tries to imagine what it was like to "overwinter" for nearly ten months in a shelter built partly from the very ship that was supposed to take you home when the sun finally reappeared and the icebergs began relinquishing their month-long hold. Building the shelter, he knows, took almost everything from the men who'd already battled icebergs and terrible winds as they inched their way northwards. He imagines that even the discovery of Spitsbergen near Norway didn't mitigate the disappointment that the adventurers felt when they finally decided to turn

back, only to find themselves trapped by ice just off Nova Zembla. The sixteen men who eventually tramped over the ice floes to the shore called the shelter they built Het Behouden Huys. The Saved House. Peter looks around the studio. The 7.8 by 5.5 metre shelter on Nova Zembla was barely bigger than the space he is now working in.

In preparing for the work he is about to do Peter has done some further research. A description, written in 1884 by historian Samuel Richard van Campen, in the preface to Daniel van Pelt's English translation of Hendrick Tollens' *The Hollanders in Nova Zembla*, has stuck with him. He reads it again.

They went to work, returned to the ship, and brought away planks and beams, nails, pitch, boxes, and casks; planted the beams in the ice with all due ceremony, made a roof of what had been the deck, hung up their hammocks, lined the walls with sails, stopped up the holes with pitch. But as their work went on they suffered in unheard-of ways, and were in constant danger. The cold was so great that when they put nails in their mouths they froze there, and could only be taken out by tearing the flesh and filling the mouth with blood. White bears, wild with hunger, assailed them furiously among the ice, around their cabin, even in the interior of the ship, and obliged them to leave their labor in order to defend their lives.

There was the moment when the sun finally reappeared after months of darkness, and earlier than Barentsz's careful computation.

But the fact was fully verified two days later, when one of them, opening the door, saw an extraordinary light, gave a shout, called his companions, and all went out of the cabin. There in the east the sky was illuminated with a clear radiance – the moon was pale, the air limpid, the summits of the rocks and mountains tinged with rose; the dawn at last, the sun, life, the benediction of God, and the hope of once more seeing their country after three months of darkness and anguish! For a few moments they stood silent and pensive, overcome by emotion; then they broke into cries and tears, embraced each other, waved their ragged caps, and made those horrid solitudes resound with accents of prayer and joyful shouts. But their joy was brief. They looked in each other's faces, and were filled with terror and pity one for the other. Cold, sleeplessness, hunger, and anguish of spirit had so consumed and

changed them that they were unrecognizable. And their sufferings were not yet over. In that same month the snow fell in such abundance that the cabin was almost completely buried, and they were obliged to go in and out by the opening of the chimney. As the cold diminished and daylight came, the bears reappeared, and the danger, the sleepless nights, the fierce combats began again. Their strength declined, and their hearts, a little lifted, fell once more.

How was it possible that through all the saturating hopelessness, the men in Het Behouden Huys didn't burn up all the paper that they had? And they had a lot when they left Holland. That had been established in the writings of one of the crew members, Gerrit de Veer whose illustrated journal had become a best-seller when it was published after his return to Holland. On board, and then taken to the house on Nova Zembla, was a stack of Renaissance prints that they hoped to trade once they reached China, bringing home spices and tea. Surely staying warm was more important than saving works of art?

But they kept at least some of the prints away from the constantly burning fire that was the only barrier between them and certain death. The pulpy mass sitting before him is evidence of this and so are the many other papier maché blocks still waiting for him to coax back to life. For long after Barentsz and his men had finally left Nova Zembla, in two small open boats, and several hundred years after the famed navigator died on the achingly slow journey to the Kola Peninsula in Russian Lapland, where a dozen crewmen were rescued and finally returned to Holland, the Renaissance prints were discovered.

Once holding the promise of spices within their folds, the prints are nearly unrecognisable, having long been buried when the ice finally claimed back Het Behouden Huys. By the time Norwegian seal hunter Elling Carlsen and, later, English explorer Charles L.W. Gardiner found the remains of The Saved House in the 1870s, the animal glue in the paper had penetrated through all the layers. It's a wonder, Peter thinks, that those who found what Barentsz and his men had left behind even thought to bring back the grey stodgy mess in front of him.

It's a hundred years since the Rijksmuseum acquired the severely damaged prints, along with other objects – weapons, tools, personal belongings and, most heartbreaking, the letter written by Barendtz before the survivors left the house and stored in powder horn by the fireplace. 'May our god grant us safe voyage and bring us in health [back] to our homeland. Amen,' the explorer had written. Among the objects that made their way back to Amsterdam are a jumble of mismatched shoes, made of thin leather, many open-backed – footwear that was woefully inadequate for trudging and hunting on ice. "Het leer van onze schoenen bevroor aan onze voeten; het werd zo hard als hoorn en sloeg aan de binnenkant wit uit," wrote De Veer. "We konden ze niet langer dragen en maakten wijde klompen met een bovenkant van schapenvacht, waarin we drie of vier paar sokken over elkaar konden dragen." [23]

It seems impossible but somehow Peter must now unravel the mysteries of the prints. Which artists' work was loaded on the ill-fated ship when it left the coast of Holland far behind? What was the subject matter of the prints? What did the Dutch explorers want to say about their land to the Chinese whose wares were so highly coveted? Was it even possible to answer these questions, he wonders.

But he pushes these thoughts out of his mind as he prepares to take the first step. To get anywhere, he would have to start with the enzyme liquid. And water. If he'd told anyone outside paper conservation this, they'd have thought him crazy. The first time he saw a seventeenth century print immersed into a big basin of water, Peter himself was shocked. In the bookshop the thought of any kind of liquid getting near the stacks was enough to put the fear into him and his father. But, after a decade of feeling it move between his hands, hunting for the right way to make it whole again, he knows one thing about paper. It loves to swim.

Breathing slowly now, he picks up a ball of cotton wool, and with a sure hand, dips it into the solution and begins dampening the block of paper. He does this again and again until he knows it is time to stop. If anyone had come up to him and asked how he knew he'd done enough, he wouldn't know how to answer. It just feels right.

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[23] We could no longer wear [these shoes] and made wide clogs covered with sheepskin, that we could wear with three or four pairs of socks on top of one another.

Peter again reaches for the cotton wool and twisted off a section, now dabbing off the excess liquid in small, energetic bursts.

That job done, he reaches for the piece of Melinex sheet that he has positioned next to the amber jar of liquid and cottonwool. He pauses ever so slightly to consider if the choice of glue – an eight per thousands methyl cellulose MCP 400 solution – is the right one. Pushing any doubts from his mind, he swiftly grabs his small brush and dips it in the solution. He must slow down now. Carefully he pastes the glue on the sheet, his heart racing. Would the centuries of compaction prove too much for carefully planned task, even with a knife as good as his?

The transparent sheet now carefully placed on top of the outermost layer, he reaches for his instrument. No daydreaming, no imaginings of things past can stand in the way of this moment. Let the secrets be known. Steadying his hand as he moves towards the paper block, Peter slips the small sharp end of the knife between the top sheet and the one beneath it and gently begins lifting.

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Chapter Six

Before restoring a damaged masterpiece, wrote Max Schweidler in 1938, you should be in a spotlessly clean environment. A good quality for restorers, noted the German, is dedication to the task that awaits you. And a sympathetic understanding of the art object that will soon feel the touch of your hands.

The author of *Die Instandsetzung von Kupferstichen, Zeichnungen, Büchern usw*, or *The Restoration of Engravings, Drawings, Books, and Other Works on Paper*, made one last point about preparations ahead of restoration: you really must, he said, be in a good mood.

I examine the only photograph I have of my great-grandfather undertaking a restoration in the Rijksmuseum's atelier. Is he in a good mood? It's hard to tell. But he certainly looks serious. He's leaning in towards his blade, so dark in his hand it almost disappears, and his lips are slightly parted in the manner of a tightrope walker with thoughts only of his next steadying step in mind.

Placed in front of him, on a wide work table, is the object he's restoring. To my untrained eye, it appears to be a Renaissance print, of the kind where robed, supplicating figures throw their heads towards light streaking through the sky like the delicate, but insistent, sheddings of an orbiting comet. I notice that underneath his dark workcoat Adrianus is wearing a shirt and tie, and there's a watch on his wrist. But it's his hands that draw me in the most. The slight arch in the left. The comforting rounding of the right. His hands are easier to read than his mood: they are sure and steady as he prepares to take the artwork into them.

At the top edge of the print, Adrianus's tools are arranged on the table, ready for use. A row of glass containers the size and shape of gallon bottles for apple cider overlook an array of instruments spread neatly on a rectangular cloth and a scattering of cottonwool balls.

Looking at the photograph, it's easy to see why Max Schweidler likened the work of a paper restorer to that of a physician. For the author of the first major twentieth century European text on the subject, artworks were patients, the restorer's workshop was the clinic and the restorer performed surgery on an object weakened by accident or disease or time.

Though unprecedented in its detail, the German's weighty tome – "Anyone who has only a small amount of time available and thinks he might be able to finish my book on the streetcar, or somewhere else in between other activities, is better off leaving my book alone. It will not do him any good. It is not just an entertaining piece of literature, a pleasant chat in more or less beautiful words," he advised readers – wasn't the first European publication on restoration.

In 1846, French bookbinder, restorer, and writer Alfred Bonnardot published *Essai sur l'art de restaurer: Les estampes et les livres*, a slender eighty-page treatise, mostly on rare books and their bindings but also tackling art on paper restoration. Four hundred copies were printed and sold, which was considered enough of a publishing success for Bonnardot to take the page number up to a substantial three hundred and sixty in a revision edition of 1859. A German translation was published a year later but it would be another sixty years before an English version of this important text appeared.

Alfred Bonnardot was a modest restorer. His writing style was unassuming, and he took great pains to assure readers that he had no "special, certain skill". Instead, the Frenchman offered his publication as a mere suggestion to amateurs on how to go about "cleaning, repairing and freshening" rare books, especially their covers. These ideas, he submitted, might also usefully be applied to works of art on paper.

"It is possible, without being obliged to touch the boards of a book, to clean and repair the covering, either entirely or in spots," Bonnardot gently advises his readers. "To accomplish this, I know some methods which are simple and practical, although, of course, too imperfect to restore to an ancient binding all the brightness and vigor of its youth. A rather mature prima-donna may, perhaps, within certain

limits, soften the ravages of time; but, when observed closely, the lines on her face cannot be concealed. And this is also the case with the coquettish old bindings of which I speak."

But Bonnardot was also a visual artist who could evoke vivid images when writing about the objects of his adoration. He delighted, for instance, in the use of pebble-grained goatskin for book covers and was full of useful tips for the restoration of the "sumptuous moroccos of the Levant, the mere perfume of which fascinates all trueborn bibliophiles".

Did Schweidler come across Alfred Bonnardot's publication before setting about writing his book? It's possible, but the former print dealer tackled the task of detailing the experience he'd gained over several decades of restoration in Berlin with all the stridency of a novice religious zealot preaching in a morphine den. Perhaps his somewhat immodest tone was to overcome whisperings that his older brother, Carl, was the real restoring talent in the Schweidler family. Still, *Die Instandsetzung von Kupferstichen, Zeichnungen, Büchern usw* did well enough to enjoy a second edition, published in 1950, and is still considered important enough to have been translated into English and contexualised by retired head of paper conservation at the Boston Museum of Fine Art, Roy Perkinson, as recently as 2006.

Schweidler's book appeared only five years after Adrianus took up the offer of work at the Rijksmuseum and I wonder, had my great-grandfather read it, whether he would have found anything useful in chapters like "Treatment of China Prints Mounted on Copperplate Paper", or "Additional Hints For The Restorer of Postage Stamps"? Might he have agreed with the German that erasers are better than bread for cleaning prints? Or that regularly leaning across a print and sprinkling it with a specially concocted solution of vinegar water was absolutely the best way of dampening it?

Die Instandsetzung is of such immense detail that it requires four pages, in six point type, for the contents section alone. Throughout the book, Schweidler adopts a hectoring tone, and he doesn't think twice about berating glazers and framers – the tradesmen who most often fell into restoring in the early part of the 20th century – for

what he sees as their ham-fisted attempts at the work. What is needed, he vociferously states, are trade schools to prepare apprentice restorers and remove the work from untrained hands into those of professionals like himself.

But for all his pronouncements on the urgent need for art on paper restoration to be done by trained individuals, it's unlikely that he would have made a good teacher.

Whether busy with an Old Master print or toiling over his book, Schweidler didn't like to be disturbed when he worked. As 1938 gathered pace, he barely glanced out of the windows of his Berlin studio – a haven of organised tranquility – as he contemplated what would be better suited for tinting the print in front of him. Liquorice? Coffee? Tea? Chicory? In his spotlessly clean studio, he would lift prints that had been "left to their fate" in overnight water baths (the best way to remove cardboard backings he had come to think), with a single-minded dedication that kept the real world hovering like a faraway Zeppelin on the horizon.

When he took the journey home, Schweidler left the silent contemplation of his studio behind and plunged into a city whose surface normality – men and women stepping off trams to join up for a day in the Tiergarten; cigar sellers coaxing business out of preoccupied city workers; upper-class British girls walking through swastika-festooned streets to their finishing schools – masked an undercurrent. In 1938, Germany was heading for war, with Adolf Hitler having used the five years since he became Chancellor to cement his power and implement steps, like the Nuremberg laws, that were gradually stripping Germany's Jewish citizens of their rights.

There was no ignoring it when, on November 9th and 19th, ordinary folk joined members of the Sturmabteilung paramilitary – the Storm Troopers – to attack Jewish-owned businesses, schools, homes and Synagogues in a violent pogrom that became known as Kristallnacht.

In his writings, Max Schweidler does not mask the outrage he felt when works of art were mishandled by inferior craftsman whom he sees as failing, sometimes catastrophically, to meet his own rigorous standards and thereby condemning precious

artworks and masterpieces to certain death. But how did he react when news of the incineration of books and artworks – Kristallnacht's collateral damage – became known? Or, five years before that, on May 10th 1933, when the heat of 25 000 burning literary works threatened to singe the crowd of saluting onlookers that filled the city's Opernplatz? Was it possible that a man who had devoted his life to "preserving cultural treasures" stood by while books and artworks – works by nineteenth-century German Jewish poet Heinrich Hein; plays by Bertolt Brecht – were tossed onto smouldering piles and devoured by a force so rapacious that not even the most dedicated or skilled restorer could coax the paper on which they were printed back to life again?

The restorer certainly kept on with his work during the Nazi era and throughout the Second World War, publishing a revised version of *Die Instandsetzung* in 1950 that fleshed out his paper restoration methods even further. He also continued to take on restoration work for private clients and even began training a few apprentices.

Schweidler was filled with a sense of the historical importance of his work. Whether in his original 1938 text or his later revision, he was single-minded about paper restoration. Its only purpose, he believed, was to transmit "these treasures in the best possible condition to future generations". In pursuit of this, Max – or perhaps his brother Carl? – had devised several methods that made it virtually impossible to see if a print had indeed felt the touch of a restorer's hand.

Arduously, he would shave down the edge of a tear and insert a piece of paper with a beveled edge to create an undetectable joint made even more perfect by the stretching of the print that ended every restoration. With unwavering belief in their effectiveness, he prepared the acid baths that would brighten and clean prints. He would spend hours retouching prints with pigment on a brush so skillfully deployed that the new margin lines being created blended seamlessly with the old. He felt a sense of triumph when he finally perfected the by then established method of splitting a piece of paper in two, thereafter deploying this technique in two key situations: when there were drawings on both sides of a piece of paper or, astonishingly, "when a print is supposed to be used for a lampshade but it is not transparent enough because

the paper is too thick". Schweidler also spent hours "implanting" – as he referred to it – wire lines into prints made in the 17th, 18th and 19thh centuries, to make it appear as if they were the original lines of the mould in which the laid paper was made.

Schweidler's devotion to making the artworks as perfect as when they were first pulled away from the woodcut or the press was never questioned in his time. Even after the publication of his book, restoration remained little changed from what it had been a few centuries before: an intuitive, insular pursuit with practitioners setting their own rules. Until the nineteen sixties, when there was an explosion of interest, paper restoration was left to a scattering of individuals across the world, who devisds methods for artworks by letting their experience and, perhaps most importantly, the unique piece of paper in front of them tell them what to do.

If the paper restorers of this time paid any heed to the morality and ethics of making a print as good as new, with no proof of their work left behind, it went unremarked on. There's little evidence of restorers wrestling with the ethics of removing a part of an original print and then undertaking a repair that only the most skilled observer could detect. It was certainly what the robust market in Old Master prints and drawings in the nineteen twenties and thirties demanded from restorers like Schweidler, with Rembrandt etchings, Albrecht Dürer engravings and the like being collected and valued higher the more pristine their condition.

Indeed, even though he didn't detail it in his book, Schweidler made no secret of his ability to place watermarks into restored prints, disrupting the ability of art historians to date when an artist created it – whether it was done in the lifetime of the artist or even if it was a first state print. This technique and others that he was so proud of (implanting of wirelines, the creation of new margins) eventually led to the unflattering term *schweidlerized* which remains in use more than seventy years after the publication of *Die Instandsetzung*. The term is applied not just to the German's work but to any print or drawing that has repairs almost invisible to even to the most trained eyes, is sold for a price far higher than it is actually worth or is even an outright fraud. "Where does one draw the line between skillful repair and deception?" Roy Perkinson asked in his translation of Schweidler's text.

I look at a photograph of the tall restorer carefully pulling a print out of a basin with a roller, the tap and hose to his left testifying to the importance of water in his studio. With his silver, swept-back hair and white coat, Schweidler has the confident air of the surgeons he so frequently aligned himself with. He could scarcely have imagined that the outrage he felt when observing the shoddy work of "framers and glazers" would one day be turned on him; that museums, auction houses, historians and collectors would be on constant alert for any form of *Schweidlerism* in prints and drawings that aren't rare or intact after all, but reconstructions made of damaged artworks.

It's impossible to say if Schweidler knowingly created frauds by, for example, turning a damaged Lucas van Leyden print into something worthy of the Dutch engraver's own hand, or overseeing an apprentice as he restored a Rembrandt landscape etching by excising the damaged sky and replacing it with a new piece of paper altogether. What is certain is that most of the German's restoration methods eventually fell deeply out of favour.

It's not known when Schweidler died but after 1960 training became more rigorous, with the first formal qualification offered in the seventies. Technology also stepped in, assisting practitioners in gaining a better understanding of paper, ink, and other materials, and helping establish uniform standards. Treating paper with chlorine, for instance, was found to be harmful. The fact that Old Master prints and drawings had actually survived this toxic bath advocated by the German was ascribed to the durability of paper and inks made in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Gentle pressure with weights took the place of the stretching and laying down of a print. And Max's preference for using an airbrush to give back plate tone to an etching was dismissed as restoration quackery.

Still, the pace of change was not swift. The first comprehensive book to follow *Die Instandsetzung*, *Manuale per la conservazione e il restauro di disegni e stampe antichi,* edited by Carlo James, was only published in Italy in 1991. It took a further six years for an English edition to appear.

But by far the most important change emerging in the late sixties and seventies was philosophical. How far should a restoration go? In fact, wasn't the word all wrong in the first place? Didn't it imply taking a damaged or worn artwork and returning it to the very condition it was in when the artist finished working on it? Was keeping his or her work 'new' what the artist intended? Wasn't it better to conserve the artwork with the intention of prolonging the useful life of a piece of art?

And so a new word came into being. No longer would men like Max Schweidler and Alfred Bonnardot be known as restorers. Those who followed in their footsteps were to be called conservators. And while they were doing their work in New York or Paris or London or Berlin, these conservators would be on the hunt for the fingerprints of predecessors. Men who thought nothing – or so the new wave of conservators thought – of leading clients of the Berlin Auction House to believe, in the heady days of the 1920s, that the condition of the Old Master print they were buying had not changed since 1700.

Now, reversibility and visibility became standard, along with changes in tools and techniques. Schweidler, who believed so wholeheartedly in making his patients perfectly whole again, would have been shocked. Why on earth would you want to repair an Anthony van Dyk etching in a way that, if you leaned in closely, you could almost see the restorer's handiwork?

Still, there was one thing that hadn't changed. Call them restorers or conservators. Place them in a collection of experts charged with preserving art for humanity: museum directors, curators, civil servants, and conservation scientists. In the end, as art historian M. Kirby Talley Jnr so powerfully put it, " they are the ones who actually lay their hands on works of art … bear the greatest accountability for the proper care and treatment of anything entrusted to them". [iii]

When a restorer stands over a basin of water and plunges Pablo Picasso's *Le Repas Frugal* into a basin of water, he knows the point of no return has arrived. Should the world's most expensive etching start breaking up in front of his eyes, he will be remembered in the art history annals as little better than the mentally unstable schoolteacher who took a breadknife to Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*. There can be

no chinks of doubt or troubled thoughts when contemplating the path of a restoration. There can only be single-minded confidence about the task ahead. Max Schweidler was right after all. Before taking an artwork in his hands, a restorer really must be in a good mood.

Chapter Seven

In 1933, my great-grandfather went to work at the Rijksmuseum. But when he first entered through the small door in Jan Luijkenstraat he wasn't there to gently take a chalk drawing by an Old Master into his hands, and stop a fissure tracking an almost imperceptible route of destruction through the artwork.

Adrianus had been engaged as a cartonneur – a technician, charged with making boxes to store the works that were turning the Rijksprentenkabinet into the biggest repository of prints, drawings and photographs in the Netherlands. There was talk that he might be asked to double up as a museum guard, stoically stationed in one of the museum's many halls, invisible to passersby with eyes only for what was hanging on the walls. "I won't wear a monkey suit," he told Anna and the children as he slipped his silver watch on his wrist and checked that his wedding ring, made by his brother, was on his finger before leaving for his first day at work.

But he was grateful for the work. In 1930 he was retrenched from the Utrecht Botanic Laboratory where he'd work since leaving his printing job at the *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, the newspaper that had served the city where Adrianus was born since 1893. When he was informed that the laboratory could no longer afford to keep him, Adrianus was taken aback. He'd been really good at his job as an amanuensis to the professor working at Oude Hortus, the botanical gardens of the University of Utrecht, not far from the family home in Valkstraat in Utrecht's Vogelenbuurt. Surely his age meant that his younger colleague would get the axe first? "But the colleague had more working years at the laboratory and so it was dad who was left without a job," my grandmother Atty writes in her memoirs.

Adrianus wasn't alone in being jobless at the beginning of the thirties. By then, the fallout from the 1929 stock market crash in America had reached the Netherlands and several years of decreased work hours and wages imposed by the government had not, in the end, staved off mass unemployment. Still, even with their dad on state benefits for several years, it never got so bad that Atty and her brother Frederick were forced to wear the red coloured clothing that would have signaled to

everyone that the Marchal family was in a desperate situation. Or, worse for some, carry the notice of bicycle tax exemption that was given to the most destitute, pinned like a flag of failure on the outside of their clothing or flapping on the handle bars of a doortrapper, a cumbersome bicycle whose basic construction wouldn't allow riders the thrill of freewheeling downhill.

The Marchal family's financial plight was eased by the presence of an older woman who had come to live in the Valkstraat house as a boarder some years before Adrianus left the laboratory. "The financial arrangements, I never knew," says Atty of this set-up. "One did not speak about money." But for what other reason would the family have put up with someone who wasn't a blood relative and whose behaviour became increasingly strange? Once she even attempted to get Anna and Adrianus to change Frederick's surname to match hers, something the couple rejected with the appropriate measure of horror.

Known to the family as Tante Diehl, Frederika Gertruide Johanna van Krieken Diehl was a spinster. She came, it was said, from an upper class family and had twin brothers who had lived somewhere in the Netherlands but were now, like the rest of her family, dead. Why the seventy-year-old ended up living in the Marchal family's front room instead of her family home was never spelt out to the teenage Atty, but the clues were there.

"How embarrassed I used to be when I walked with her to one of her nearby friends," my grandmother writes. "She used to wear long black dresses and a hat with a big black bow in front, which I used to call her 'butterfly' hat. She would always carry a black umbrella called an 'en-tout-cas'. Her shoes were something else. As she was suffering from bunions, holes were cut in the uppers, which were then repaired in the shape of her toes with soft leather. Tante Diehl was sensitive to strong light so most of the time her dark blue blinds were three-quarter down, and, on top of it, she wore a visor. To a young mind it all seemed very strange."

Towards the end of Atty's school years, Tante Diehl left to live with close friends of the Marchals. "Was I relieved," my grandmother confessed. "The curtains were opened wide and we got our room back. She told friends she had not been fed

properly and was losing weight. My mother caught her emptying a glass of milk down the drain." Not long afterwards Tante Diehl died. As she exhaled her last breath she was, Atty heard it said, using "foul language".

More than seventy years later, when she wrote down her recollections of this time, Atty was struck by a thought. "Now we would understand that Tante Diehl in fact suffered from dementia," she wrote. Closing the book on her memories of the odd, upper class lady with a visor pulled low on her head, sitting in the front room, Atty sounded one last note in her handwritten memoirs: "My father was the only who attended Tante Diehl's funeral.'

Unlike their house in Utrecht, the family's Amsterdam home in Watergraafsmeer had been built fairly recently and even had its own bathroom. "Such luxury," recalls Atty. It was a happy change from having to take a once-a-week bath in an old galvanised bath filled with water heated up on the coal stove in the Valkstraat house. In Amsterdam she started the four-year long MULO schooling at a school near the family home and, to her surprise, began to enjoy lessons for the first time. "What a difference in atmosphere," she says of the school that was for both boys and girls. "For every subject, we had a different teacher and everybody was more friendly. Our history teacher was, in the eyes of us students, very weird. On cold days he would stuff newspapers between his coat and body which we thought was hilarious. Somehow I wished I had paid more attention to his lessons. He tried to make it more interesting and did not go by the book."

Even though the stealthy advance of fascism and the ongoing financial crises were front page news on many days, the young Atty found Amsterdam a carefree place.

After school, she would go to the local pool – the Sportfonds-en-Bad – with her friends and splash in the water until the badmeester's whistle shrieked out like the grinding brakes of the trains that ran hourly into Centraal Station. Not even the plunging temperatures of winter stopped Atty and her friends from grabbing their towels and heading to the baths. Sometimes it was so cold that their hair froze under their maroon rubber bathing caps, making thick crystallised lumps that had to be

untangled at home with a broad comb. Never mind! A bowl of pea soup or stamppot, a dish of vegetables mashed with potatoes, would soon warm up Atty and her friends after they had made their way through the ice-sheathed streets to Watergrafsmeer.

My grandmother loved winter, when you could wake up one morning to find that the meadows and parks had magically turned into ice-skating rinks overnight.

With her dad as her patient teacher, she learnt to skate properly in 1929 when Utrecht's canals were frozen over during an especially severe winter. "You could go from one end to the other of the town just on skates," she writes, the rare thrill of seeing the underbelly of the bridges she had walked over hundreds of times still palpable. Nearly eighty years later, my grandmother's recollections of the wonders of her wintry childhood are undimmed. "The best Sundays I remember were in wintertime when it had snowed," Atty writes. "It would get dark at about 4.30 in the afternoon and all us cousins were allowed outside to make a big snowman and a 'glijbaan'. We did this by running along and then sliding across the snow so the track looked like a mirror. On these days, the nights were beautiful. The sky was clear with lots of stars and a full moon. The highlight was walking home instead of going by tram and hearing our footsteps make the snow crunch."

I have this description in my mind when I go into my youngest daughter's room to look at one of the many cross-stitch pictures with Dutch themes made by my grandmother that hang in the homes of her children and grand-children in cities and towns scattered throughout South Africa. Against a blue background, it has everything Atty loved about winter, in one teeming picture. A child in a red woollen hat using a wooden chair to haltingly get going on the hard ice. Couples holding hands as they lift up their legs in unison while others gently reach around their partner's waist as they flutter forwards. Two young friends building a sloppy snowman. A jaunty teenage girl in a white and red striped jersey showing off her skillful moves. A crowd gathering to buy stroopwafelen and hot chocolate from the vendors in their stands at the rim of the rink. And, on the bandstand in the centre of the ice, a band playing with gusto beneath a fluttering red, white and blue Dutch flag.

When my grandmother was sixteen, the famous Norwegian skater, Sonja Henie, stopped off in Amsterdam on her European tour and Atty and her friends joined the crowds at one of her public displays. Sonja had twice won Olympic titles with an especially delicate, balletic style, and, with her ringletted blonde hair and sparkling smile, was already displaying the glamour that would make her a movie star later in the decade. She was partnered by Phil Taylor who, quite unbelievably to the giggling teens encasing the rink, skated on stilts. There were other distractions too, like when the first branch of the Hema opened near the swimming baths. "Not one item was above one guilder. I remember buying a pair of lined kid-gloves and pure silk stockings both for one guilder. This was also the time of the 'tangee' lipstick, which was pale in colour but, after applying to your lips, turned a lovely red. It was also the time of famous face powders like Coty and French Houbigant, which was my favorite, and had such a lovely smell." Like she often does in her memoirs, my grandmother adds a matter-of-fact comment that is revealing of the time she's writing about. She notes that, in spite of the glittering wonders that awaited the young women of Amsterdam on the shelves of the Hema, "make-up was still frowned upon and associated with prostitution".

Atty spent two happy years in Amsterdam before the Marchals packed up their house and returned to Utrecht. "We moved back because my dad was very close to his two brothers and they had a lot in common. My mother used to say they bred like rabbits. Of course the rent was much cheaper in Utrecht, but my father forgot the expense of a season train ticket between Utrecht and Amsterdam."

My grandmother didn't mind returning to the city of her childhood but her time in Amsterdam had brought one life-changing event. As she recalls, "When I was sixteen I met a boy with blond curly hair and blue eyes. His name was Julius Reuvers and he was twenty which seemed so old to me."

My grandparent's relationship wasn't plain sailing. Julius was a devoted Catholic, surrounded by Catholic friends and a widowed mother who thought her son's relationship with the daughter of two avowed atheists was to be actively discouraged. But the two stuck together, even though Julius was prevented from receiving the sacraments for choosing to be in a serious relationship with a non-

Catholic. On weekends the couple would put this behind them and go sailing on the lakes around Amsterdam on Jules's homemade boat, which he later upgraded to a small sailing boat that he bought. As long as Jules's older brother, Frank, was in attendance, Adrianus and Anna allowed their daughter to explore the city's waterways and the couple spent many hours sailing until late autumn, when Jules would steer his boat towards a small yacht harbour, there to stay until spring started softening the hard edges of the Dutch winter.

Atty knew that her parents were hoping her romance with Jules would fizzle out after the move to Jutphaas in Utrecht. "Jules was a Roman Catholic and when you married one, you were assured of many, many children which, in the eyes of my parents, was not an enviable prospect," Atty writes.

But my grandfather would not be deterred. He bought a German-made DKW motorcycle, a popular two-stroke vehicle on which the rider had to crouch low over the handle bars, his body nearly parallel to the topside of the royal red engine casing. Each weekend, Jules would leave his station in the shoe department of Amsterdam's de Bijenkorf, where he'd proved to be quite an excellent seller of footwear, and come put-putting all the way from Amsterdam to Utrecht. "He would arrive dressed in a long leather jacket, leather balaclava-like cap, leather gloves and waterproof leggings. He was a sight to behold," says Atty of her determined suitor.

By the time the family moved back to Utrecht, Adrianus had been at the Rijksmuseum for two years and all talk of him putting on a museum guard's uniform had long disappeared. Each weekday morning he boarded the train dressed in his own jacket and tie. As soon as it pulled out of the station he would open his freshly-bought copy of *Het Volk*, the socialist newspaper that was his main source of news and information for nearly his whole life.

At the Rijksmuseum, Adrianus had quickly shown that he was capable of a great deal more than making boxes for the storage of prints, drawings and photographs, although his ability to turn a flat piece of cardboard into a haven for a 16th century Asian century print was unquestioned. Before long, he became part of the

Rijksprentenkabinet's restoration department, taking his first steps into the world that would hold him fast for close on three decades.

In truth, calling the place where Adrianus found himself in the nineteen-thirties a 'department' would be ambitious. The Rijksmuseum's first paper restorer, P.W. Van Baarsel, was only officially appointed six years before Adrianus came to work at the museum. Restoration wasn't a big priority for officials in the Rijksprentenkabinet, which had just recently emerged from a muddled attempt in the first half of 1929 to establish it as "a museum within a museum".

The idea to separate out the Rijksprentenkabinet was an experiment by the Rijksmuseum's director, Dr F. Schmidt-Degener who had a very specific vision for the museum. Soon after his appointment in 1922, he set about tackling the glut of art on display, making a distinction between those artworks that would be a part of the permanent display and those that would become the depot collection, housed in a separate building. He was also not impressed with Cuypers' decorative scheme. He thought these were too intrusive, and drew attention away from the artworks, and instructed that they must to be hidden or removed. Schmidt-Deneger also enforced a clear distinction between historical items and art. In 1927, this led to the Nederlandsch Museum van Geschiedenis en Kunst splitting into the Rijksmuseum voor Beeldhouwkunst en Kunstnijverheid and the Nederlandsch Museum voor Geschiedenis. It was a moment of triumph for the director when he oversaw the mounting of a major Rembrandt exhibition in 1935, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the new building. With *The Night Watch* as its centrepiece, the exhibition established the Rijksmuseum as a significant European art institution.

Adrianus did his best to keep out of museum politics. Instead, he spent his time getting to know the thing that was at the very heart of the Rijksprentenkabinet: paper. Since he started working at the *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, he had come to know how paper could be fed, in rolls as big as fresh bales of hay, through the press, and then turn into something that brought news to ordinary citizens. Whenever the professor called him into the hothouse and place a leaf in his hands, with the instruction to keep it safe at all costs, he became aware, once again, of paper's extraordinary place in preservation. And when he walked through the

Rijksprentenkabinet's stores to find prints for an upcoming exhibition, he would think about the treasures that lay within the boxes, many of which he'd made with his own hands. Did those museum visitors gazing in wonder at the *Militia Company of District II under the Command of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq* have an inkling that, close-by but out of sight, there were nearly ten thousand drawings and prints that had also emerged from the hand of the master during the Dutch Golden Age? And not just Rembrandt's hand. Entrusted to Adrianus and his colleagues was a vast store of work by the Old Masters of Europe, who had always picked up a pencil and a piece of paper before moving onto canvas.

Adrianus sometimes sat on the three-legged stool in the restoration studio, gazing for a long time at the artwork that needed all his skill and focus if it was to survive the unforgiving march of time. What was the artist thinking at the moment before taking a piece of charcoal in his hand and making the first mark on the paper? Was the final artwork in his mind's eye as his hand approached the pristine surface? As an atheist he knew that an artists' gifts didn't come from God – but surely there was an unseen creative force that allowed just a handful of people out of millions to give life to something quite outside the ordinary?

When he was offered the job of cartonneur, Adrianus never thought much beyond the regular income that would enable him to take care of Anna and the children after nearly three years of unemployment. But now he was becoming obsessed with ways of preserving and restoring everything that was in the museum where he worked. On his train journey home to the family, he would close his eyes and daydream of paper.

Chapter Eight

It is a miserable, cold and rainy November day in 1938 when my grandmother boards a ship in Rotterdam. By her own account she is sailing "to a far off sunny country where my husband was waiting". But when the boat begins pulling away from the dockside, she is crushed by the sinking realisation that she might never again see her parents and young brother. So she remains on deck, waving as they recede into the dull drizzle and her long jacket yields to the invasion of the bitterly cold air.

Her parents, Adrianus and Johanna, and their fifteen-year-old son Frederik are huddled in a small group on the quayside, dressed warmly in dark coats and hats to ward off the rain that is falling like small question marks all around them. "How on earth could my parents have let me go half way round the world to an unknown future?" she asks sixty years after that fearful moment, writing in a small A4 notebook covered with pretty blue floral paper and a photograph of a bird cut out of a magazine. She has titled it *Memoirs*.

The ship she boards is the TS Pretoria and it is bound for Cape Town, following a route down the West Coast of Africa. The vessel was built in Hamburg in 1936 by Blohm & Voss as part of n the Deutsche Ost-Afrika Linie fleet, which moved cargo and people between Germany and South West Africa and South Africa. On board is accommodation for a hundred and fifty two first class and three hundred and thirty eight second class passengers. A few months after war broke out on September 1st 1939, the TS Pretoria was requisitioned by the German army to serve as a U Boat depot and, later, as a hospital ship. When the end of the war came in 1945, it was docked in Copenhagen, ready to evacuate German troops. Instead, she was seized as a prize of war and given to Britain, which triumphantly renamed her Empire Doon and turned her into a troop ship.

But now, with the gloomy winter weather fading out of sight, the TS Pretoria is ablaze with the careless gaiety that being at sea brings. Atty, as Adriana Antje Marchal is known to her friends and family ("Adriana was such a mouthful that I was

called Attie. In high school I changed it to Atty. Much more interesting. It also looked more English, my favourite subject," she reports) soon settles into life on deck.

Dressed in a white skirt and a pretty white shirt speckled with delicate flowers, she plays deck quoits under remarkably blue skies, patiently waiting for her turn to throw the ring in a bucket from the white line drawn on the wooden deck. She joins a crowd of young girls in floral frocks, soaking up the sun on deck chairs set in front of a large striped canvas curtain that shields the ship's working areas from its passengers. When the rain comes down in driving sheets or the waves get too rough, she whiles away the time by chatting with the girl who shares her cabin. What are we expecting from this wild country? she often asks her companion as the TS Pretoria makes its twelve-day journey to the Cape.

On the way, the ship stops in the Canary Islands. When Atty joins the passengers disembarking at the Atlantic port of Las Palmas, it's the very first time she has set foot anywhere outside the Netherlands.

I discover this when paging through an old photo album that records her late teenage years. My mother gave it to me. It seems every time I see her she's pulling something else she's discovered in my grandmother's closets or at the bottom of a drawer out of the voluminous multi-coloured bag she carries with her. I'm now becoming the keeper of this part of the family history. In the album titled 'Holland 1', I find a small photograph of Atty in the back of a horse pulled carriage, being driven by a dark-skinned man in a smart white suit, a striped tie and a navy style hat. Underneath, in simple printed handwriting, it says "Las Palmas". My grandmother found herself in a colonial scene even before she arrived in Africa.

Sitting with her under the canopy is Oma Grooff. She is mother to Corrie, the wife of Atty's new brother-in-law, Frank Reuvers. The older Dutch woman is also bound for South Africa with her husband. They are to visit their daughter for the first time in the country where she has been living in since 1937.

It must have been the presence of these parents that softened the blow when the Marchal family saw off their oldest daughter that unhappy winter day. Oma

Grooff and her husband lived in South Africa when he worked for the Hollandsche Spoorweg-Maatschappij in the late eighteen hundreds. They settled in Braamfontein and had a child there until the Boer War sent them back to Amsterdam.

Filled with the sadness of seeing their oldest child sail out of Rotterdam harbour, Adri and Anna could not have predicted the scene less than two years later when the port city lay in ruins after of an aerial attack by the Germans. The quayside where they stood under a low sky thick with grey clouds was quickly smashed to pieces as the German *Luftwaffe* crushed the Dutch into surrender.

At the very least, the couple knew that Europe was in trouble, with Adolf Hitler's influence pouring out of Germany like a black blot on a paper map. Both Adri and Anna were avid socialists and members of the Social Democratic Workers' Party – and they knew that Hitler's politics were diametrically opposed to their own. They drew comfort from the fact that their daughter wasn't the only Dutch person striking out for less bleak horizons in the 1930s. If the Great Depression that took hold of the country in 1933 hadn't already sent the adventurous seeking opportunities to places like South Africa, the approaching spectre of war certainly did the job. Australia, America and Canada also drew emigrants from the Lowlands and my mother sometimes told us children that if it weren't for the cold weather, she and her three siblings would have been Canadian. "So us children wouldn't have been made?" we'd ask her, wide-eyed at the thought of it. "You would have been made, but you'd be different," she would always answer. In the end it was the promise of long sun-drenched days that made her father, Julius Reuvers, settle on South Africa to start a different life. He left on November 7th 1937. "Snot and trane," says Atty of the day Jules started his journey to Africa. "After all, he left without the promise of a job and if he was not successful he would return to Holland."

I still wonder if the sunny skies would have been sufficient for my grandfather if the Nationalist government had already been in power in the nineteen thirties. When the National Party did win at the voting stations a decade after Atty arrived, it sent shockwaves through the Dutch immigrant community in South Africa. My mother vividly recalls the horrified gasps of her parents and her aunt and uncle as each National Party victory was announced on the wireless that crackled on the low

table in the sitting room of their home in Orange Grove in Johannesburg. “1948 was a political disaster,” Atty writes of that time. “We were glued to our radio to hear the results of the elections, which were held that year. How depressing it was to hear that so many districts fell to the Nats. We were so sure that the United Party would win. Then the ‘bombshell’ fell. South Africa had a Nationalist Government. We were stunned. Smuts lost. Apartheid was born. In the eyes of the world South Africa was a pariah. Laws were changed, restricting the movement and job opportunities for blacks. They were issued with passes, and not allowed to travel outside the district of their employment.”

But all of this was still to come. On the T.S. Pretoria, Atty heard that the Cape was at last in sight and was hurrying up from her cabin below deck, her heart racing at what she would see. The date was December 9th.“This was going to be my ‘vaderland’ for the rest of my life,” she writes. “Was I nervous? I don’t remember. What I was expecting I don’t know. I was only twenty years old.”

Atty knew two things for sure as she looked out across the bay, and up at a mountain so high it was utterly unimaginable in the landscape of Holland. She was in love. And she was married, even though her new husband was thousands of miles away in the Waterberg bushveld when she signed the marriage register with her father under the watchful eye of the stern-faced burgermeester of Jutphaas.

She was now Mrs Atty Reuvers Marchal, her surname co-joined with her husband’s in the Dutch tradition that long preceded the modern liking for double-barrel surnames. She liked the feeling of familiarity this brought on the cusp of a very different life, although she was quick to push away thoughts of her parents and brother when she was flooded with feelings of longing for them. Within hours she would disembark in Cape Town, pass through immigration and feel the African soil under her feet for the first time. Then she would get on a train headed to Park Station in the faraway city of Johannesburg, where she would finally be with Jules, the boy from Amsterdam “with blond curly hair and blue eyes”. Now she could not wait. She had a great deal to tell him about the gathering in Jutphaas.

Atty wasn't alone in this strange, delayed nuptial experience known as marriage-by-proxy. Her TS Pretoria cabin-mate and Corrie were both married in this manner before heading to South Africa and there were many other young Dutch couples who'd also started their life like that. In fact, in 1937, Jules stepped in to play the role of his brother, Frank, at his proxy wedding to Corrie Grooff. The two boys were raised in Amsterdam by their mother, Maria, after her diamond-dealing husband died when Julius and Frank were just ten and twelve. The family were devout Catholics, and it was in a Roman Catholic newspaper that Frank saw a teaching position advertised at Maritz Brothers, a Johannesburg Catholic boy's school. He applied for the post, was accepted and paid the refundable 300 pounds asked by the colonial government of all immigrants at the time. On the day of departure, in 1936, when he was already on his way to the boat, a telegram arrived from the school, saying that he was no longer needed. But on Jules' advice, no-one told Frank. "Let him go – it will be an experience," the younger brother said. "On that day the future of the Reuvers family was decided," Atty wrote years later.

Atty's own marriage-by-proxy to Julius was on November 17th 1938, a scant week before she would place her small suitcase on the bunk in the TS Pretoria cabin. Deep in the ship's hold was her trousseau. It contained twelve sheets and matching pillow cases, bath towels, hand towels, dish towels (separate ones for glass), and face cloths bought from the Vroom & Dreesman, the department store where most young Dutch brides assembled the items needed to start married life. It had cost just over a hundred guilders. Her wedding gown of white satin and a floor-length veil crested with flowers were also packed in the brown trunk. She knew that the dress fitted her slender frame like a glove. She had already worn it a week earlier, when she entered the office of Jutphaas' burgermeester and sat at the long wooden table as the official went through the marriage proceedings.

At the time my grandparents got married, marriage was only recognised legally if conducted by an official representing the Queen, Wilhelmina, at the town hall in the gemeente in which you lived. A church wedding simply didn't count. This meant that young women like Atty, whose fiancés were in faraway lands, had two full weddings, with dresses and flowers and photographs and presents and a feast. And a bridegroom.

In the Holland 1 album there's a series of photographs that capture Atty's first ceremony. In one, she's standing in her full wedding dress with her uncle Adri at her side, her parents to her left, her soon-to-be mother-in-law, Marie Catherina Reuvers van Coolwijk, and Marie's twin unmarried sister, Coos, on her right. Underneath is written "Oom Adri – 'Bridegroom'". Atty's uncle is the pretend bridegroom in this first wedding but Oom Adri has stepped into character and is wearing a smart black suit. There is a small white flower in his buttonhole. He takes his role even more seriously in another photograph in which Atty sits next to him, their hands clasped as they gaze into each other's eyes. The caption reads "Happy Couple". I wonder which of the family member's present – *Grootvader* Marchal, Adri and Anna, Tante Nel, Tante Jo, Tante Grada, Mrs Reuvers van Coolwijk, Miss van Coolwijk – suggested this playful depiction of a couple in love for the camera. A menu kept from the day records the wedding feast: "aardappelen, fricandeau, wortelen, doperwten, sperciboonen, fruit". For Atty, the pageantry of a full wedding was simple: "Since none of the family could attend the church wedding in South Africa, I dressed in all my bridal finery."

But for all the celebration, Atty would make the journey to her second wedding alone. She would bring her legal marriage certificate covered in signatures and declared valid by the mayor. She would take her bridal finery and her gifts and all the things a young woman needs to start a new home. And she would bring art.

There's another picture in the Holland 1 album captioned "Presents". It goes with the ondertrouw, or registration of intention to marry, ceremony that took place on the last day of October, two weeks before the proxy wedding. Atty is pictured in a simple long white dress, a narrow dark coloured belt (could it be black velvet? It's hard to see in the black and white photograph) catching her waist as she stands next to a modest table of presents that were delivered to her parent's house. There's a steel bread bin, a statue of a prancing pony, several clear vases and the Gero cutlery set her parents gave her, with twelve knives, twelve forks, twelve spoons, and twelve teaspoons cocooned in soft fabric folds. There are also two framed etchings.

I take a magnifying glass so old it's falling out of its brass ring, and examine the artworks. The glass, with its own faded ruby-coloured felt bag, is yet another object from the past that my mother has brought me. The etching on the left is of Dutch buildings lining a street. A church tower is visible. The second etching is harder to make out, no matter how many times I pull the magnifying glass in and out in an attempt to bring the image to the fore. Still, both feel as familiar to me as the worn wooden table in my kitchen that once was the eating place of my mother's family in their Orange Grove home. Above the etchings is an oil painting in a wooden frame. It's a still life of a lamp, a book and a number of other objects that I can't make out. It's a painting done, I feel sure, by Atty's dad, my great-grandfather Opa Adri. On top of it is another small artwork and, to the left above a brass Japanese gong set, is a portion of yet another picture, this time in a gilt frame.

Of all the photos of Atty's Jutphaas wedding, this is the one I love the most. My grandmother looks so young, so innocent, in her diaphanous puffed sleeves and softly folded long skirt, hardly ready to take a journey halfway across the world. On her left hand is her engagement ring, made by her beloved Uncle Wim, her dad's younger brother. Wim had opened a little jewellery shop in Utrecht when she was much younger and she would frequently go and watch him work, gazing in wonder at the semi-precious stones he weaved into his own designs. "Exceptional," is how she describes him. I feel a connection to Wim through the two simple, worn white gold rings I wear that he also crafted.

In the photo, Atty is not looking directly at the camera as she so often does. She is looking down at a large book she's holding in her right hand. I imagine it to be a record of the people and their gifts that she will pack in her trunk to show Julius in Johannesburg. It turns out to be something close: a maroon photo album for her to start recording the first days of her married life. She inscribes it "Voor mijn man" and puts the date of her proxy marriage, 17 November 1938. The album opens with the commemoration card to celebrate the marriage of Julius Reuvers to Attie Marchal, lovingly handdrawn by my great-grandfather. It's a delightful depiction of my Oma's impending journey from the haringvijver on board the TS Pretoria, across the evenaar to Julius in Africa ('hier woont Reuvers'). The photo album closes with the only letter from my great-grandfather to his daughter that I ever find. In it he tells Atty

what he believes to be the three pillars of a happy marriage: Samenhorigheid (solidarity). Elkaar begrijpen (understanding each other). Liefde (love).

Most of all, I love the “Presents” picture because it shows my grandmother surrounded by works of art, in a home where they are unmistakably treasured. She didn’t know it yet but, in the end, this was the most precious thing she carried with her when leaving her homeland that dismal November day.

Chapter Nine

When Atty first stepped onto the platform at Park Station, she felt a surge of excitement tinged with anxiety. The train journey from Cape Town had taken two nights and a full day. She had never travelled such a distance on land before. With the sparse Karoo landscape rushing past her window, Atty sat reading and re-reading the letters that had come sliding, like slender gifts, through the letter slot at her Jutphaas home soon after Jules's arrival in South Africa. The most recent bore the postmark of Vaalwater, the closest village to where her new husband was working as a farm manager. What on earth did Jules know about farming? she wondered when she first read his news on the blue and white air letter with its curious flower stamp. She'd seen him tinker with his DKW bike and his sailing boat, so reassured herself that he would be useful on a farm – at least more than in his first position on arriving in South Africa. Back then he had been employed as an agent at Norwich Union. She was sure that he knew next to nothing about insurance.

It was at the offices of Norwich Union that someone suggested Jules might be right for a job that was available on a farm in the Waterberg, about three hundred kilometres away from Johannesburg. With nothing to lose and a willingness to learn, Jules met with the farm owners. Mr Willet had taken a job in Johannesburg at the Rand Water Board to supplement the farm income, and he was, he told Jules, eager for the presence of a man to help his wife Cathleen and their daughter Shelagh in running things. Much to Atty's amazement, Jules seemed to have moved, without too much fuss, from convincing Amsterdam's wealthy ladies into buying the Bijenkorf's best shoes to helping cows give birth and building a flue-barn for curing the tobacco grown on the Willet's farm. His wages were low, to be sure, he wrote to Atty, but he was promised a share in the farm's profits. Within the carefully folded edges, his letters carried an unmissable air of optimism.

On the train, Atty tried to imagine what the next few weeks might hold. Her first Christmas away from Utrecht would be hot, that much she knew. Outside the train's oval window, the sun was fierce, smothering everything in bright light and

causing a shimmer on the horizon. As she sweated on the green vinyl train-seat, she couldn't help wondering if the wedding dress that was buried deep in her trousseau would be uncomfortably hot when she put it on again.

There was to be another wedding as soon as she arrived in Johannesburg and she wanted to look as pretty as she did on that November day in Jutphaas when her uncle stood in for Jules. The proxy wedding gave her family the chance to be part of the celebrations. But in the eyes of the Catholic church, Atty and Jules were not yet husband and wife. Only a church wedding would change that.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw another steel windmill next to a round concrete dam. Earlier, when the train was stopping at De Aar, she was able to examine one like it a little more closely and came away with the thought that while these plain structures must be useful, she much preferred the sturdy, red-bricked Rijn en Son windmill in Vogelenbuurt. As she waited for the train to start again at De Aar, she rolled around the little village's name in her head. Since walking down the gangplank and onto the wharf at Cape Town harbour she had heard snatches of conversation in a language that she knew had its roots in Dutch. But, if she were to be honest, Afrikaans sounded at once familiar and utterly strange and unpleasant, as if the language she spoke and thought and wrote in had been put through a mincer to create strands of the original but with its own irregular shape.

As the train pushed on towards Bloemfontein, Atty thought again about the wedding that was to take place in Johannesburg and her recent conversion to Catholicism. She and Frederick were brought up as atheists. There was no other way for children of Socialists who rejected the control that the church had over society. But accepting Julius's marriage proposal came with a commitment to conversion. His mother wouldn't have it any other way and so Atty went for lessons in the Catholic faith at the convent in Mariaplaats in Utrecht. Nearly seventy years later, she would say of this change in her life, "In those days the saying went, and I am translating literally, 'where two beliefs lie on one pillow the devil lies in between'. The nun who instructed me was a delightful person, full of fun. Not having had any religion at home, I must admit that I sometimes had my doubts."

But Atty put these doubtful thoughts out of her mind as she stepped into Johannesburg Station in her pretty Bijenkorf suede shoes, a dress that she had made herself and a matching crocheted hat. Looking up, she was startled to see that she was surrounded by a number of striking visual images. For a brief moment she felt like she was back in the painted niches of the Rijksmuseum and a pang of longing for her father shot through her. But the images that her eyes fell on were of a vastly different place to her home country. It was a place where blue and grey mountains hosted unbending trees and where the earth's sooted and rusted insides were explored by men looking for gold beneath still landscapes of muted greens.

She would only discover later that what she found herself looking at in her first minutes in Johannesburg were the panels that JH Pierneef had been commissioned to produce for the new Park Station concourse in July 1929. The thirty two renderings of South African scenes – of which twenty eight were almost square – were unveiled almost six years to the day before she stood before them. Had she had the time she would have been able to very quickly get a visual feel for the country she was moving to. Pierneef's panels ranged over all the provinces, although not quite evenly. Twelve Transvaal scenes, nine Cape, two each of Natal and one of the Orange Free State. Table Mountain. Vaal River, Parys. Waterval Boven. Heidelberg. Graaf-Reniet. Most striking were the compositions *Premier Mine* and *Reef Gold Mine*. There were also renderings of scenes of Lesotho and South West Africa. In no way grasping the limited, even idyllic, depiction of the divided country she had arrived in, she found them quite beautiful. Maybe this place wasn't so uncultured after all. [iv]

A shout jolted her out of her thoughts. "Atty, hier ben ik!" And there, striding towards her, dressed in a dark woolen suit with a white hat on his head, was Jules. She didn't care what the Catholic Church said. She was looking at her new husband and, for the first time since setting off under Rotterdam's rain-filled sky, she felt relieved and full of joy.

I take out the photo albums that my grandmother made for me in the late seventies and find her wedding photo. "Julius Reuvers married Adriana Marchal 12 December 1938, Johannesburg," this committed keeper of family facts has written in blue pen. And, beneath it, "Married by proxy in Nederland 17-11-1938". My

grandmother has fixed two wedding photographs on the page although the sticky residue has long disintegrated. When I open the album, they slide out of the protective plastic and land on the floor.

The bigger photo looks like it was taken in a studio, with my newly married grandparents staring straight at the camera as instructed by an unseen photographer. They look happy — and very Dutch. Jules is handsome in his suit of black and Atty is beautiful in her dress of white, an enormous bouquet of flowers tumbling over half her body. But it's the smaller photo that I love more. Snapped (for it feels unposed) on the verandah of the Frances Road house where a small reception was held, my grandfather's hair has the unruly look of a schoolboy, like it may take off if a gust suddenly swept down from Linksfield Ridge. But if this happened, he wouldn't notice at all because he is so caught up in the moment of irrepressible happiness. My grandmother, with her white gloved hand looped through her husband's arm, looks with confidence at the photographer — probably her brother-in-law Frank – who has just called out "Atty, look over here". Her face, tilted almost imperceptibly towards the right, is noticeably free of make-up and, with her lips slightly open, Atty looks innocent but also remarkably assured. Just twenty and only on her third day in a new country, she is ready for what lies ahead.

In stark contrast to her Nederland wedding, just five people attended Atty's South African wedding at the St Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in Yeoville: her brother-in-law Frank and his wife Corry, who had put up Atty in their home in Frances Road, Norwood on her first night in Johannesburg while Jules stayed with friends, two Dutch friends, Bol and Inge and one other guest. "Name forgotten!" Atty exclaims in her memoirs. The night of December 12th, Atty and Jules stayed in a hotel on Eloff Street where the sounds of the trams clattering past the window were a pleasant reminder of Krugerplein and Amsterdam.

My grandfather was due back at the Willet's farm and so their honeymoon was compressed into two days. They spent it sightseeing in Johannesburg and buying furniture for their rooms on the farm. In the trunk that was heaved into the hold of the T.S Pretoria was the Vroom & Dreesman trousseau. There were prints and a watercolour of the cascading flowers of a pindakaasboom that her father had done for

her. Twenty years spent with parents who valued the aesthetic had given my grandmother an appreciation for beautiful objects and when she chose a dining room and bedroom suite in Johannesburg it was with reluctance. “I thought the furniture was hideous, being so used to the modern Norwegian style in Holland which most young couples bought,” she recalls.

Ugly or not, the furniture would be railed to Vaalwater, close to the farm. These days the small town in the Limpopo province has lost the prettiness it had when just after the Boer War, members of the North Waterberg Farmers Association started working together, to create the village with its general dealer, post office and station. Like many other places strewn across the country, the town’s main street is now lined with a hodgepodge of shops selling bulk grocery supplies, airtime and clothes made cheap in China. Taxis s churn up dust on the edges of the tar.

Every year since 2010, I’ve passed through Vaalwater on my way to a game farm on the border of the Welgevonden game reserve. Staying at Kololo is a birthday ritual that I’ve created with my thirteen-year-old son, who wants more than anything to be a game ranger when he’s done with the inconvenience of school. In his room, on the shelf, underneath a notice of his birth that Atty cross-stitched in 2000 when he was born, is his collection of books on birds, mammals and game parks of South Africa. Bedtime reading.

On his birthday, Zach and I again head out on the busy Ben Schoeman highway between Johannesburg and Pretoria. A few hours later we’re on the R33, passing through Modimole and then Vaalwater, overtaking trucks headed to Botswana. As we turn left towards Welgevonden I think about how successfully the land — thirty seven thousand hectares of it — has been reclaimed from farming, and has now reverted to the bush that’s been part of the Waterberg area for thousands of years. I’m on a trip with my only son, into an area named with the Dutch phrase “well found” and where my grandparents began laying their South African roots. The game farm where we are staying is owned by a Dutch family whose kinship with the land is evident. I feel helplessly nostalgic.

A day later, with Zach out on a game drive, I sit on the small stoep outside our room, close my eyes and try and imagine what it was like for Atty in those first months in the Waterberg. The area must have immediately struck her as quite unlike Holland with its mountainous massif, where the peaks rise to one thousand and four hundred metres. Against the muted buzzing of a bumble bee arcing towards the green hill that frames the western side of Kololo I hear birds chirping and cooing. The silence of the bush on an afternoon like this is the perfect backdrop for avian players to spool out a luxurious performance. At times it rises in intensity, as if the cries of one bird stokes up a contest of sound that takes place furiously and unseen in the white stinkwoods and *boekenhouts*. But, just as quickly, the chorus recedes to nothing, in the manner of a fish eagle silently piercing the dark waters of one of the many dams in the area.

In Vogelenbuurt, where she spent much of her childhood, the streets were named after birds. Lijsterstraat. Koekoekstraat. Kievitdwarstraat. But Atty must have been unprepared for the abundance of birdlife that accompanied her as she went about her daily chores.

At first she found everything about her new home very strange. “There was a big drum with water on the back verandah and it was connected to the bathroom,” she writes. “At about four o’clock, a big fire was lit underneath the drum and it heated up the water. As there was no piped water the drum was filled up daily with water collected from a well. I was horrified to see that the water was a brownish colour. Drinking water was collected from rain water. In the kitchen was a black stove, heated by a fire from dead trees and branches on the farm. Twice a week loaves of bread were baked. What a lovely smell.”

There was a further disappointment with the furniture. When it finally arrived, only the wardrobe, dressing table and part of the bed had made it from Johannesburg. Jules improvised a mattress from mielie leaves and news came that the furnishing firm had gone out of business. The likelihood of their dining room suite ever arriving in Vaalwater was as remote as a bag of delicious salty drop suddenly being available in the Kirkman’s general store.

In spite of the geographical names that surrounded her — Vaalwater, Nylstroom, Hartebeespoort, Heuningspruit — Atty had arrived in a deeply English community. The Waterberg was where a number of English officers who had chosen to remain in South Africa after the Anglo Boer War had settled and created a community. The Mortimers. The Chaneys. The Davidsons. The Barbers. The Kirkmans. The Clarks. The Fawssetts. "How I struggled with my English," Atty recalls. "I really was thrown in the deep end."

After two months of marriage, Atty fell pregnant with my mother. Around the same time, one of the area's first farmers, Edward Alexander Davidson, offered Jules a job as a farm manager at Twenty Four Rivers and they moved into a small house on the farm. At last my pregnant grandmother could create a home. On a small hand sewing machine she made green cotton weave curtains. "Very modern" (she notes in her memoirs) orange covers were created for the cushions on the borrowed homemade chairs. She taught herself to bake and cook. Thursday evenings were bread baking times and she would knead the dough over and over until it was ready to be put into pans, where it would balloon up and signal it was time to be put into the big oven. On occasion, Mrs Mortimer would arrive on her horse, with her daughter, Nancy, in tow, sitting happily on a donkey. Atty admired the sixteen-year-old's cooking and baking skills. "I had never boiled an egg in my life when I got to South Africa," she writes in her notebook. The birds, chattering piet-my-vrous and orange-breasted bush shrikes, kept her company as she sat outside and read the English books that she borrowed from the library that Mrs Fawssett housed in one of the two rondavels occupied by this very Victorian lady.

Still, she was on her own for most of the day. "Our social life was nil," she wrote in that matter-of-fact way that I'd come to expect in her writing. Nil that was, except for the first Sunday of every month when a padre would come to serve in the Church of John The Baptist at Twenty Four Rivers, and the community would gather, regardless of their Christian preference.

The church was designed by Sir Herbert Baker for Ted Davidson, his wife Molly and her two aunts, Katherine and Edith. These four Waterberg pioneers weren't daunted by asking the already world famous architect to design the modest church of

Waterberg stone and thatch out in the country (but, my grandmother notes in her memoirs, they were annoyed when Baker left out the Church of John The Baptist in his list of recorded works). Most of the families in the area contributed materials, labour and church necessities, and help also came from relatives in England. Later, as budget and time allowed, there were additions to the interior. A stone baptismal font. A timber crucifix designed by the famous artist Walter Battiss's wife, Grace.

At Kololo I come across a book, compiled by Elizabeth Hunter, a descendent of Ted Davidson and Molly Fawssett who still lives at Twenty Four Rivers. My nostalgia is compounded as I page through photographs of the very farm where my grandparents started their life in South Africa, and where my mother was brought home after Atty had given birth in Johannesburg. Prior to her due date, she traveled with Jules to the city, and stayed with Frank and Corry until it was time to give birth. My grandfather had had to return to the farm to work and so when her waters broke on the morning of November 3rd, a taxi was called and she was taken to the Fragwen nursing home. There, Atty had her first child, aged just twenty-one and alone except for the midwife and doctor.

The year was 1939 and she hadn't been in her new country a year. But Atty wasn't daunted by circumstances. Nearly three years later, when my uncle Julius was born, she was booked into the mission nursing home in Warmbaths run by Belgian nuns and again gave birth without the support of her husband or family. Just before the birth, Jules had settled her into the boarding house run by the mayor of Warmbaths. "The Mayor was very kind and told me to knock on his window when I had to go into hospital. I didn't have to wait long. That night I waited as long as possible but eventually knocked at his window and at midnight I was safely in bed at the mission. Within four hours, Jules, our son, was born." My grandmother notes that my uncle was "the first white baby to be born in the nursing home", one of the few references during this period to the growing divide between black and white in her adopted country.

Even though the post was frequently slow, Atty and Jules were able to communicate with their Dutch family. At first letters from Adri and Anna and Maria Reuvers would arrive at the Willet's farm after the scotch cart's weekly trip to

Twenty Four Rivers for post and supplies. When Jules and Atty moved to the Davidson's farm, communication became easier. Once a month four issues of *Libelle*, a magazine for women, would arrive, giving Atty tips on motherhood and homecraft. When news of her pregnancy was conveyed to Amsterdam, her mother-in-law sent a baby cot along with clothes and napkins. Life felt idyllic in spite of the daily challenges that living on a farm brought — swarms of bees (to which Atty was allergic), the sometimes swollen and impassable Dwars river, the ever-present fear of locusts, snakes, fires and failed crops. For Atty, who grew up in a country that could fit almost thirty times into her adopted land, the birds, the bush, the mountains, the open spaces were magical. Jules started building a wattle and clay house by the river for his growing family. "The nights were beautiful, and there were so many stars in those clear skies," writes Atty. "There was no pollution so they seemed so near, especially the Southern Cross".

But even when my mother was born and the new parents fell in love with their fair-haired daughter, an undercurrent of unease took hold on the couple. Lying in hospital for the mandatory ten-day post-birth recovery period, Atty heard that the Germans were at the Dutch border. "This upset me terribly," she writes. "What was going to happen to my family?" Still, back on the farm a few days later, the notion of another World War still seemed distant. She sewed dresses for baby Emma. She acted swiftly when a fire that Jules was out fighting jumped the fire-break. Picking up Emma and all her important papers, she ran. "Scary," she says of this incident in her memoirs. Even when Mrs Mortimer decided to leave the running of the family farm to her husband and daughter and join the land army in England, the war seemed unreal. Atty and Jules worried about their family but didn't think that the war could upset their own lives. The Germans had invaded Poland, and then Norway and Denmark. Would they really take on the neutral Netherlands? "How wrong we were," she writes. When Germany did invade in May 1940, the post between Twenty Four Rives and Jutphaas and Amsterdam came to an end. The news on the battery-operated radio wasn't good.

But the danger to their families in faraway Holland wasn't the only thing terrifying Atty and Jules. One day in 1940, an official envelope arrived at Twenty Four Rivers, addressed to Mr J. Reuvers. With sinking hearts, my grandparents prised

it open and found inside my grandfather's army call-up papers from the Dutch government in exile, based in London. "I had been like an ostrich, hoping against hope that the government would not find us — after all we were living so far from civilization," writes Atty.

With a new baby on the way, Jules wasted no time in applying for compassionate leave. When the first ship carrying Dutch conscripts from South Africa sunk, leaving no survivors, Atty knew that the birth of his first son had saved my grandfather's life. She clung to the hope that a move by Dutch conscripts in South Africa to declare their call-up void because the government was no longer on Dutch soil would be successful. In spite of the efforts of Advocate Vierya, who would later become a friend of my grandparents, the part of London where Queen Wilhelmina was living was declared an extension of the Netherlands and the call-up became binding.

With all avenues exhausted, my grandparents confronted the fact that Jules was going to war. Staying on the farm with two young children wasn't an option anymore and, with the help and support of the Davidsons and the Twenty Four Rivers community, a house in Florida, on the western outskirts of Johannesburg, was found for Atty, Emma and baby Jules. The family left the Waterberg for good.

In March 1942, Atty once again found herself on the platform at Park Station. All around her were crying wives and stern-looking husbands. Children gazed on with fear as their fathers, some of whom had never set foot in the Netherlands, prepared to leave. In her memoirs, my grandmother reports that she didn't join in the crying. But the feeling of joy that had consumed her when she first stepped into Park Station more than three years earlier had vanished. In its place was something approaching terror at what lay ahead. "There was a heavy lump in my heart when I waved goodbye to Jules. The only thought in my head was 'would he come back'."

Chapter Ten

I'm in a room at the Netherlands Embassy in Pretoria and my heart is thumping. Placed neatly on the white tables around me are small red, white and blue flags. Bunches of orange, red, white and blue balloons festoon the room's corners. Near the entrance is a bright orange that declares "Holland, pioneers in international business".

It looks like the setting for a seminar that celebrates the centuries-old Dutch love for foreign trade, but it isn't. In a few minutes, on a chilly day in May 2011, I will say the declaration of solidarity that will confirm my Dutch citizenship.

Like my brothers, Mathew and Nicholas, who are in the room with me, I've opted for the non-religious version of the declaration. We'd long ago shed the Catholic teachings that my father had barely tolerated, and which my mother had dutifully implemented until we convinced her that the beach was a more natural outing for our Sunday mornings than the church. "You always said you could pray anywhere and what better place than in nature," we chorused, entirely reasonably we thought, as we tumbled out of the car into the church parking lot, the humidity gluieng our nylon clothes to our peeling bodies and making us fidget and complain.

Suddenly I hear my name being called by the ambassador's representative. It's my turn to say how I will respect the constitutional order of the Netherlands and properly fulfill my duties as a Dutch citizen. "Ik verklaar dat ik de grondwettelijke orde van het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden, haar vrijheden and rechten respecteer en beloof de plichten die het staatsburgerschap met zich meebrengt getrouw te vervullen. Dat verklaar en beloof ik."[24] It is done and I'm handed an orange box that's heavier than I expect. It is tied together with a ribbon in the colours of the Dutch flag.

[24] I faithfully declare that I will fulfill the constitutional order of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and promise to respect its freedoms and rights and the duties that come with citizenship.

When I sit at the table with my family, I am filled with a feeling of joy. It's the kind, should you one day look back on your life, you will recognise as appearing infrequently. Like when you bend towards your newborn and gently place your nose and mouth on a head that carries with it a scent of such intoxicating wonder you can scarcely believe it's diminishing each day with no way to capture it for good.

Later, once the declarations of the others are done and koffie met een koekje are served, I open the box. In it, there's a book. *Dit Zijn Wij*. This is us. It details the one hundred most important traditions of the Netherlands, starting with Sint Nicolaas. I smile and show my mother Emma, who has flown from Durban for the ceremony. We know the story well. It's one Oma told us often because, as she writes in her little memoir notebook, "We believed in Sint Nicolaas. He used to come from Spain on his white horse assisted by Zwarte Piet with his bag for naughty children to be put in. A few nights before he arrived we used to put a carrot in our shoe and a list of wishes. This was put next to the chimney and special songs were sung. Sinterklaas would hear this as he and his horse and Piet walked over the roofs at night. On the morning of December 6th, presents were lying under the chimney. All the children were very good as we were threatened to be taken away by Piet in his bag and taken to Spain."

Sint Nicolaas isn't the only tradition that connects with my memories as I page through the book. Koninginnedag, with its cry of Oranje Boven, is another. At number 13 are two dates: the May 4th Nationale Dodenherdenking (Remembrance Day) and Bevrijdingsdag (Liberation Day) the next day. To be honest, we were more fascinated by the gasmask and coarse scratchy khaki uniform that Opa brought home with him after his time in the Prinses Irene brigade than in the Second World War itself. We'd dare each other to climb to the top of the cupboard where we knew they were stored, just to get another look and imagine what it must have been like to have to wear the mask. But, even as children, we knew the solemnity of these two days. Further down the list is haring and at number 12, stamppot. This dish was deemed "delicious" by Oma and was a regular feature of meals in their upstairs flat when we shared a house in Umhlanga Rocks in the mid-seventies. But really it was Oma's baking, cinnamony speculaas and thin pannekoek and, for Old Year's Eve, oliebollen and appelflappen, that we loved most. My sister Catherine and I, and later my brothers, would determinedly make our way up the path leading to my grandparents

top-story home and before long, we'd be sitting at the wooden table, eating treats and drinking warme chocolademelk while Oma made small cross stitches to create twirling skaters on her embroidery.

I lift up the book and underneath is an envelope with my name on it. It contains an official letter confirming my Nederlanderschap, dated April 14th 2011. I know I'm looking at a piece of paper that will change my life — and soon, that of my children. The box also contains the documentation that I've collected since it became clear that an amendment to the Dutch Nationality Act in June 2010 was going to come into force in October of that same year. It was for those born before 1985 to a Dutch mother and a foreign father who couldn't hold Dutch citizenship because it could only be passed on through the father. Until the mid-nineteen-eightiess the liberal Netherlands, it turns out, was robustly patriarchal. The new legislation, the result of intense lobbying within Holland, now gave people like me and my siblings and around 90 000 other latent Dutch scattered around the world the option to apply for citizenship.

Stacked together in the box, with many items bearing the poppy red stamp of South Africa's apostille mark, is a paper trail of my lineage. It's light when I pick it up but the information is heavy with the weight of history. There's my birth register extract, noting my name, date of birth, address where my parents were living when I was born in Bloemfontein, and my race (white). Seeing my father's youthful signature on the official document, eight years after he died so suddenly, momentarily displaces the joy. Owen would, I feel sure, be thrilled about this moment. There's my mother's birth certificate, Emma Antonia Reuvers, born in Johannesburg to Julius Reuvers, age twenty-four, and Adriana Antje Marchal, twenty-one, both noted as Hollanders. My dad's official documentation is also in the box. Owen Charles Coetzer, a "European" born at the Boksburg-Benoni Hospital to thirty seven year old Charles David Weire Coetzer and Florence Ethel Lawson. I notice that my paternal grandmother was thirty eight when she had my father, far older than Oma when she had my mom, and, it strikes me for the first time, a year older than my grandpa. On his notice of birth is recorded where they were living when my Dad was born – in Plantation, Boksburg where my grandpa worked as a clerk in the office of East Rand Property gold mines. A document from the Zeist Gemeente, retrieved with determination by my aunt and

uncle, Sandy and Robert Reuvers, during a visit to the Netherlands, reflects Opa's birth – in Watergraafsmeer, Amsterdam on November 15th 1914, to Franciscus Lodewijk Christiaan Reuvers and Maria Catharina van Coolwijk. His death, on December 21st 1996, is recorded there too. There's also a copy of Opa and Oma's proxy marriage certificate, located with ease by a helpful official early in 2011 in the Nieuwegein Gemeente, an astonishing seventy two years after the ceremony in Jutphaas.

Like so many other documents, the certificate survived the war and the dissolution of the gemeente and the passing of the years. I count fifteen signatures on the watermarked copy, mostly Molenaars – my oma's maternal family – Marchals and Van Coolwijks. I see the mark of my great-grandmother Reuvers and my great-grandmother Molenaar Marchal. All are in the writing style – elegant, contained, with a few tasteful flourishes – that I know to belong to my grandmother. The evidence of so many family members at that 1938 wedding expands and lengthens the connections I have to the country of which I am now a citizen.

More than two years later, I'm again headed for Pretoria, this time to collect documentation that Oma's cousin, Marijke Marchal, has brought back with her from Holland. These are the Dutch birth certificates that have come from Den Haag for me and my four children and which other cousins, Bep Marchal and Peter de Jong, have been keeping safe in Driebergen for several months. "The Very Important Documents have landed," Peter says in an email when the efficient Dutch bureaucracy sends out the documents just weeks after getting our paperwork.

As I pass the four slender minarets of the Nizamiye Turkish Masjid on the highway from Johannesburg, a lively discussion about the plight of street traders blaring out of the radio, I think about how the city I'm headed to has changed.

Back in 1988, when I was working for Press Trust of South Africa news agency in Durban, Pretoria was a place of sorrow. And terror. It was at Pretoria Central Prison that political prisoners who had been condemned to death by the apartheid government waited on death row for the day when the noose would be

placed around their neck. You can still see these twisted pieces of rope, hanging in that section of the Apartheid Museum where children don't often go.

In a story that was reproduced in the feminist journal, *Agenda*, to mark the year of women political prisoners and detainees, I wrote about Theresa Ramashamola, the young woman who, with five men, was sentenced to death for the murder of a deputy mayor in December 1985 during a protest against rent increases. The case became known as the Sharpeville Six, causing outrage for its use of the doctrine of "common purpose" to convict all six – Theresa, Reginald Sefatsa, Reid Mokoena, Moses Diniso, Duma Khumalo and Francis Mokhesi. The case became a rallying point for the struggle, prompting unprecedented international and national appeals for clemency. At the time I wrote about her, Theresa, a waitress who had been arrested in her pajamas, was alone in the women's section of death row at Pretoria Central, having been granted a four week stay of execution while lawyers were appealing against the sentence given to the Sharpeville Six. "Apartheid continues right into prison: black and white prisoners are separated as are men and women," I wrote in 1988. "Unlike the five men – who are joined by over a hundred other condemned – Theresa has no support system inside the prison. No-one to share her fears, wishes and apprehensions. Now the question on the lips of many concerned women, black and white, in South Africa is that, if the renewed application fails, will Theresa die alone? Women in the country want to know: who will sing for Theresa?" On July 11th, fifteen hours before their scheduled execution, the Sharpeville Six were granted an indefinite stay of execution by Kobie Coetsee, the Justice Minister, but it took another three years before they were given amnesty and released.

I think about Theresa as I get closer to the Pretoria suburb where Marijke lives with her husband, John Anderson. She would be about fiftyone now, if she is still alive, just a handful of years older than me. Was the closeness of our ages why I chose to write about her? She was convicted on the evidence of a single witness who claimed he heard her shout "he is shooting at us. Let's kill him". She had survived being tortured and assaulted during her period of solitary confinement. Electric shocks had been applied to her nipples. She had lived through the awfulness of preparing to be hanged, alone, only to be yanked back to her cell hours before she was to stand before her executioner. Her lawyer, Prakash Dair, told me that she "broke

into a hysterical cry" when told of the stay of execution. "She grabbed the prison warders who were around her. She touched my hands through the glass window, thanking me. I said to her that I did not need any thanks and that she must praise the Lord. Theresa replied that the Lord had come to her through me. She was so overjoyed. I don't think any words I use will adequately describe her feelings." [v] Did Theresa return to the four-roomed house with one bedroom she shared with her mother and sister after being released from prison? Did she resume her work at a Vereeniging roadhouse? Was she one of the growing numbers of South Africans now taking to the streets to protest the pitiful service delivery by the ANC government in some parts of the country? Did she feel let down by the golden promise of democracy that waited at the end of six years spent in Pretoria, listening to the hadedas and imagining the purple rising on the jacarandas in spring. Always fearing for her life.

When I rummage through a bag full of my old writings to find the copy of *Agenda* that my article appeared in, I notice it comes just before a review of a book on female circumcision by Mamphela Ramphele, then a member of the department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cape Town and an activist on the ground of the black consciousness movement. It's a sign, I think to myself. Early in 2013, without much soul-searching, Ramphele publicly distanced herself from the failings of the African National Congress and established a new political party, Agang. The move will prove to be fraught with difficulties but, when it happens, it makes me feel less disorientated and disillusioned about the ideals Pregs Govender wrote about in *Agenda* in 1987. "Democracy means full control over our lives.' How naive that simple statement now seems.

As I approach the outskirts of Pretoria, I find myself in the middle of five lanes, cars closing in on me and trucks changing gears and lanes to snake through the traffic. But when I arrive at Marijke's, it takes just a few minutes for me to be happily pulled back from the complex doldrums of the place where I was born into my other life as a Nederlander, who can trace her roots back, in the case of the Reuvers family, to the seventeenth century. It's a calming feeling.

In Marijke and John's gezellig house, there are photos on walls and tables and pinboards and artworks in every room. There, in a small photo, are my great-

grandparents amidst a tumble of mostly costume-clad bodies, posing for a beach snap. Opa Adri is dressed in pants and shoes, the sleeves of his shirt rolled up. His face is turned to the side, but he's looking at the ground, not at Oma Anna who's seated next to him, gazing with calm eyes at the camera. I remember Oma telling me that my great-grandfather didn't much like being away from home. "My mother used to love going for rides in the country, not so my dad," Oma writes in her memoirs. "He was very much a stay-at-home. Whenever my mom and I would decide to go for a ride, he would go outside, look up in the sky and when one little cloud appeared he would frown and predict rain."

Opa Adri probably wished he was on the other side of the camera that beach day. He was a keen photographer, winning prizes and developing and printing his own photographs. In another photo on Marijke's walls Opa Adri sits in untamed grass with his brother, Wim, the jewellery maker. He appears comfortable, a cigarello in his mouth, his legs flopped apart, in his hands a box camera pointed straight out, as if he's taking a picture at the very same moment as the unseen photographer. I've not been able to locate any of his original photos in South Africa or Holland and Marijke isn't sure if she has any in her home. But she does show me a silver tea service made by her dad. The scored lines running the length of the small biscuit tin with its perfectly closing lid are the work of a master craftsman, Marijke says with pride. She prepares lunch and John, a geologist working on a global project that aims to urgently remind us that we are all one species, goes off to his workroom. I take my time looking at the artwork on the walls of the lounge. There are several of Wim's drawings on paper, done before he died aged just forty-eight of leukemia. One is of a young child, her dark eyes wise, her hair curved into a fringe the shape of half an oval. In the corner is his signature: WM within a small dark circle.

"The two brothers, my dad and your great-grandfather, were so artistic. Gifted really," says Marijke as she comes in holding a plate of salad greens. "But your great-grandmother was quietly amazing too, you know. I remember what a great sense of humour she had."

Later, when I'm paging through Oma's memoirs, there's evidence of this in my grandmother's recollection of the adventures she and her mom had on their bikes

around Utrecht. "On one occasion we were happily cycling along when she saw a purse lying on the bicycle path. Hup, she got off her bike. Just as she was going to pick up the purse, it disappeared. There was much laughter from the boys in the bushes who had tied a string to the purse. My mother, having a sense of humour, laughed as well. Another bicycle story of hers was when she just learned to cycle and, not being able to stop, rode right into a dairy shop and was stopped at the counter! And, at the end of the cycle paths, were little poles. They did not go away when they saw her coming so she would hit them. But as she progressed we made longer trips."

Aside from her brother, Fre, who made his way to Johannesburg in 1947, Marijke is Oma's only relative to have moved to South Africa. She came to teach physical education in the nineteen sixties and has stayed ever since. Marijke was at that May 2011 ceremony at the Dutch Embassy. At lunch afterwards she gave Nicholas, Mathew and I flowers picked from her garden, gathered together in a plait of red, white and blue cotton.

When I finally leave her house with our Dutch birth certificates tightly in hand, she gives me several other things, including my own copy of the beach photograph and the funeral notice for Opa Adri. "Na een langdurige ziekte is heden zacht en kalm ontslapen, mijn lieve man, onze zorgzame vader, groot en overgrootvader. Adrianus Marchal, in de ouderdom van 87 Jaar." It's dated 23rd January 1975 and, fittingly for an atheist, it gives the time and date of his cremation along with that of his memorial service. The notice comes from my great-grandmother, J. Marchal-Molenaar and her kinderen, klein en achterkleinkinderen. That's me and my three siblings and my oldest cousin Megan, I think. See, we're part of him!

Marijke also hands me a score for Handel's *The Messiah*, with my overgrootvader's signature on the title page. Even though, as Oma writes, "in our house there was no religion. My parents and the rest of my family were staunch socialists," Opa Adri loved the transporting moments that come with massed singing and was a devoted member of the only place where this was possible in the Holland of the nineteen thirties, the choir. I'm thrilled by these gifts from Bep and Peter, strengthening the invisible line that connects us now. But it's when she shows me a

framed black and white print of a simple, yet mysterious, arrangement of flowers on a stem, moving up to the light above a cluster of buds waiting to bloom, that I'm filled with joy all over again. It's a print, number 7 of 7, done in 1932. In the hand drawn ink border that frames the flowers and their stems is written AM, and, just below, Opa Adri's signature. It is my first artwork on paper done by the man who loved drawings and prints and sketches so much that he devoted much of his life to finding ways of conserving them.

On the drive back home, past the Masjid and the billboards that line the highway like signposts to the future, I wish I could phone my oma and share everything with her. But I can't. Her hearing and eyesight have betrayed her and there's little she can do except sit out the days. "I've had a good life," she said to me the last time I saw her in the living room of the assisted living section at the Umhlanga Rocks retirement village where she's lived since returning from Holland.

When I get home, I search her memoirs for clues about the artwork I've now inherited. Disappointingly, I find nothing. But the surprise gift of Adri's artworks prompts me to send an email to my family, asking for photos and descriptions of his original artworks they may have hanging on walls or kept in cupboards.

Catherine sends through a picture she has taken of the sailing boat that is mounted on a wall in her bedroom. Natalie, my cousin, emails a painting of a single stem of flowers that I recognise straight away as having hung in my grandparent's home. My aunt and uncle, Sandy and Rob promise to have a look and a few days later sends two photos, both taken in the Oeterwalerstraat flat. In one, my grandfather, wearing a button-through shirt and tie, leans over his father-in-law as he points to a landscape painting he is working on. In the background, propped up against the wall, is the painting that now belongs to my cousin Natalie. Lying on the table in front of Adri is a rectangular piece of cloth and on top of it, neatly laid out, are the tools of his trade. A wad of white cotton wool that looks like a petite cloud that has chosen to settle on a small table in a flat in eastern Amsterdam. There are oil paints and brushes in a glass with a chequered pattern on the outside. Three small bottles are placed within easy reach. For once I see my grandfather is working on a piece of art, without his thick overcoat on. Instead, he's wearing an open sports shirt and pants. But there

is no mistaking his intention. Adri is giving the painting a good clean before it is taken back to South Africa to join the many other artworks that are now in the homes of his descendants in cities across the land.

Chapter Eleven

To get to the Rijksmuseum library, you must first pass through the many halls that lead from the white chandelier-crested Atrium into the eastern corner of the building.

If you've got time to look at the art that lines the walls of your route, you might stop at Jan Veth's 1885 *Portrait of Albert Verwey*, and marvel at how the painter captured the upstart member of the Tagtigers, a group of Dutch writers and artists, his intense eyes, ruffled hair and rumpled jacket giving the poet a look that wouldn't be out of place on a poster pinned up on the walls of the nearby Paradiso rock club. You might even pause before the 1887 *Self Portrait* by Vincent Van Gogh, just a little further on from Verwey, who was born just ten years after the painter. After trying out the Neo-Impressionism style he had seen in Paris on images of himself, Van Gogh gave one of his self-portraits to André Bonger, the brother of Theo van Gogh's wife, Johanna van Gogh-Bonger. The painting of the artist, rendered in short, urgent strokes and liberating colours, has been in the Rijksmuseum since 1937, when it was donated by Bonger's widow. These days, it's kept quiet, unassuming company by two other Van Gogh works, *Mother By A Cradle* and *Farm Cottage*. Together they create an intimate, homespun embrace of the artist, who died just three years after he captured his own, unsmiling gaze.

With at least five halls to walk through, it's hard not to be distracted on the way to the library. And if it's any time after mid-morning, there are crowds to wind your way through; visitors taking a more leisurely route through the museum now that, for most of them, the pressure of seeing *The Night Watch* is over. Since the renovation, Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn's painting is located in the far end of the Night Watch Gallery, its walls washed the colour of a Karoo storm cloud, weighted low on the horizon with plump, eager raindrops.

If you enter the gallery early in the day, when the impatient visitors are still making their way through the streets of Amsterdam, the sparsely filled walls and natural light filtering in from outside turn it into a place of quiet reverence for the reimagined vision of Pierre Cuypers' 1876 design. Most eye-catching is the restored frieze, depicting important moments in Rembrandt's life (Zoon van Haarlem, In De Westerkerk), and the refreshed decorations that rise above the words, like delicate traces of an immovable, natural sentry that has stood guard over *The Shooting Company of Frans Banning Cocq* and Willem van Ruytenburch's *Preparing to March Out* since the gallery first opened in 1906. "Imagine you were only allowed three selfies in your entire life," I overhear an American guide telling a hushed group of admirers, by way of explaining why Captain Banning Cocq and seventeen members of his Kloveniers forked out one hundrred guilders each to appear in the painting, commissioned in 1639. "You would pay close attention to how you looked, what you wore and who was painting you. A painting like this was a deep investment in the self," the guide whispers before the group reluctantly makes way for other pilgrims and heads in the direction of the Gallery of Honour.

If the *Night Watch* is the Rolling Stones of the Rijksmuseum, then Johannes Vermeer's *Woman in Blue Reading A Letter* is Bob Dylan. Placed in one of the side rooms of the Gallery of Honour, the 1663 oil painting by the Dutch master is magnetic, capturing the same elusiveness of womanhood as the American songwriter's stunning ode to his wife Sara. "Sara, Sara whatever made you want to change your mind?/Sara, Sara, so easy to look at, so hard to define," sings Dylan on a song written three hundred years after Vermeer contemplated his canvas, but as easily fitting for the woman who gives nothing away about the contents of the piece of paper that she's holding in both of her slightly raised hands.

Surprisingly, Vermeer's name doesn't appear among those written on the now restored cast iron beams that run down the length of the Gallery of Honour. When Cuypers conceived the gallery as a celebration of those 17th century artists who had turned the Netherlands into a centre of fine art, Vermeer's ability to compose a domestic visual scene that carried with it emotion and mood, that allowed a window into the intangible interiority of its subjects, had yet to be recognised. That came only after the Rijksmuseum opened in 1885 and the painting, on loan from the City of

Amsterdam, was acquired for display on June 30th of the same year. *The Milkmaid*, painted in 1660, joined *Woman in Blue* in 1906 and the museum's Vermeer collection is completed by the *The Love Letter,* which was purchased in 1893, and *The Little Street*, donated in 1921 by Amsterdam-born H.W.A. Deterding, founder of the Royal Dutch Shell group.

Because eight thousand objects are displayed – out of a collection of one million – and spread through a route of one-and-a-half kilometres, it's not every visitor to the Rijksmuseum who strays away from the halls towards the library. But every so often, a group will open the door leading in from the second floor where a small platform offers a look into the balconied, three-story space.

There, the view into a still sanctuary that's changed little since the nineteenth century is gratifying, even for those who are not bibliophiles. Cuyper's vision was that the museum would also be a place of learning and the library was therefore given the same detailed attention as the rest of the structure. On every side of the slender, tiled floor are dark wooden shelves, heavy laden with art books, journals and periodicals, and accessible by walkways that are bordered by the same wrought-iron railings that were installed during the original construction. Moss green strips of felt run along the upper edge of the shelves on the last two storeys giving the works tucked beneath modest protection from the light shining through the glass roof which once provided enough natural light for nineteenth century scholars to read in the library during the day, without the help of gaslights. Since the renovation, the arches that bloom out from the top storey bookshelves and surrounding walls have been rescued from the suffocating whitewash that had coated them from around the nineteen sixties. Trails of hand-painted decorative leaves and flowers frame the exhortations of Cuypers to users of his library. "Wij hebben twee oogen maar één mond. Dit zij voor U een teken. Hier veel te lezen en niet veel te spreken." "You have two eyes but only one mouth. Let this be a warning to you. Here, you read lots and don't talk much."

It's in the library that I leave the crowds and join those who've sat beneath the vaulted ceiling over the past one hundred and thirty years. Aside from the periodic clicking of a digital camera from the viewing platform on the second floor, twenty

first century visitors to this place of learning take heed of Cuyper's instruction. At times the stillness settles so totally over the library, like a net cast from above by an unseen fisherman, that I'm certain the sound of my racing heart must be audible.

I'm hunting for clues to my great-grandfather's time at the Rijksmuseum. Employment dates. Colleagues. Duties. Restoration work. I'm not feeling particularly confident because already the archives haven't produced much. But I'm still excited at what might be available. If I am to tell the story of the three generations of art on paper restorers in my family, if I'm to reclaim the role of these people, and others like them, in the ability of museums in Amsterdam, London, New York and Paris to attract large numbers of visitors, I want something more than the increasingly fuzzy stories that have made it down the decades.

Even my grandmother's memoirs mention her father's work all too briefly, with frustratingly little detail. About a third of the way into the pages covered with her distinctive writing she notes, "When his boss, the first paper restorer in 'het Rijksprenten kabinet' was pensioned my father took his place and in 1946 my cousin Wil van Oort became his assistant." That's it. Except for this, in her particular style of written English, a little further on: "After my father was pensioned he accepted private work from high born people who had famous pictures that had to be restored. My brother Fre told me that when these treasures arrived at our home they were transported with a police escort. Baron van Schimmelpenninck was one of his customers. One story, told by my mother, goes that a painting had a hole in the middle and was painstakingly restored. It was ready for collection when my mother accidently knocked it over. Was my father cross! He had to start all over as there was another hole in it."

I've already left the Netherlands and am back in South Africa when I read what my grandmother has written, with such frustrating brevity, about her father's career as a restorer.

I'm struck by two things. The first is the idea that Adri might have done painting restoration alongside his paper work. Even in its infant years, the world of restoration was always separated: the painting restorer, the textile restorer, the

furniture restorer, the paper restorer. When I met Bas van Velzen in his studio just off the Prinsengracht, the book and paper lecturer at the University of Amsterdam gave me a short publication by the university produced about its Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage courses. These days, a three-year bachelor degree followed by a two year Masters is required for anyone eyeing a career in any one of the different studios in the Ateliergebouw in Hobbemastraat, a new building completed in 2007 and also designed by Cruz and Ortiz, the Spanish firm that renovated the Rijksmuseum. "As it is known today the profession of conservator-restorer is relatively young. Younger still is the scientifically trained discipline. Both are rapidly gaining recognition and validation," the booklet notes. When Adri retired in the ninteen fifties restorers were still self-taught men – there were far fewer women than the profession attracts now – who learnt by experimentation and what was common practice in whatever studio they were working. It was entirely possible that for a retired restorer like Adri, the boundaries between the disciplines were more permeable than they are today

The other thing that jumps out at me from my grandmother's memoirs is Adri's "high born" client, the fantastically named Baron van Schimmelpenninck. There have been several men with this name over the centuries but it's likely that Adri's client was Baron Hendrik Nicolaas Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, born in 1907 in Wassenaar and a minor member of de Huizen van Oranje en Nassau, the Dutch Royal family. From several thousand kilometres away it's difficult to know what kind of collection the Baron had. Prints? Drawings? Paintings? I try to imagine his artworks being delivered to the second floor of 15 Krugerplein, the presence of officials on the street outside indicating that "something important" was happening. Would customers buying cheese in the shop over the square inquisitively leave the counter and watch as Adri opened the door and beckoned the officials inside? Could the young couples choosing sparkling orange sweets at Jamin imagine what was being taken up the narrow staircase, carried with all the care and gentleness one would devote to a newborn baby?

I wonder, too, how Baron Schimmelpenninck came to send his artworks to Adri. Did he strike up a conversation with him on a day when the winter rain was keeping the Baron longer than he intended in the Rijksmuseum library where he was

researching an aspect of his growing collection? Perhaps he glanced up from a monograph on Albrecht Dürer and saw a short man with round glasses and a starched grey workcoat descending the delicate spiral staircase that runs down from the top balcony like a perfectly stretched Nautilus shell. I imagine that a conversation occurred and that, when Adri indicated he really should be getting on, the Baron took down his details on a small square of white paper, folded it up and stored it safely in his jacket before heading out into the rain coming down in sheets on Jan Luijkenstraat.

Amidst the everyday distractions that being back in Johannesburg bring, establishing the true details of Adri's work for the Baron (and even which Baron Schimmelpenninck he worked for) seems beyond my reach. But when he retired and began taking private restoration commissions, my great-grandfather had been head of the Rijkspretenkabinet restoration studio for nearly ten years, something which would have earned him a reputation amongst the art collectors of the Netherlands.

On the first day I arrived in the Netherlands, I started working my way through the bound copies of the *Verslag Omtrent 's Rijks Verzamelingen van Geschiedenis en Kunst* that were neatly lined up on a shelf at the back of the library.

At a glance, the reports are unpresuming, with their plain covers and utilitarian layouts, except for a few photos or replicas of artworks that are strewn between the words and lists. But the treasures that lie within are untold. From each museum director, there's a report on the year's activities. In descending order of what I assume to be importance, the report from the Rijksmuseum te Amsterdam is followed by that of the Koninklijk Kabinet van Schilderijen (Mauritshuis) te 's-Gravenhage, the Koninklijk Kabinet van Munten, Penningen and Gesneden Steen te 's-Gravanhege, the Rijksmuseum H. W. Mesday te 's-Gravenhage and so on, ending with the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische en Ikonografische Documentatie te 's-Gravenhage. Each year's report closes with an Overzicht van het aantal bezoekers a list of the visitors to each of the history and art institutions in the Netherlands in that particular year.

It's in the 1952 report, two pages after a reproduction of a drawing of a ship at half sail by Dutch marine painter Willem van de Velde de Jonge, that I strike gold. Under the heading Prentenkabinet, Atelier, it reads, "In een bijeenkomst van het personeel werd afscheid genomen van de Heer A Marchal, lange jaren chef van het restauratie-atelier, aan wie een gezamenlijk geschenk werd aangeboden, en waar tot uiting is gebracht hoe conscientieus deze restaurateur zijn verantwoordelijk werk heeft uitgevoerd."[25] Finally, there it is. Confirmation of Adri's position and a devotion to his work that everyone had seen. A man who conscientiously discharged his duties as a restorer. Not for Adri the flash of a limelight seeker. A man who quietly picked up a print, like the Van de Velde de Jonge, and, un-intimidated by the three hundred years that had passed since the sailing boats had sprung to life under the artist's hand, set about working to make sure it lasted another three hundred. The dedication with which my great-grandfather approached his work wasn't just a romantic notion conjured up by a great-grand daughter who'd embarked on a search for her roots. It was large enough to be noted in the director's report – which, I'd learnt by painstaking reading, was hardly comprehensive when it came to the museum's personnel.

I picture my great-grandfather shaking the hands of his colleagues and accepting the gift that they had all pitched in to buy on his retirement. What could it be, I wonder? What did the people he worked with decide was most fitting for their head restorer?

Unexpectedly, a print room staff member approaches me with a piece of paper. Might I be interested in this, she asks? Earlier I'd explained to her why I was working in the library and she had done a search for Adrianus Marchal and come up with a list of all the artworks that are connected to him in the print room. In this list of nine artworks, four are listed as gifts. There are two prints by Willem Abraham Wassenaar, reportedly a protégé of Jan Toorop, the notable symbolist painter. *Vogelstudie tusschen Distelplanten* and *Grauwe Lijsters* are their titles. Bird Study Between Thistle Plant and Spotted Thrushes. Another is, curiously, a pair of stockings

[25] During a meeting of the staff a farewell was given to Mr. A. Marchal, head of the restoration study for many years, who was presented with a joint gift that reflected how conscientiously this restorer had carried out his responsibilities

"knitted with scalloped edge, decorated with garlands". The last is a print by painter and lithographer Eugène Louis Pirodon titled *L'horloger de village.*

At first I think that these are gifts bestowed on Adri over the years. Perhaps on his birthday each June 6th? There were, I imagine, four small ceremonies over where carefully considered art on paper works were handed over to my great-grandfather, adding to his modest collection at home.

But later, when I do a search in the Rijksmuseum's extensive online catalogue, I see that I had it backwards. The gifts listed amongst the nine items are from Adri to the Rijksmuseum, not the other way around. There, by clicking on the "Object Data" icon beneath *Grauwe Lijsters* I read that Willem Abraham Wassenaar was born in Katwijk on December 14th in 1873 and died in Amsterdam on January 2nd in 1956. That the technique used for that particular artwork was coloured lithograph and, next to "acquisition and rights", that the print came to the Rijksmuseum in 1940 as a "Gift of A. Marchal, Amsterdam". Precisely the same information is given for *Vogelstudie tusschen Distelplanten*.

Frustratingly, there are no images available for the two prints. But there is a description for *L'horloger de village* (noted as created by Eugène Louis Pirodon, H. Mosler, Lemercier & Cie, 1834 – 1934), a lithograph that Adri presented to the Rijksmuseum in 1935. The scene inside the clockmaker's workshop, with the clockmaker behind the counter and a girl and a young woman with a baby in her arms on the other side, seems a departure from Adri's love of nature that frequently expressed itself in his own painting and drawings and prints.

His five purchases, like his gifts, were of minor figures in the world of art on paper. There is *Stadsgezicht*, a print by Ignace Joseph de Claussin, a nineteenth century French printmaker known for his etchings and his catalogues of Rembrandt prints. And *Gezadeld Paard Naar Rechts*, from the hand of another 19th century printmaker, Johannes Mock. Also listed are two anonymous prints, *Bosgezicht* and *Ruïne aan een water in boomrijke omgeving*, a return to the natural environment that Adri adored.

Buoyed by the discovery of the retirement note and the list of artworks that I'd had no clue existed, I go back to the *Verslag Omtrent* .... Surely, there must be more mention of Adri between the extensive details of the exhibitions that were mounted and – always taking up the most space – the artworks that the generous F.G. Wallerfonds had allowed the Rijksprentenkabinet to purchase each year.

Although he died in 1934, I can tell that François Gérard Waller was the kind of man who might have joined Adri for coffee on the Leidseplein to talk about people like De Claussin, Mock, and Wassenaar – artists and printmakers who knew that paper was where all art started. Waller loved engraving more than anything and, after a half-hearted stab at law, devoted his life to collecting and writing about Dutch engravers. His social standing as the son of two of Amsterdam's prominent citizens, Meindert Johannes Waller and Maria Elisabeth Adolphine Waller-Schill, enabled him to study art history at the École des Chartes. He eventually became director of the print room at Leiden University. A mountain-climbing accident when he was nineteen years old, which almost caused him to freeze to death on the Matterhorn, weakened him and, when he died, Waller bequeathed most of his collection of prints to the Rijksprentenkabinet. He had worked there in a voluntary position in 1896 and had believed it to be the most important repository for art on paper works in the country. When Waller named the state of the Netherlands as his sole heir it turned his assets into a fund that remains, to this day, the most important source from which the print room adds to its collection.

It's in the 1944 report that I come across a second mention of my great-grandfather, again with little fanfare. Noting the retirement of P.W. Van Baarsel, the head of the restoration atelier, the acting director of the Rijksmuseum, C.M.A.A. Lindeman, writes, "In zijn plaats werd met ingang van December 1944 benoemd de Heer A. Marchal, die sinds 1932 in het atelier van die Prentenkabinet werkzaam is." [26]

Finally, I have a timeline. My great-grandfather started working at the Rijksprentenkabinet as a technician charged with making boxes and framing in 1932. Twelve years later, in 1944, he was appointed head of the restoration atelier. For

[26] Mr A. Marchal, who had been working at the Pretenkabinet studio since 1932, was nominated to replace him with effect from December 1944.

someone who had to leave school early to help support his younger brothers and sisters, it was a remarkable achievement (but, I can't help thinking, one that was surely dulled by the hunger winter that gripped Amsterdam in the month of his appointment). Then, in 1952, at the age of 65, this most conscientious of restorers retired, and returned to Anna and his small workshop on Krugerplein.

I sit back and look up at the steel rods that cross the narrow library space. The light under the gentle curves is warm and yellow and embracing. I close my eyes and picture Adri moving through the library, descending the stairs, on his way to collect an artwork from the print room stores. How many times did he do this in twenty years? And which of these prints did he love working on, more than any other?

There's one last mystery that the collected volumes of *Verslag Omtrent 's Rijks Verzamelingen van Geschiedenis en Kuns* might solve for me and so I walk over, take several volumes off the shelves and begin reading again, skipping back and forth. A few hours pass in which I learn that visitors to the Rijksmuseum te Amsterdam in the third and fourth quarters of 1945, the months after the liberation of the Netherlands on May 5th, numbered 208 322 – more than four times the number that visited the year before. That in 1939, the year war broke out in Europe, the F.G. Wallerfonds enabled the Rijksprentenkabinet to purchase four hundred and fifty six art on paper works, among them *The Promised Land* by Hendrick Goltzius, a man who counted engraving, print publishing and painting amongst the talents that turned him into a leading figure in Dutch late sixteenth and early eventeenth century art. That in 1938 the museum purchased *Jeremia treurend over de verwoesting van Jeruzalem*, a Rembrandt oil painting, yet more confirmation of its position as the pre-eminent custodian of the Dutch artist's life's work.

I'm paging through the 1937 report, scanning over details of the museum's Chinese porcelain, glass, costumes, tapestry, silver, and gold collections, when my eyes stop. At the top of page thirty two, opposite a reproduction of Gerard van Honthorst's 1632 oil, *Fluitspelende herder en vier nimfen*, something catches my eye. "De Heer A. Marchal schonk een geteekende boekomslag van Albert Hahn voor 'Sprotje' van Gene Stratton, gedateerd 28 June 1918, een van zijn laaste werken." The short sentence stops me in my tracks. It's not the details of a restoration by my

great-grandfather that I had hoped for but his gift of the Hahn bookcover is significant enough to earn a mention in the annual report, not known for wasting time on inconsequential things. And, intriguingly, that particular artwork doesn't appear in the list given to me several hours before.

I sweep my eyes around the library, at the close to half-a-million books that are available for reading here. I think about the print room. The book cover drawn by Albert Hahn must surely be here somewhere?

Chapter Twelve

Back in South Africa a few weeks later, I'm haunted by the Albert Hahn drawing. Why wasn't it on the list I was handed in the Rijksmuseum? How did this particular donation from a technician in the restoration studio of the Rijksprentenkabinet get the attention of a busy museum director? What was it about the book cover that moved Adri to buy it, not for himself but for a museum that could display it for ordinary people to see? How did my great-grandfather even afford the piece of art in the aftermath of the Great Depression?

The difficulties of being on the trail of a story that straddles two continents and must fit into a full life of children and work is becoming frustrating. Outside my window, it's one of those end-of-winter Johannesburg days when the brown dust that's been accumulating on the city since May hasn't yet been stripped away by the spring rains. A skittish wind is blowing across the Highveld.

I've just returned from fetching the children from school. The news coming out of a local talk show on the car radio is about the first proper roasting of President Jacob Zuma by new parliamentarian, Julius Malema, and his Economic Freedom Fighters. "Pay back the money, pay back the money," they chanted in reference to a finding early this year by South Africa's Public Protector, Thuli Madonsela, that the President and his family unduly benefitted from the multi-million rand upgrades at his private home in Nkandla. The recommendation was that he pay back a portion of the money and Malema – himself under scrutiny for tax evasion – was trying to force a response from the President. The chaotic scene ended with the summoning of the riot police to eject the EFF from parliament.

I look away from the bleak sky and down at another three copies of *Agenda: A Journal About Women and Gender* that I came across recently, hidden underneath a well-thumbed *Tank Girl* comic and an *NME* from 1989 with Beastie Boys on the

cover. “Back from the dead,” shouts the music magazine’s headline, which, from the distance of twenty five years and with the knowledge of Adam Yauch’s death from cancer, is suddenly robbed of all winking irony.

The 1988 issue of *Agenda* is where I found my article on Theresa Ramashamola. On the inside front cover, there’s a handwritten note to me: “Thanks for your contribution, with compliments, AGENDA collective”. I idly pick up another issue, dated 1987, with a picture of swaying dancers from the Sydenham Women’s Dance Group on the cover. Towards the end of the journal I come across an article by Pregs Govender about the launch of the United Democratic Front’s Women’s Congress. She wrote about how the 1986 State of Emergency had seen the detention of many women activists and how vigilante action – something that I would also report on in my first year out of Durban University – had also been responsible for “the killing and rape of women comrades”. Further on I read about the congress’s resolution on a democratic South Africa: a brave statement directed at the apartheid government that I remember feeling buoyed by when it was first made public. “Democracy means full control over our lives. It means participation by the people in decision-making about all aspects of our lives.”

How did it come to this? I think. How did the struggle for national liberation so swiftly become the comic battle between a former hero who sees nothing wrong with having nearly a quarter-of-a-billion rand being spent on his house, and a man whose hearts-and-minds winning populist stunts are a distraction from some unsettling pronouncements?

Since my discovery in the Rijksmuseum Library, I’ve done some reading on Albert Hahn and a thought springs to my mind. How would the political cartoonist have depicted the implacable Zuma facing off with Malema and his EFF, defiant in the red workman’s overalls and maid’s uniforms that they claim as their parliamentary uniform? The scene in the National Assembly came one hundred years after Hahn was at his peak, but the August day is ripe for visual commentary from someone with his penetrating gaze.

By the time he died in Watergraafsmeer on August 3rd 1918 (precisely, it strikes me, a month after my grandmother was born in Utrecht on July 3rd of that year) Hahn was the Netherlands' most prominent political cartoonist.

In the *Biografisch Woordenboek van het Socialisme en de Arbeidersbeweging in Nederland* [vi]I discovered that his first move into social commentary were his illustrations for a book written by Louis M. Hermans. It was, very pointedly, titled *Krotten en Slotten* (Hovels and Slums) and was published in 1901. Hahn – like Adri – grew up in a working class family so knew something of the struggle faced by those living in the hovels and the slums. After contracting tuberculosis of the spine when he was nine, he was very frequently ill, missing years of school as a child and eventually dying at just forty one.

A year after *Krotten en Slotten* was published Hahn entered the world of political commentary. The gateway was winning a competition run by *Het Volk*, the national newspaper of the Social Democratic Workers Party. Even on my great-grandparents' holidays to South Africa, Adri could be found dozing on a beach chair, a folded copy of the paper on his lap, its pages lifted by the gentle sea breeze. Actually, it was *Het Volk's* Sunday supplement, *Het Zondagsblad,* that needed a political cartoonist and Hahn quickly became a permanent member of staff. Over the next sixteen years, he produced a prolific stream of drawings for all the publications associated with the SDWP: *Het Volk*, *Het Zondagsblad*, and, later, the weekly satirical magazine *De Notenkraker*. In Hahn's sights were capitalists, the misery faced by workers, the political consequences of the railway strikes in 1903, the Dutch government, the clergy and the inhumanity of World War I. Every single issue that was important to the Socialists in the Netherlands was turned into visual commentary by Hahn. "A month ago I gave you 5 days off so you could give birth, and now you must leave again just to bury this child, what is to become of my business?" Hahn has a capitalist shouting at a woman in one cartoon. In another, this conversation relays the socialist view on the army: "'I don't know what is to become of my oldest son. He isn't studying well.' 'Make him an officer. The dumber he is, the better his promotion. And he'll always be intelligent enough to shoot that striking scum!'" One of his best-known illustrations is of a worker with his hand raised as a train races out of the

station, two black suited Capitalists tugging at his leg. “The whole machinery stops, if your mighty hand wills it so,” reads the caption.

During the last four years of his life, Hahn laid bare the horrors of the war in a series of images that helped sear the reality of the bloody battles into the minds of his newspaper’s readers. In his hand, cathedrals morph into tanks; a mournful, watchful skeleton plays the violin for troops heading towards a certain, fiery death; and the world is ablaze, clutched at by an obese Capitalist futilely attempting to blow out the enveloping flames.

I spend hours on the internet poring over Hahn’s work. I get hooked most by the artworks that he created for the Sociaal-democratische Arbeiderspartij. [vii] A 1911 poster urges voters to “Sign The People’s Petition for Universal Suffrage”. The simplicity of Hahn’s image of a red-shirted man pulling on a rope that sounds a bell against the backdrop of a rising sun gives it an enduring power that travels across the decades and geographical boundaries right into my office in Johannesburg. A 1913 lithograph that the International Institute of Social History describes as the first illustrated election poster in the Netherlands places a working man in a defiantly outsized red shirt in front a distant factory, with the words Stemt Rood! (Vote Red!) occupying nearly half of the 110 centimetre deep image. A similar man surfaces in a poster drawn by Hahn five years later. This time, however, the stoicism of the working man has given way to action. The righteous flow of his downward motion to disentangle, with a pick-axe held in both his strong hands, the multi-limbed Octopus (“Kapitalisme”) is now echoed in the elegant letterings and patterns that read “Stemt Rood” and “Kiest De Kandidaten Der Soc.Dem.Arb.Partij.” Vote Red. Choose the candidates of the Social Democratic Worker’s Party.

With its fluid lines, curling type and restrained colours of burnt orange, buttery yellow and seaweed green, Hahn’s lithograph was a forerunner of the Art Deco design movement. The poster enjoyed a print run of ten thousand, an impressive number for the time. I imagine Adri and Anna carefully taking their copy and pinning it up in the kitchen of their home in Utrecht as they waited for the birth of their first child.

I look at a photograph of Hahn in his studio space that I found in the treasure trove of digital images connected to him online. On the wall behind a calendar hangs, at a slight angle, from an unseen hook, open on the month of August 1915. It is a product of M.V. Electrische Drukkerij, a printing company located on the Keizersgracht that specialised, so it states in bold black type, in book, newspaper and commercial printing. Propped up on the bureau is a print of a wintery scene in which a woman digs a grave for a fallen man lying on the ground next to her. The bureau's shelves are filled with papers and rolled up pieces of cardboard and empty cups, a tableau of disorder that leaves the small table on which Hahn works free of clutter. In his left hand is a slender paintbrush, poised over an out-of-focus drawing of what looks like a worker confronting an authority figure.

Hahn is sitting on a chair, dressed in a dark woollen jacket, a thick vest visible beneath its edges. His gaze is direct but there's a droop, a glaze to his eyes, and his shoulders are slightly hunched.

At the time the photograph was taken, Hahn was three years from dying and must surely have been struggling with the relentless back pain caused by living for thirty years with spinal tuberculosis. Vertebral collapse and spinal cord compression are among the later complications for sufferers, I see when I look up the condition. Was it any wonder that his cartoons of the First World War became increasingly bleak? The anguished death of a man caught in the electrified dodendraad that the Germans erected to control the Dutch-Belgium border. A uniformed skeleton sowing grenades in a sooty landscape stripped of life above a caption that reads "Springtime".

Hahn's final cartoon, published in *De Notenkraker* on the day he died, was a black and white drawing, in the artist's signature graphic style, of another skeleton in a uniform. At his back are row after row of crosses that eventually merge with an awful, blackened sky. At the deathly creature's side is a large standing gun and the caption reads: "After four years of war, militarism speaks: Have trust in me. I do not work fast, but the peace I will bring eventually will be very complete".

I know that Adri's gift of a hand-drawn book cover for Gene Stratton's *Sproetje* ("Freckles") is also one of the artist's last works. According to the annual

report that I found in the Rijksmuseum library, the drawing is dated 28 June 1918, just under five weeks before Hahn's death. But Hahn's Sproetje doesn't surface amongst the political cartoons and posters that I find online when I am back in Johannesburg.

There's no shortage of information on Gene Stratton. In all the writings, Gene Stratton-Porter (for she joined her husband's surname to hers after her marriage in 1886) is described as a woman ahead of her times: a naturalist, a photographer and a pioneer in the movie industry who became one of the first women to set up her own studio. She was also an author who reportedly had more than fifty million readers around the world: young women mostly, who loved the stories Stratton-Porter set in the east Indiana wetlands known as the Limberlost Swamp, narratives that showed that you could beat down adversity if only you were clever and kind. *A Girl of the Limberlost*, written in 1909, is Stratton-Porter's best-loved book set in the swamp where the author would frequently wander with her camera and notebook, documenting the birds and moths and other creatures that lived there. The book was the sequel to *Freckles*, which told the tale of an adult orphan who arrives, history-less and mysteriously missing his right hand, in Limberlost and is soon protecting its creatures and plants with a vigilance that catches the attention of those living and working in the area.

I am finding it increasingly hard to keep my mind on anything. Outside my office window, there's no sign of the dampness that Stratton-Porter knew so well from her beloved Limberlost wetlands. Instead, everything about this August has a crack of dryness and I long for the thrumming of a spring downpour and the smell of lightning left by a summer storm. I'm gripped by a melancholy about the country that I love that is only broken by unfettered wanderings into the side-paths of the journey that I have undertaken. Albert Hahn. Gene Stratton-Porter. These long gone people fill my mind, taking the place of thinking too much about Jacob Zuma and his homestead.

Once again, I take out the list of artworks associated with Adri that was given to me in the Rijksmuseum. No matter how many times I stare at it and read the list there's no sign of Hahn's *Sproetje*. If the artwork was significant enough to be written about in the 1937 *Verslag Omtrent 's Rijks Verzamelingen van Geschiedenis en*

Kunst, then why isn't it on the record of gifts from my great-grandfather to the museum?

I take one last stab at finding the drawing and open my browser on the Rijksmuseum online catalogue. Typing in Albert Hahn brings up close to fifty entries, only two of which have images. The first is a portrait of Johan Braakenziek, published in the first edition of *De Amsterdammer* on October 29th 1911. The black, white and cream print gives a side view of the artist, who, like Hahn, combined his work as a political cartoonist with book illustrations. Was he an inspiration for the younger man? In Hahn's graphic-style drawing, Braakenziek has a commanding air, carried by the softly knotted tie, his thick, swept-back hair and the round glasses perched on his nose. Respect me, the portrait seems to say; respect my ability to use just a pencil and a single piece of paper to tell you a story that you might never forget.

I look at the second picture in the catalogue. *Meisje kus voor haar knielende Engelse soldaat*. A willowy woman bends down to gently kiss the forehead of a man kneeling before her. Both are unadorned, reflecting the artwork's muted colour palette of sage, cocoon yellow and black. She is in a simple long dress tied with a soft sash and he has a short axe tucked into the back of his belt. Hahn depicts the couple within an oval that resembles a locket, and they are held in the embrace of tiny birds in flight and softly curling tendrils and flowers. But it's their hands that carry the love that radiates from the work. As the woman takes her soldier's face in both of hers, covering his ears as she draws his forehead up to her lips, he crosses his hands across his chest, surrendering totally to this moment of bliss.

When I download the full image I see a scroll at the top of the drawing. It says "Gene Stratton-Porter" and, in bigger writing, "Sproetje". With a jolt of excitement that makes the fading winter weather, the distracting political shenanigans disappear, I know that I am looking at the artwork donated by Adri to the museum in 1937. I can hardly wait to print the full drawing.

When I do, I imagine Adri feeling the paper in his hands, noticing the fold that runs along the width of the work, just below the soldier's crossed hands, and the small 'H' in the bottom right corner. Where did my great-grandfather find the drawing?

Was it in his and Anna's home in Utrecht, hanging amongst their collection of prints the story of Stratton-Porter's Freckles and his true love, the unnamed Swamp Angel? And did he, like me, wonder why Albert Hahn had drawn the orphan as an English soldier who still had his right hand. Maybe, days from death and haunted by images of the war, Hahn couldn't bear to draw anything but a moment of pure romantic perfection.

Once again, I go back to the Rijksmuseum catalogue. I know that the information that accompanies each artwork must state its credit line. In the data, Hahn's *Meisje Kut voor haar knielende Engelse soldaat* is noted as a book cover for *Sproetje* by Gene Stratton-Porter. It is a pencil drawing that measures 169mm by 105mm. But, under acquisition and rights, I see that the Rjksmuseum has recorded the drawing's credit line as "Gift of D. Marchal, Amsterdam, 1937".

That's it then. In the transposing of an A for a D, Adri's gift ceased to be part of his story within the Rijksmuseum. The Hahn drawing, important enough to get the attention of the museum director in the year it was donated by my great-grandfather, has been untethered from the list of nine I was given and is floating away in history. If only I hadn't had to leave Amsterdam so soon I might have been able to correct the D for an A in person. I could have called for object RP-T-1937-28 – indicating Rijksprentenkabinet-Teken-1937-28 – and had it brought to me in the reading room. I could have picked up the drawing, and used my hands to pull it close and look for signs of Adri's fingerprints on a drawing he loved enough to give to an institution that would care for it in the way it deserved. I might have known then if he had, with the diligence that he was known for, restored what looks like a barely visible tear in the right-hand border. Perhaps I would have found notes in his handwriting concerning what to do about the small spots of flocking visible under the 'e' and 't' of 'Sproetje'. I might have at last found an artwork restored by the Rijksprentenkabinet's atelier's most conscientious restorer.

Still, even without seeing the drawing in person, I have no doubt why Adri found the Hahn so irresistible. Both men, born ten years apart, were immersed socialists, which meant singing in socialist choirs, attending socialist schools, joining socialist unions, visiting socialist hospitals, listening to socialist radio, reading and

drawing for socialist newspapers. When Hahn died in 1918, Adri was thirty one years old and not a day of his adult life had gone by without him having read *Het Volk*. He would have seen thousands of the close to four thousand political cartoons that Hahn drew in his lifetime. These drawings were a visual mapping of the issues and beliefs that were of burning importance to the socialists of the Netherlands in the early twentieth century. Then there were Hahn's lithographs for the SDAP. Breathtakingly beautiful even a century after they were created, the posters were a new and imaginative way of using paper for mass political communication. They were, in the end, the ultimate mix of socialism and artistry, the very two things that my great-grandfather loved more than anything.

Chapter Thirteen

"Are you going to visit friends?" the young man in the Utrecht tourist offices politely enquires when my sister Catherine and I ask for directions to the outskirts of the city. "There's really much more to see around here."

He's right. Just a few metres outside the office is the famous Domtoren, the tallest church tower in the Netherlands that, on a still and clear day, rewards those who have climbed its four hundred and sixty five steps with a view all the way to Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Down the road is Dick Bruna Huis where the collection of Utrecht's famous illustrator is held. It's also a place of pilgrimage for lovers of his Nijntje that are scattered around the world.

We visited the museum yesterday. We wanted to see how Bruna created his children's books, never longer than 15.5 centremetres (just right for small hands as Catherine and I found with our own children) and always with just one sentence and a single picture on each page, yet overflowing with character, emotion and narrative. Video installations show his working process, which hardly changed since he first drew the small rabbit to amuse his son in the mid-fiftiess. His tools are simple. A piece of white paper, a small bowl of black ink and a fine paintbrush to create Nijntje's graphic outline, her mouth (a little cross) and two eyes (neat black dots). We watched as a video showed him use a transparency of Nijntje peeking out of a tent and, with scissors in his right hand, cut coloured shapes for the tent, background and her body. He chooses from the five colours that he's worked with for decades – an orangey red, a deep blue, buttercup yellow, grass green and, only occasionally, bear brown. It sometimes takes hours or even days of shifting the colours around until he's happy with the final image and the page is sent to the printers. As I watched Bruna use a pair of long bladed scissors to cut with conviction and move paper around, I suddenly thought of Matisse, seated in his wheelchair, his left hand holding up a piece of paper painted with gauche to his precise colour specifications and, in his right, a large pair of dressmaker's scissors ready to make his next cut-out.

But on this day in 2012, my sister and I are headed out to Vogelenbuurt, and then further on towards Marnixlaan. Neither are regular stops for the tourists that roam Utrecht's binnenstad and its canals and buildings that can be dated back to the Middle Ages. "Good luck," says the young man as we exit the building and turn towards the Oudegracht.

We know we might need luck, but not in the way that the young man imagines. In my bag is a piece of paper. It reads: "My dad was very active in the socialist movement and with the advent of radio he became chairman of Utrecht. He was also secretary to a building project of lower priced houses. To this day his name appears on the memorial stone on one of the houses. It still is a nice complex." Precisely where the building project with Adri's name on it is located, my grandmother didn't specify when she wrote her memoirs. But before we left on our trip we had asked around. Now that she is in her nineties, the name has slipped out of Oma's memory but Marijke, my grandmother's cousin in Pretoria, says that the building with the stone inlay is in Marnixlaan in Utrecht's northwest district.

When Catherine and I planned our walk to Marnixlaan, I thought of how strange it was that the knowledge of Adri and Anna's active membership of the Socialist Party had only been properly revealed to me when I began reading my grandmother's handwritten recollections in 2011.

It wasn't as if our childhood was deprived of stories and artifacts from the Netherlands. Quite the opposite. As we sat around their small kitchen table, eating Oma's delicious boterkoek, we loved hearing my grandparents recount how they had married twice, one of the times while in different countries (can you imagine that!). We'd lie on our tummies in our lounge and page through the detailed diary, filled with photos, menus and mementos, that my mother had kept during that six-month family visit to Holland in the nineteen fifties. When no-one was looking we would climb onto the top of my grandfather's cupboard and, after running our fingers along the rough fabric of his Dutch army uniform, take out the musty green gas mask attached to an oblong brown cannister and make ourselves scared with what-if-a-gas-attack-happened-right-now whispers. We knew about the days my great-grandfather

Frans Reuvers spent working in Amsterdam's diamond trade, first as a polisher, then as a cutter and finally as a trader on the diamantbeurs. We lapped up proudly told stories about how the railway station at Groningen was built by a close relative of my great-grandmother Maria van Coolwijk Reuvers. And, like a family mantra that is repeated over and over again, we heard stories of Adri and Wil van Oort in the paper restoration studio in the eaves of the Rijksmuseum, painstakingly fixing tears and damage, but – my grandfather always reminded us – not for much money; never getting the recognition they really deserved. "See this," I remember my grandfather saying as he pointed to a barely visible brown smudge on *Het Vreeburg Te Utrecht*, a print that now hangs above the piano in my lounge. "If your great-grandfather was still alive he would be able to make that go away. Then, in one hundred years from now, your grandchildren will still be able to look at this beautiful scene and know where their ancestor who went by the name of Adriana Antje Marchal came from."

I go back to Atty's memoirs, hunting for more details of those visits by Anna and Adri to South Africa. Noting that the year was 1966, she writes, "Again there was a visit from Opa and Oma and I just can't remember where they all slept. Fre and Stien had moved to Bloemfontein where Opa and Oma stayed for three months. Cathy and Diane were three and two respectively. As they were about the same height and almost dressed the same, people mistook them for twins. Before a person could say 'Are you….?' the girls would say 'we are NOT twins'. In the morning they used to come upstairs and knock on the door. 'Who is there?' we would ask. 'Me' was the answer. 'Who is me?' we would say and so it would go on. We were so lucky to see them grow up."

There are several photographs of that visit. My great-grandfather was nearly eighty and my great-grandmother was seventy six. In the family photograph snapped on the wharf of Durban harbour after the months spent with Fre in Bloemfontein and Atty in Umhlanga Rocks, Anna and Adri look their age. Adri especially looks tired and slightly ashen, maybe at the thought of the long trip back home. It's as if the walking stick that extends off the length of his right index finger is the only thing keeping him upright. He's not smiling and neither is my sister Catherine, but everyone else – Oma Anna, my mother, my father, Atty and Jules, my aunt Anne-Marie and my uncle Robert – offers up an easy grin as the photographer clicks his

shutter. I smile when I see myself in this photograph. I've always disliked being photographed and at the very moment that everyone's been encouraged to look at the camera, I am shielding my face with my spread out right hand, although I seem quite relaxed in the arms of my grandfather. I notice too, that Catherine and I are in matching homemade dresses of black velvet with flower-speckled sleeves and bright white cuffs and collars. On our feet are exactly the same patent black shoes, the ones with perfectly spaced pinprick holes around the inside edge, and white bobby socks. No wonder people thought we were twins.

Catherine and I are not in matching dresses in another photograph from that trip, taken in the garden of the Umhlanga Rocks house. My great-grandparents are in fold-up garden chairs, with their first great-grandchildren – Catherine and me – on their laps. Both Anna and Adri are leaning towards the right, at almost precisely the same angle and, with their near-duplicate glasses. They have taken on the look of similarity that is particular to two people who have been together for over fifty years. Here, Adri looks vital. It's one of the few times that I find him with anything approaching a smile in a photograph. Perhaps his reluctance to perform for the camera was because he preferred being on the other side of the lens, as the ever-present brown box slung over his left shoulder in many photos from this time signifies. But I like to think Adri has his mouth open in a half smile because, in the buttery summer sunshine and with me on his lap, he's forgotten about the election of Jelle Zijlstra of the strongly Christian Anti-Revolutionaire Partij as Dutch President and pushed aside his conflicted thoughts of how it came to be that his children had ended up in a country run by racist Christian Nationalists. He's happy just being a great-grandfather to a grinning two-year-old wearing a pretty dress with rick-rack edging and holding a little ball between her fingers; a little girl that he's steadying with the same extended right index finger that in another photograph was helping keep him upright.

I try hard to remember that visit. Our regular treks up the stippled brick path on the side of the house to my grandparent's front door must have meant we saw a great deal of Opa Adri and Oma Anna. I have a flash of an embracing warmth radiating from Anna while my great-grandfather sits in a chair, lost in reading or daydreaming. I know that this memory might be fuelled by the ones my mom has of her grandparents. "Opa was always reading copies of *Het Volk* that he brought with

him, and Oma was one of the kindest people I have ever met," my mom said to me more than once when we talk about the trips her grandparents made to South Africa. I again smile to myself when another cousin of my oma's, Jan Visser, who is ninety-one, writes an email to my mother, and replies to her news that I am writing this book with his own recollections: "Adri and Annie were quite near to me: he with big 'explosions', she with an admired even temper. She always was quiet and full of humour."

Armed with the knowledge of my great-grandparent's commitment to socialism, I imagine that Adri's remoteness at times during those trips was his way of dealing with the strangeness of being in South Africa. After Frederick emigrated in 1948, both his children settled in a country where the principle of universal suffrage was actively and openly defied for all the world to see.

The first visit by her parents (by boat because, Atty reports, her father refused to fly) came in 1948, the year the Nationalist government assumed power. When they returned in 1954, the party was hard at work creating laws – the Population Registration Act, the Separate Amenities Act, the Group Areas Act – that would separate the people of Atty and Jules' adopted country for decades.

By this time, the business that my grandparents started in 1948 was thriving. In its prime, Holland Dry Cleaners employed twenty eight people to collect from agents around Johannesburg, do the dry-cleaning and help with the office work. Located in the light industrial area of Denver, in a building designed by their Dutch architect friend, Anton Voorvelt, the small business would eventually provide Jules and Atty with the means to relocate to Umhlanga Rocks with their youngest children in 1964 – the year of my birth.

My grandparents worked hard at making Holland Dry Cleaners a success, with Jules heading to work at seven in the morning and leaving the factory at eight at night. My grandfather was strict and could often boil over. As we grandchildren came to know, this good Catholic son could be heard shouting "Godverdomme" in frustration – mostly at something small – at least once a day and the family frequently gave quiet thanks that Atty had inherited her mother's "admired even temper". But my

grandfather was also fair, paying the workers at Holland Dry Cleaners double for overtime and, on more than one occasion, trying to intercede when apartheid's laws interfered with business. On one occasion, writes Atty, "The staff was sitting outside on the pavement eating their lunch. We had a special room for lunch which was never used. A police van arrived and the policemen asked for their passes. Of course nobody had them on them as they were sitting outside their working premises and the passes were inside in their jackets. They were not allowed to get them even though Jules asked politely to let them. The whole staff was bundled into the van, much to the disgust of Jules and the woman who worked in our office who, incidentally, was Afrikaans and a Nat. Work stopped. In the evening they were discharged after paying bail."

I never had a sense that my grandparents were actively resisting apartheid. But I knew they supported the more liberal United Party in the most important elections since the Union of South Africa's independence from the United Kingdom, and were stunned when the National Party got into power in 1948. I'm curious to know who could have played a role in steering Atty and Jules away from the National Party which was led by Hendrik Verwoerd, a man who was, like my grandfather, born in Amsterdam into a properly Dutch family. More than once I would come across the name Herbert Vieyra in Atty's memoirs. He was the lawyer investigating the legality of the government-in-exile conscripting Dutch men who had emigrated to South Africa. My grandmother's diary also records that Herbert helped Holland Dry Cleaners get underway by lending Jules and Atty money to buy a collection and delivery van – a step up from my grandfather's start in the dry cleaning business when he drove a horse and cart around Joburg, collecting laundry and dry cleaning for commission. It was the only job he could get when he returned from the war in 1945.

Intrigued by the recurring appearance of Herbert Vieyra in my grandparent's life, I do an online search and discover that this son of Dutch parents, who immigrated to South Africa in 1896, made legal history by establishing in court that marriage by proxy was valid in South Africa. [viii] But it wasn't just his Dutch roots and interest in the legal rights of the Dutch community that drew my grandparents to Herbert: he was also a Catholic, and, like my grandmother, he had converted to the religion when he was just twenty-one. Unlike Atty though, Herbert had to actively renounce the Jewish

faith that he was born into, becoming estranged from his family for years. Herbert subsequently became a lay leader in the church and played a prominent role in assisting the Catholic bishops in formulating their responses to apartheid legislation. I learn all of this in a thesis that I happen across online. "Vieyra strongly believed that lay Catholics needed to be involved in the social and political arena of their faith," explains the author, Mark James. "He advocated that the dignity of every human being had to be upheld, especially in the face of government legislation that denied that black people shared this God-given dignity". I like to think that it was Herbert's belief in being "a living influence" on those around him that meant my grandparents weren't among the many white Catholics who supported the Nationalist Government's apartheid policies.

When Anna and Adri made their last visit together in 1966, it's hard to imagine that the pretty seaside town of Umhlanga Rocks was able to fully mask the authoritarianism of the nineteen sixties that had turned South Africa into a security state. The banning of the African National Congress and Pan Africanist Congress in 1960 under the Unlawful Organisations Act. The Sabotage Act, which granted the police the powers to detain people without trial in solitary confinement. The Sharpeville Massacre, which would play a big role in the establishment of the anti-apartheid movement across Europe.

Since I discovered that my great-grandparents were socialists I've been aware of romanticising the role of the party in their lives. I try and guard against the wishful thinking that they would have found being in South Africa difficult because the idea of a workers' revolution that would bring an end to the inequality between the classes and genders – the very foundation of their political beliefs – was anathema to the Nationalist Party.

So I set about trying to find out how Adri and Anna really felt about South Africa, but the task is almost as hard as unearthing an artwork that my great-grandfather restored. Frustratingly, no-one seems to have kept any of the letters that flowed between the Netherlands and South Africa for decades, interrupted only by the war. I long to be able to reverse the action of Oma, her brother Fre, their children and

relatives in Holland, who looked at a sheaf of paper covered in detailed handwriting and decided it should go into the throwaway pile.

It's only during my trip with my mother in 2014 that I come closer to an understanding of what Anna and Adri felt about the roots their growing family were putting down in the Republic of South Africa. We are spending the day with Atty's cousin Bep and her husband Peter de Jong in Driebergen and they've prepared for my visit. Spread out in the dappled sunlight on a small wooden table are photos of three generations of the Marchal family and a kwartierstaat detailing the members of the Marchal family – my great-great grandparents, Willem Marchal and Antje Baartwijk, and their children. Eleven in all, with my great-grandfather the oldest. I look closely at the dates and see that three children – among them the first Willem, born in February 1903 and dead just ten months later – did not make it to adulthood. There is also a copy of Willem and Antje's marriage certificate, dated May 10th 1887 and noted as marriage number 209 in Utrecht that year.

Amongst the photographs is one taken during an excursion by the Utrecht VARA club and there, as part of the close to one hundred members gathered under a large tree, is my serious-looking great-grandfather. VARA stood for Vereniging Arbeiders Radio Amateurs and was, Peter explains to me, the socialist radio club. "The VARA was part of the verzuiling that defined life in the first few decades of the twentieth century," Peter – himself a socialist – explains to me. "Verzuiling was a system of almost total isolation of different groups of Dutch people. Every group – Socialist, Roman Catholic, Protestant – had their own newspapers, magazines, trade unions, choirs, broadcasting stations, schools, youth clubs, and hospitals."

I think back to Atty's memoirs, where she writes how important it made her feel when a socialist street parade stopped outside the family's house in the Vogelenbuurt. "My dad was a prominent member of the movement and he was serenaded by a band. Here we were standing in front of our home while the band played all the Socialist songs. I loved it. It made us feel so important as the whole neighbourhood watched." In another entry she describes a VARA rally in Hilversum when she was a teenager. "From all over the province of Utrecht the members were coming. We went by bike – my father included. Nearing Hilversum we soon

discovered people with their bikes alongside the road. What had happened was that the opposition party had thrown tacks on the paths and there were many punctured tyres. On another occasion the police stopped us from going through the centre of Hilversum. It was a Sunday. I was indecently dressed, wearing shorts."

I'm finally getting a sense of how difficult it might have been for my grandparents to accept Atty's conversion to Roman Catholicism, all for the sake of a family deeply embedded in a zuil that was different to their own. When I express this, Bep and Peter they smile at each other. "Why do you think Atty and Anna moved back to Utrecht after just a few years in Amsterdam, even though Adri had to catch a train every day to the Rijksmuseum?" they ask. "Because Adri wanted to be near his seven brothers and sisters," I confidently reply. They shake their heads. "That might have been what they told Atty but the move was really to try and separate Atty and Jules," Peter says in his forthright way.

I'm taken aback at this disruption in an important family story and am suddenly filled with admiration for my great-grandparents' acceptance of Atty and Jules' love – in direct contrast to Maria Reuvers, who wouldn't sanction her son's marriage unless Atty converted to Roman Catholicism. Surely Anna and Adri's visits to South Africa also came with some personal agony as they watched the family prepare for church on Sundays, I now think. Even my mother was compliant in the early days, dutifully taking her own children to the Umhlanga Rocks Hotel hall which served as a church for the village's Catholics until eventually, with the beach and our teenage gang beckoning just a hundred metres away, we begged to be released from this duty.

There are more revelations to come from Peter. "Your great-grandfather was an important member of the Socialist Party's Fakkeldragersgroep," he tells me as Bep brings out a plate of ice-cream coloured petit fours. "This was a group of about ten Socialist Party members in every district, who would come together weekly to discuss politics. I remember Adri telling me that they had discussed what was going on in South Africa as apartheid made itself felt. The feeling at one point was that Adri and Anna shouldn't go to the country at all because that would be an endorsement of a discriminatory system. But on a personal level, the Fakkeldragersgroep relented

because they knew it was important for your great-grandparents to see their children and grandchildren. Still, there was an instruction that Adri come back with information to report to his group."

"And? What did he say?" I'm on the edge of my seat now. Peter looks at me. "I don't know exactly what he said to his Fakkeldragersgroep but I spoke to him about it many times. He never waivered from saying that apartheid was wrong but his stance softened a little after those visits. It was complicated, he said, and wasn't a problem that could be solved overnight. I think he was trying to put himself a little in the shoes of his children who had learned to live within the system."

Later, after dinner, Peter and Bep drive Emma and me back to Eekhoornnest, where we are staying in Soest. In the heart of the Utrecht Hill Ridge, surrounded by forest and dunes and filled with birds, we both find ourselves thinking of Atty in her one room in the assisted living section of an Umhlanga Rocks retirement home. Before my mom left to board the plane to join me in Johannesburg, Atty pleaded with her. "Take me home to Holland. I want to go home." At the time, Atty was recovering from a broken femur and was nearly blind and deaf. My mom could only gently wish her ninety-six-year-old mother goodbye.

We make a detour to Park Rodichen in Huis ter Heide where my grandparents lived from the late eighties until my Opa was dying in 1996 and they returned to South Africa to be closer to their children. They had been married nearly sixty years by then, just a little more than Adri and Anna. What a life they had, I think to myself. Nearly being separated forever by a war far away from their adopted country. Narrowly escaping having their love thwarted because of the verzuiling that ruled Dutch society at the time.

I long to know what it was that helped my great-grandparents accept their daughter's decision to marry a Roman Catholic and her emigration, all before the age of twenty one – the age of majority at that time. Was it Anna's admired, even temper? Or was it the thing that made Adri a good socialist, a good father and a good restorer: the ability to put himself in the mind of others; a desire to work for equality and the

end of suffering; a belief in a world that cared about those who inhabited it and what they created.

I think back to the day Catherine and I were searching for evidence of this aspect of our great-grandfather's life. As we left the old town behind and made our way towards Marnixlaan, we didn't have to look far to see how much Utrecht had changed since a socialist choir was serenading Adri on its streets. In the Amsterdamse Straatweg that separates the old city from Noordwest, Turkish men gathered to drink coffee, the smell of fragrant Suriname rotis hung in the air as we passed a food shop and a wedding dress was displayed in the window of a Muslim dress shop. But the low-cost housing project that the Socialist Housing Association opened on December 13th 1919 is little different from when it was built, in a sombre take on the Amsterdam Style. As we approached Marnixlaan that May day in 2012, I saw something in the brown brick wall and, after running across the busy road, we found ourselves standing in front of the memorial stone. It's a moment I will never forget. "Utrechtschewoninggebouw, Vereeniging Utrecht," read the words at the top of the stone. And, chiselled into the light grey stone just below, the names of the key individuals involved in the project. "G. Voerman. Voorzitter. A. Marchal. Secretaris. D. Beun. Penningmeester."

Bep and Peter nod enthusiastically when I tell them about our journey on foot to Marnixlaan and our pride, more than ninety years later, at seeing our great-grandfather's name in the stone. "The houses were for working-class people and because it was a project of the Socialist Housing Association located on a triangle between Marnixlaan, Van Egmontkade and Van Hoornekade, it became known as De Rode Driehoek – the Red Triangle," Peter says. "Even today, people refer to it that way. Adri was always very proud of having been part of getting that project completed because there was great poverty at the time."

As we turn into Eekhoornnest's long driveway, edged by clusters of white cow parsley flowers and fields of green, I'm at last feeling properly rooted in this land, a place that's been woven into my life through stories and pictures since as far back as I can remember. I hold the picture of the commemoration stone at De Rode Driehoek in my mind. My great-grandfather's fingerprints might be invisible in the Rijksmuseum,

but on this building of three hundred and fourty three flats, on a nondescript corner of Utrecht, his name is displayed for all to see.

Chapter Fourteen

By mid-November 2014, the task of capturing my great-grandfather's story is still feeling overwhelming.

In a month or so I would be in Cape Town, in the suspended state of bliss that the end of the year brings to a country in the southern hemisphere. There, in the small village of Simonstown where we spend our summer holidays, it's always possible to pretend that the tattered state of the rainbow nation was just a wretched dream; something you can shake off like rumpled bedclothes after a restless night's sleep.

As the final weeks of the year closed in, I was only able to write in fits and starts. When I wasn't being a mother, most of my time was taken up by the writing work I had started takin on when I finally had to come to terms with the fact that *Rolling Stone South Africa* was never going to be published again. When we started the local version of the magazine in 2011, we imagined years of narrative journalism ahead of us and spoke boldly of rock and roll being an attitude, not a genre. It allowed us to widen our scope and tell the stories of a country where the music created by a Shangaan disco hitmaker was as important, if not more so, than the rock bands that are most associated with the journal for which I was the music editor. I started avoiding events where I would have to have yet another conversation with an acquaintance about the heartache of twenty years of music writing slipping away from me and the impossibility of finding another place for my work at a time when publications were shutting their doors, scattering words and images into the void of history.

In the few minutes before I fell asleep, I attempted to read the books of other writers for inspiration. But, in the blur of work and parenting, they only made me feel frustrated. Who can take off six months for research, I thought with no small amount of bitterness when I made my way through Emma Brockes' *She Left Me The Gun* [ix](and also this: why did the prospect of being given a South African passport prompt

such revulsion in the writer and how can she say that Afrikaans sounds so awful to outsider's ears?) There were other books, read and half-read on the table, beside my bed. Languid explorations of family histories and their curiosities by people living in countries where Just Being A Writer of Books for a proper amount of time seemed actually possible. Award-winning narratives by writers whose lucky lives meant they didn't have to work and had plenty of hours in which to move words around and plan the arcs and flows of their stories.

None of this did me any good. Regularly, I castigated myself for the unbecoming feelings of envy that surged, unbeckoned but wholly unmistakable, inside me. Better writers have accomplished more with much less than you have, I remonstrated to myself. For my mid-afternoon drive to fetch Hannah from her school on the edges of the inner city, I had worked out the journey that crossed paths with the smallest number of street hustlers possible. This was not something that made me proud. I lived a solid middle class life, with a house, a car, a domestic worker , a pool. But, after twenty years of living in the city, I was beginning to find the growing number of window washers, hawkers of car freshener and plaintive rubbish collectors who appeared at my car window at Johannesburg's intersections distressing. And so I had fashioned a route that avoided the worst intersection on Oxford Road. Even so, I couldn't avoid an open park where bundles of blankets and clothes hung over the fence until night time, when their owners would return. Most people in this country are concerned with survival, not about finding time for a creative project, I chastised myself as the fence appeared in my left-hand side window. Get over it.

One Sunday my mother called. "Moeder bursts into tears every time she sees me," she told me, using the Dutch term for mother that she had recently reverted to like an old cardigan pulled from the back of the cupboard at the start of winter. "She hates being in frail care and doesn't understand why she is still here."

By 'here', Atty actually meant alive. "I'm ready to go," she had said, not for the first time, a year before, when first her hearing and then her eyesight began receding, caught on a tide that would never return. The announcement wasn't a lightly disguised plea for pity about the fact that her body was letting her down. It was matter-of-fact and consistent with my grandparents' no- frills approach to the big

questions of life, whether it was sex, nudity or death. Only their Catholic religion escaped the robust practicality that I came to associate with being Dutch since I was a child. For some time, Atty tried to make light of the fact that her eyes and ears had not outlasted her strong heart. Pulling a humorous face she said to me on one visit, "What can I do Diane? I can't embroider, I can't read, I can't even knit. Can you imagine how boring every single day is, just doing nothing?" But, by the end of 2014, as her health began deteriorating, the quick interjections of humour with which she used to surprise us were being replaced by a grim distress.

Wanting to forget the image of Atty caught at the far edges of her life, watching the hours move like dark, thick treacle pouring out of a can, I took out my grandmother's memoirs. As I flipped through the notebook, my eyes settled on the pages that described the shape that her life took when my grandfather stepped onto the train at Park Station and began his life as a Dutch soldier.

Prompted by the realisation that remaining on the farm at Twenty Four Rivers, with two young children and no husband, wasn't feasible, Atty moved into a house in greater Johannesburg with another woman and her nineteen-year-old daughter. "They had a house in Florida without furniture and I had furniture," Atty said of this practical arrangement. The woman's husband was a pilot in the South African Air Force with the surname Von Binsbergen. "She changed it to to Binsen because it sounded too much like a German name," my grandmother reported.

The few weeks after Jules' departure were like a dream that slid out of sight at the moment of awakening, leaving only traces of emotion behind. The secrecy that surrounded the movements of the Dutch troops meant that my grandmother at first didn't know where her husband had been sent. In these early days, there were no letters. The only confirmation that Jules was still alive was the small allowance that she went to collect, along with the wives of other conscripts, at the Dutch consulate in Pretoria each month.

It's not surprising that the little she can recall from that time isn't happy. "I remember feeling very miserable, pushing a borrowed pram with baby Jules in it around the Florida streets. News of the sinking of a troop ship, which was the first

contingent of Hollanders, reached us. Had it not been for Jules's compassionate leave, I would have been a widow. Holland was invaded by the Germans, but there was no news of what had happened to our families."

As if the total absence of news about her husband and her parents and her brother wasn't difficult enough, my grandmother was suddenly plagued by a throat so sore she could not swallow. There had been an outbreak of diphtheria in Johannesburg, but reports on the wireless said it was over so surely she couldn't be struck down by this highly contagious bacterium that could leave its victims unable to breathe? She was taken to the Discovery Hospital in Florida and put into a ward with other patients. Waking up from a feverish sleep, she noticed at once that she was the only patient in the room. "Is it diphtheria?" she barely managed to ask a masked nurse who suddenly appeared at her side. "Yes," came the answer. The very next day she was transported by ambulance to the fever hospital in Johannesburg.

For three weeks she fought the illness, lying flat on her back to improve her heart function, being fed brandy as a stimulant, trying her best to swallow the medicine that felt like hot lava streaming down her throat. She was kept company only by the sight of a sleeping young girl who was lying in the glass cubicle next to hers. One day, when the daily swabs showed that the bacteria was definitely on the retreat, her brother-in-law Frank appeared by her bedside. He was leaving to join the Dutch troops in England and had been given special permission to see his brother's wife. She was happy to see Frank but the thought of him in a Dutch uniform only stirred images of her husband who was who knew where – dead? injured? left in a field? – and so she extinguished the thoughts as soon as they arose.

During Atty's illness baby Jules, too young to understand the absence of both of his parents, was cared for by Wendy Bisen. With Frank getting ready for being deployed, three-year-old Emma was moved from her aunt and uncle's home to Dutch friends Inge and Bernard van der Bol. But they were renting a single room at the back of a house in Pretoria and so it was decided that my mother should be sent back to the Davidsons' farm in the Waterberg. There, Atty was relieved to hear, her daughter was happy.

When she was finally allowed to leave the fever hospital, it was a struggle. The diphtheria had attacked her central nervous system, leaving her with double vision, no strength in her arms and unable to walk barefoot. Using a phrase that recurs in her memoirs, Atty writes, "Was I happy? I don't know." She adds, "Nowadays they would have told me that I was suffering from depression." The consensus of Atty's sister-in-law Corry, now the mother of two small boys, and their Dutch friends was that she needed to get to the sea to recuperate. A hotel was booked in Margate and the two sisters-in-law undertook an arduous train journey down to Natal. "How Corry managed it, with a useless sister-in-law and four small children and milk for baby Jules that had gone sour during the journey I will never know," Atty writes. When they arrived in Margate by taxi they discovered to their horror that the hotel could only be reached from the road by several flights of steps. With the help of the driver and Corry, and surrounded by four young children, Atty made it up to the hotel. She later discovered that the other guests, watching her slow, unstable progress up the hill, thought she was drunk ("DRUNK!!" wrote the daughter of two teetotallers in her notebook in a rare display of outrage).

Still, that Margate trip was the start of a love for the Natal coast that eventually led to my grandparents becoming one of the first home owners in Umhlanga Rocks. When Corry left Margate, Atty took Emma and Jules with her and became a paying guest at the Genazzano Convent near Umhlali on the Natal North coast. When the nuns left on retreat, someone suggested Atty and the two children head for the Umhlanga Rocks Hotel in the small village just fifteen kilometres outside Durban. It was cheap and clean and in the gardens overlooking the sea was a double-decker bus that served as sleeping quarters for English women and children from Singapore. "Who would have thought that Umhlanga Rocks would become our hometown from 1964 onwards?" my grandmother noted decades later when recalling her first stay in the small town.

She was recovering, slowly but surely regaining proper vision and the use of her arms and feet. She was able to walk the few steps down from the hotel onto the Umhlanga Rocks beach and, with baby Jules by her side, sat for hours on the sand, watching Emma paddling in the rock pools that dotted the shoreline. The seaside resort had grown out of the sugar estate of a Scotsman, Sir Marshall Campbell, after

his family and their visitors had begun tracking a path down to the sea from the homestead a few miles inland. A beach cottage was built in 1869 and when it began serving beachgoers tea and scones, the village's roots were planted. As the sugar cane farmers and Durban's richer set began building weekend cottages, and first the Oyster Box and then the Umhlanga Rocks Hotel sprung up. This enclave, away from the Zulus who had moved into the area in the early 1800s and indentured sugarcane workers from India, started flourishing.

During her first days in the place that was to be where many of her grandchildren would be raised, it was impossible for Atty to resist looking out to the sea that had taken Jules away to war. Her physical recovery was impeded by all-consuming thoughts of her husband and her parents and brother in Amsterdam. And what of her many cousins, aunts and uncles and friends? Since May 1940, they had been living under Nazi occupation and the newspapers were filled with stories of German advances, land battles, torpedoed ships, bombing and death across Europe. She didn't know that the mass murder of Jewish people by gassing began in Auschwitz almost at the same time she felt the sand beneath her feet, for the first time in months, with no pain.

Eventually there was news from Jules. He had made it safely to England and was now based in the city of Wolverhampton with the Royal Netherlands Motorized Infantry Brigade. He had joined others from Canada, the United States, Argentina and the Dutch West East? Indies – Dutch citizens who were out of reach of the German occupation and men on whom the government in exile and Queen Wilhelmina were relying on to form a Dutch force able to fight alongside the Allies. The army in exile was known as the Princes Irene Brigade, named for Princess Juliana's second daughter who was born in Soestdijk Palace in August 1939, shortly before her parents left the Netherlands for exile, first in England and then in Canada.

Atty's memoirs don't give much detail about the Brigade and so I turn to the internet. [x] There are details of its involvement in the Allied assaults of 1944 and 1945 – Normandy; Operation Market Garden. There is also a small note about how five hundred volunteers from the Dutch colony of Suriname were turned away by the government in exile because their "racial background" might have caused offence to

the South African conscripts. Even thousands of kilometres away, even before the National Party came into power, even in relation to men who were not citizens of South Africa, even in a global fight against totalitarianism, racial privilege was making itself felt. Something else also catches my eye: veterans of the Brigade were given the status of Freeman of the City of Wolverhampton in 2006, a full decade after my grandfather died. I wonder if anyone attending the ceremony remembered a fresh faced young father, born-and bred in Amsterdam and now raising a family in South Africa?

I reach into the bag of photographs that my mother gave me. The stack has grown over the past few years as my grandmother moved within the Umhlanga Rocks retirement village where she has lived since 2002 – from her bachelor flat up on the hill to another small flat closer to the dining room, then to an assisted living single room and finally to frail care. With each move, her possessions grew smaller and those that couldn't fit into the ever diminishing space were divided amongst her children and grandchildren, matching teaspoons now in drawers in different cities, the carefully collected narrative told by photograph albums disrupted as pages were separated and distributed.

Amongst those that arrived at my home in Johannesburg was a page with one of the few photographs of my grandfather in his Princess Irene Brigade uniform. It was taken during a recording at the BBC for the programme Songtime In The Laager that was described as "a weekly magazine feature for South African and Rhodesian forces" in the BBC Year Book of 1943. Together with Private J. Reuvers were SergeantJ.J. Van Niftric, Private C.F. Prins and Lieutenant. L.A.J. Wirth. All four are caught looking to the left, with broad smiles on their faces. Somehow my grandfather has managed to flatten down his flyaway curls. He is wearing the same unadorned uniform and round spectacles as Private Prins. When I look for the photograph, I also find a photocopy of a retrospective release form given to Jules by the BBC. It is addressed to Private Julius Reuvers, Royal Dutch Forces, Wottesley Park, Wolverhampton and is dated December 17th 1942. The form notes that he has taken part in a programme titled "Kom Saam Met Marie – A Dutch South African in London" from 11.35 to 11.45am on Thursday December 3rd. His fee for his effort? Three guineas "(inclusive of all expenses)".

Until August 7th and 8th 1944, when it landed in Normandy, assigned to the 6th Airborne Division, the Princess Irene Brigade was based in the UK, training with the British troops to form three infantry rifle companies, a reconnaissance squadron and an artillery battery. Early on, Jules was assigned to be the chauffeur for Pieter Gerbrandy, who was appointed by Queen Wilhelmina as the Prime Minister for the government in exile after Dirk Jan de Geer's defeatist stance had led to him resigning. I am astonished when I read this in Atty's memoirs. Of all the stories told to us as children about our grandfather and his brother's role in the Dutch army, this was been related. I suddenly long to question him about what he heard as he drove the politician to the London Cabinet's offices at Stratton House in Piccadilly. Did Gerbrandy talk to Jules about his meetings with Churchill and Roosevelt and America's entry into the war? Perhaps he confided how Queen Wilhelmina held her own amongst the men who spearheaded the Allied action against the Germans.

In spite of what seemed like an easy posting, my grandfather nearly died in the war. This story, my brothers and sister and I know well and, unlike The Night Watch, was easy to verify by the physical scars Opa carried. On leave for a few days, he was travelling in a bus when it was hit by a V-1 flying bomb. The unmanned weapon was a last-ditch attempt by Hitler to turn back the tide of defeat that was sweeping over Europe. Carrying a one ton warhead, the German's began launching these "doodlebugs", as they came to be known by the British, on June 12th 1944. By the end of that month, around a hundred had been fired at the UK capital, with a bombardment every single day,. In all, around ten thousand V-1's were fired at London from different launch sites in Germany but a quarter of these crashed before reaching land and at least half were shot down by artillery on England's south coast. It was, my grandmother writes, her husband's "unlucky, or should I say, lucky day" when one of the bombs that actually made it to London dived out of nowhere and fell on the bus Jules was travelling in. He and the bus conductor were the only survivors.

"An air raid warden hitched him over his shoulder and took him to an air-raid shelter, where he passed out," Atty writes in her memoirs. "Before passing out an Anglican priest, who was on the scene, told him to make peace with God as there was not much hope. His injuries were many. Later on he was transferred to a London

hospital. His condition was so serious that Frank was sent for. After many operations to remove pieces of shrapnel he survived."

Much has been written about how the Dutch diaspora never recreated communities in the way that the Greeks, Italians and even French did. Yet the closeness Atty and Jules felt to their community was evident at every turn during the war years – from the friends who rallied around my grandmother during her illness to the Van Rosse family whose father, Arie, was in the same Princess Irene Brigade unit as Frank Reuvers and whose wife faithfully visited Jules when he was in hospital in London.

Once he had been stabilised my grandfather was sent to the countryside to convalesce. When they felt well enough to go into the village, the soldiers wore light blue suits and red ties that were issued to signify that they had been injured by the actions of the Germans. As the granddaughter of a man who told my sister and me to follow him into Amsterdam's Red Light District when we were sixteen and seventeen and "watch how the ladies of the night approach a man", I was not surprised when he included, in the story of his recuperation, how he knew he was on the mend when a pretty nurse entered the room in the country house where he was staying and he got an erection.

Not all the shrapnel could be removed from his body and for much of the rest of his life pieces would make their way to the surface. In 1976, a short while before he and my grandmother left South Africa to return to Holland, he was operated on by a maxillo-facial surgeon. Severe pain in the right hand side of his face had sent him there and clinical and radiological examination soon revealed that pieces of shrapnel were present. As children we were endlessly fascinated by the notion that fragments of a bomb made by the Nazis in a top-secret location and named *Vergeltung* (retaliation) were secreted inside our grandfather's body. It was like something out of a science fiction movie.

When the bombing happened in February 1945, Atty was kept in the dark. Her brother-in-law Frank wrote that Jules had hurt his hand and was therefore unable to write. By this time, she had become numb to the vagaries of communication during

the war and felt sure that her brother-in-law, who was part of the Princess Irene Brigade in Normandy, would tell her if the unthinkable had happened to her beloved Jules. To be honest, she worried most about her family back home. Letters between the occupied Netherlands and South Africa were non-existent. When she watched the newsreels at the bioscope, it looked terrifying and she longed with every part of her being for news from Amsterdam.

Eventually the Red Cross made arrangements for messages to be sent. But these were limited to just twenty five words. "What can you say in those few words? It was very, very difficult," Atty writes decades later.Twenty five words. I try that out for size. "Dear Mom and Dad. Emma is talking in sentences and baby Jules has started walking. There's no word from Jules. I have been terribly ill but I'm getting better. I'm desperate for news of you all. Love Atty." No. That won't work. It's six words too many. I try again. "Dear Mom and Dad. The children and I are fine. I was very sick but am much better now. I miss you all. Love Atty". And in response, "Our dear Atty. We miss you too. Things are hard but Dad at least still has work at the Rijksmuseum. Much love."

I finally understand why my search for letters between my great-grandparents on both the Reuvers and Marchal side and Johannesburg was futile; why the treasure trove of written information that I imagined would give me an insight into what it was like for Adri and Anna and Frederick to live through the occupation and the hunger winter, would never appear.

The response from my great-grandparents to Atty's twenty-five words also never came. In a painstakingly crafted message, she wrote to her parents, telling them that they now had a grandson and that Jules was close to them, in England. There was no response. "Just try and write that amount of words and then not hear anything back. It was very hard," Atty said years later. There was more frustration when Jules wasn't sent to Holland with the rest of the Princess Irene Brigade towards the end of the war because he was still convalescing. But my grandfather was stubborn and he eventually made his way to Amsterdam. "He didn't spend three years and six months away from his family in South Africa and close to everyone in Holland and then return back to Johannesburg without visiting," notes my grandmother.

When he finally arrived in Amsterdam, he was laden with cigarettes and bicycle tyres, both worth "more than gold" in 1945. The Netherlands was still buoyed by the liberation from Nazi occupation on May 5th but Jules was shocked at what he found when his mother opened her front door in Oeterwalerstraat. Maria and her twin sister were so thin he at first felt like he was looking at the ghosts of the people he loved. It was the same when he knocked on the door of the Krugerplein flat. Everyone in the city was emaciated after the hongerwinter of 1944 and 1945. The combination of a Nazi blockade of the Western parts of the country and plummeting temperatures caused a severe food and fuel shortage that left the population of Amsterdam starving and cold.

I take a break from reading Atty's memoirs and suddenly think of the day Catherine and I arrived in Amsterdam in 2012. It was May 4th and the city was honouring Remembrance Day. The day after May 5th was Liberation Day and also Catherine's birthday. We ended it in the company of a Dutch friend, Tommy, watching the annual concert on the river Amstel. I wondered then why, more than sixty years after the end of the war, these days were treated with such reverence. Would we be honouring our Freedom Day on April 27th so many decades after the end of apartheid? But now I know why the war lived so large in the lives of Hollanders – and in the life of my family. My grandfather nearly being killed by a flying bomb, my great-grandparents and great-grandmother barely surviving the hunger winter, my great uncle Fre narrowly escaping being bombed by the Allies while doing forced labour in the Siemens factory – theirs were just a handful of stories among many, many thousands that would never be forgotten.

Chapter Fifteen

Just over a kilometre from where Adrianus and Anna found a place to live on returning to Amsterdam in 1939, and around a hundred metres from where my great-grandmother Maria Reuvers had taken ownership of a block of four four-storied homes five years before that, Theo van Gogh was murdered on a bitter day in November 2004.

The film director was on his bicycle, dressed for a day's work like most people riding the city's plentiful cycle paths, in jeans, smart black shoes and a couple of cardigans. Everyday clothes. Near the corner of Linnaeusstraat and Tweede Oosterparkstraat, Van Gogh was shot several times by Mohammed Bouyeri, a bearded man wearing clothing typical of the Moroccan community that had moved into places like Overtoomse Veld, several kilometres away in Amsterdam West. But the young man didn't stop there. Pulling out a knife, he walked over to the man whose short film *Submission*, depicting the abuse of Muslim women and projecting texts from the Koran onto their bodies, had caused a spillage of ugly verbal altercations following its broadcast on Dutch public television a few months earlier. Bending over, he ignored Van Gogh's plea ("surely we can talk about this, don't do it, don't do it") and slit his throat from ear to ear. Realising he couldn't decapitate the head quickly enough as he had planned, Bouyeri used a smaller knife to crudely tack a note to Van Gogh's stomach containing a poem, Jihadist slogans and a threatening letter ("it's only a matter of time before this boomerang will seal your destiny") addressed to *Submission's* co-creator and Dutch MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali. He then planted a final kick on Van Gogh's body and started running down the road towards the railway bridge, leaving the filmmaker splayed across the cycle path he'd stumbled onto, his arms stretched above his head, the big knife sticking up straight towards the low sky from his upper right chest.

Like many around the world I was shocked to read of Van Gogh's murder and the scarcely veiled threats to Liberal parliamentarian and Islamic women's rights

activist Hirsi Ali by Bouyeri that had an impact far beyond the note left on the filmmaker's body. Van Gogh approached free speech and political correctness with a zeal that allowed no filters ("I'll do my best to seriously insult quite a few people" he said of *06-05*, a film completed just before his death, based on the 2002 assassination of his friend and politician Pim Fortuyn). His killing ignited a debate on where to draw the line when it came to religion and politics that didn't escape South Africa.

I come to know that Van Gogh was murdered very close to where my family settled in Amsterdam in the 1930s through a Dutch politician who is almost as controversial as Van Gogh was during most of his brief life. Martin Bosma is his name. He's a member of the Dutch parliament's Tweede Kamer, a former journalist and, as I would find out later, born in the same year and month as me, July 1964. He informs me of the precise location of Van Gogh's murder on a sunny afternoon in May 2014 during the week I spend researching Adri's restoration career in the Rijksmuseum library.

On my last day in the city, I take a tram with my mother to Amsterdam East, to the area around Oosterpark that spreads from the Amstel River as it passes under Torontobrug, around to the Transvaalkade and back to the Eastern Docklands.

Emma wants to see Krugerplein. In 1953, she lived on the small city triangle with her grandparents, during a six-month trip to Holland with her parents, brothers Julius and Robert and sister Anne-Marie. Now that she thinks about it again, she tells me as we leave the nearby Tropenmuseum, during that extended holiday her parents were probably trying to decide whether the time was right to return to their home country after fifteen years in South Africa. Her father had left in 1937, when the Netherlands looked like it might never recover from the depression that had affected Dutch society since the early 1930s. What's more, the threat of National Socialism hovered just a few hundred kilometres away in Germany. Hitler had already tried *Anschluss* with Austria in 1934 and it would only be a matter of time before the Nazi leader attempted this again, which made that matter the more urgent for those young Dutch men and women who were thinking of leaving. But it was now the early 1950s, and on the back of the one billion dollars that the Netherlands had secured as part of

the Marshall Plan, and the successful reclamation and rehabilitation of land, the country was on its way to becoming an agricultural competitor.

Emma met Els Nordmann, still one of her oldest friends, on Krugerplein during that holiday. Els and her parents lived in the flat above my great-grandparents. Together they would lie on the grass and chat until Els's mom leaned out of the third floor window to call her daughter for the avondmaal. Attending Bevrijdingsdag celebrations on the plein with her new friend was just one of the ways my mother immersed herself in the East Amsterdam neighbourhood, not too far from where her father had grown up in Watergraafsmeer and just a short walk from her stern paternal grandmother, who, it seemed to the teenaged Emma, loved nothing quite as much as playing patience.

After walking through the jumble of greenery, hurrying cyclists and small gatherings of daytime drinkers and rough sleepers in Oosterpark and down Maritzstraat, we arrive at Krugerplein.

The area's streets are lined with halaal butcheries and shops selling food from Turkey, Morocco and Suriname that give off unfamiliar scents as we walk by. The grass areas ringed by pathways, where Emma told Els stories of the deckgames and cleverly themed menus that marked the long boat journey from Cape Town to Amsterdam, have long disappeared from Krugerplein. In their place are bricks on which a man sits drinking beer, a grubby knapsack at his side.

Krugerplein is in the heart of the Transvaalbuurt. All around us are reminders of the country my grandparents chose as the place to build their future. Pretoriusstraat. Retiefstraat. Reitzstraat. President Brandstraat. Christiaan de Wetstraat. Smitsstraat. The Afrikaans street names are evidence of how the Netherlands once viewed the Boer leaders of the first and second Boer Wars and those who embarked on the Great Trek in the 1830s; a sentimental connection stretching as far back as the shared history of the Dutch colonisation of the Cape in the seventeenth century and the formation of a sibling language. In 1899, it was the Dutch queen Wilhelmina who sent the Gelderland to break the British naval blockade and bring the former President of the South African Republic, Paul Kruger, into exile. No wonder, I think, that there

are also Transvaalbuurten in Haarlem, Arnhem and Den Haag and that the Amsterdam neighbourhood has not one, but two homages to the Boer president: Krugerplein and Krugerstraat.

It's tempting to think that Adri and Anna moved into number 15 Krugerplein as a reminder of the faraway country to which their daughter had sailed on that foul-weathered day in 1938. The outbreak of the war only made their longing for their daughter more acute. After the ferocious attack on Rotterdam, from where Atty had left for Cape Town a year earlier, and German threats that the family's beloved Utrecht would face the same assault from the air, the Netherlands capitulated in May 1940. Communication between Atty and her parents dwindled to a meagre few hundred words every few months and even then, everything had to go through the Red Cross as part of the directives of the Reichskommissar for the Occupied Netherlands, Arthur Seyss-Inquart.

But when commuting to the Rijksmuseum from Jutphaas became too much for Adri, a home in the Transvaalbuurt was the natural destination for a committed member of the Sociaal Democratische Arbeiders Partij.

It was in this part of Amsterdam, just across the Amstel, that the noted Jewish poet and S.D.A.P. member, Sal Bonn, was living when he wrote the poem "Karl Marx (Ter Herdenking)" in 1918. Nu komt uw naam vandaag, zooals 'n mast op golvend meer – de golven zijn wild en de golven zijn hoog – niets is dan kokend schuim en waterbergen voor 't oog, alleen die mast blijft hoog en duikt niet … [27] It was also where Bonn died in 1930, in his beloved rooie dorp Transvaalbuurt, his belief in the party that was founded in 1893 still unwavering.

Bonn may have been one of the Transvaalbuurt's more noted inhabitants but the area was populated by plenty of card-carrying S.D.A.P members. There were enough of them for Adri to continue with one of his favourite after-work recreational

[27] Now your name rises up today, like a mast on a turbulent lake – the waves are wild and the waves are high – the eye sees nothing but seething foam and mountains of water– only the mast remains high and does not plunge

activities, singing as part of the De Stem des Volks, the S.D.A.P.'s choir. Emma's friend Els loved the nights on which she would fall asleep on her parent's big bed in the room above where a group of committed choir members met to practice songs like "Morgenrood" and 'The Internationale", ahead of their bigger choir gatherings. Gazing out towards the rooftops of the buildings on the other side of Krugerplein, Els thought she could have been looking into a mirror, so much did they look like her own building with their small brown bricks, long, slender sash windows and clumsy imitations of the top gable of the city's much older canal houses. But these thoughts were soon left behind as the singing drifted up from beneath her like a slow flurry of fairy seeds, putting her to sleep.

I wonder if my great-grandfather continued with another of his favourite pursuits, after he, Anna and Fre settled in Krugerplein: the gatherings of the Fakkeldragersgroep. Earning a wage was the most important thing in life for the oldest child of a family of eleven, and so Adri never did anything other than work after leaving school at fifteen. The weekly discussions of his Fakkeldragersgroep were the closest he came to an intellectual life.

Looking now at photographs of the Transvaalbuurt and Krugerplein during the war, it's hard to imagine that one of the topics of discussion wouldn't have been the nefarious intentions of Adolf Hitler and his representative, Seyss-Inquart.

Had Adri and his other Fakkeldragers anticipated the banning, in 1940, of the S.D.A.P.? Germany's leader declared Marxism to be a political force that must be exterminated and the S.D.A.P.'S history was one of a see-sawing debate between more orthodox members, who saw the party as a vehicle to nationalise the means of production and build a system of social security, and those revisionists who were willing to work through the democratic Dutch parliament for worker's rights. Either way, the S.D.A.P. was deeply rooted in Marxist teachings and built solidly around the five Ks: opposition to the rule of Kapitaal; opposition to the control the Kerk exerted on Dutch society; opposition to the monarchy (Koning); opposition to militarism and nationalism (Kazerne, or Barracks) and, finally, a dislike of the Kroeg. Alcoholism was a destroyer of the working class, and Adri, the son of a man who loved drinking more than taking care of his family, couldn't argue with that.

Adri's Fakkeldragers surely must have spoken about the threat to the Netherlands' Jewish population by Hitler and Seyss-Inquart, a vocal anti-Semite. As much as the Transvaalbuurt was a place where socialists headed to when moving to Amsterdam, it was also deeply Jewish, with many of those living in the neighbourhood calling themselves both. Indeed, one of three Joodsche markten designated by the burgemeester of Amsterdam in 1941 as the only places where Jews could buy fresh fruit and vegetables was located on Joubertstraat, which ran off Krugerplein. The Ringvaart canal to the south and the railway line to the north – the same one that clattered past the back of Maria Reuvers' four houses, the same one Mohammed Bouyeri ran to after murdering Theo Van Gogh – made it easy to control the Transvaalbuurt. The Nazis turned it into an overflow ghetto when the nearby Joodse Buurt at Waterlooplein became too crowded.

Under the Joodse Ordedienst, the Duitse Ordnungspolizei began turning up in Krugerplein, with a contingent of Jewish auxiliary police from the Westerbork Transit Camp from which Dutch Jews, including Anne Frank, were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Sobibór, Bergen-Belsen and Theresienstadt. In one photo, from June 1943, a man is standing, turned sideways and staring straight at the photographer. His hands are clasped tight in front his body, low enough for his yellow Star of David to be visible just above the white arm band that denoted membership of the auxiliary police. In the background, a young girl, unseen by the people below, leans out of the first floor window, looking down on the scene unfolding, in the square. Her posture is reminiscent of the only extant filmed image of Anne Frank, leaning excitedly over the balcony in her second floor home at number 37 Merwedeplein to watch her neighbour leaving with her groom on her wedding day in July 1941. Both girls are drawn to what's happening outside their windows, their bodies pushed forward by curiosity, but the contrast between the carefree moment, a year before the Frank family went into hiding, and the grim scene on Krugerplein two years and exactly 2,2 kilometres apart is stark.

It was on the evening of June 20th 1943 that the Transvaalbuurt suffered its own *Groot Verdriet*, the term for the Holocaust used by journalist Meyer Sluser – the editor of *Het Vrije Volk*. On that day, the occupiers, with the assistance of the

Westerbork auxiliary police, sealed off Transvaalbuurt and drove through the neighbourhood, announcing through loudspeakers that all Jewish dwellers must report with their baggage at the front door of their homes later that day. Between eight and nine that evening, with the buttery light of summer's evening rays still falling on the trees of the plein, the trucks came. The journey to Muiderpoortstation was short, a distance of some two kilometres. From there they were taken to Westerbork, leaving Krugerplein, the Transvaalbuurt, the Oosterpark on warm days, the area open to Amsterdammers desperate for accommodation during the war years.

I like to think that Adri and Anna, both socialists, both fervent believers in universal suffrage and the rights of women, both beloved grandparents, both kindly neighbours to the Nordmann family, did what they could to help, without endangering their own lives. But with no letters or recollections remaining from the war time, there is no way of knowing how they dealt with a situation that cut to the heart of the human rights they held so dear.

What I do know is that as the war wore on, they knew a little of the pain caused by the cruelty of the occupiers, even to those who were not Jewish.

There came a time when the schools in Amsterdam could no longer pretend that its older boys hadn't finished yet or weren't clever enough to pass their final year. On an unclear date, Anna and Adri's only son, Frederick, was abducted by soldiers, and put on a train headed for a forced labour camp in Germany. Fre was one of 350 000 Dutch civilian forced labourers in Nazi Germany and was assigned to a Siemens factory in Frankfurt. What he experienced there, he chose not to speak about, even after he joined his sister in South Africa a few years after the war ended. But whatever it was, combined with the long walk home to Amsterdam after liberation, left him weakened for the rest of his life. Anna and Adri had just about given up hope of seeing their son again when, one day in 1945, there was a knock at the door at Krugerplein 15. There, with the Jamin sweet shop and Het Kaashuis just visible over his shrunken shoulder, stood Fre – dirty, hungry, desperate, but home at last.

It's precisely because of its Jewish history that the street names of the Transvaalbuurt have never been changed, even during the decades of the anti-

apartheid struggle when there was much clamouring for the city to distance itself from anything associated with the National Party. The two exceptions were Steve Bikoplein, just around the corner from Krugerplein, and Albert Luthulistraat, which had previously been named Louis Bothastraat. There was an attempt to name one of the streets Winnie Mandelalaan but protestors made the powerful case that removing the original names of the streets would erode the stories of the people who were living in the Transvaalbuurt when the Ordnungspolizei arrive to take most of them away forever.

The small battle over street names in the Transvaalbuurt is something else that I hear about from Martin Bosma that spring day in May 2014. There's a note of triumph in the politician's voice when he tells me about the scuppering of Winnie Mandelastraat. But this is not because Bosma is thinking only of what it might have meant to someone like Frits Slicht, who was just a schoolboy when the local greengrocer appeared at his Krugerplein door to tell him his parents had been taken away by the occupiers. Bosma is a member of the Partij voor de Vrijheid and is one of the few Dutch people I know who loves the Afrikaans language almost as much as his own. But he's no ordinary member of the most right-wing party in the Netherlands government. He is the PVV's chief ideologue, standing against, as I would later read, "Islam, the multicultural project and in favour of stopping immigration from Muslim countries".

The day before we meet him, Bosma went one step further in an unpublished book that the Dutch newspaper, *NRC-Handelsblad*, managed to obtain extracts from. In *Handlangers van de ANC-apartheid* Bosma claims that his country's left is intent on doing to the European people of the Netherlands what the ANC government has done to the Afrikaners in the post-Apartheid period: voor de leeuwen gooien. De Afrikaners, dat zijn wij, writes Bosma. "De Afrikaners van vandaag zijn de Nederlanders van over vijftig jaar of honderd jaar". The Afrikaaners of today are like the Dutch of fifty or one hundred years in the future.

In a twist that leaves us incredulous for days, my mother and I have ended up on the stoep of the main speechwriter for Geert Wilders, a man considered even more conservative and controversial than the coiffed PVV head. We find ourselves there

because Bosma, it turns out, lives with his family in one of the four houses purchased by my great-grandmother when her husband unexpectedly died, leaving Maria Reuvers enough proceeds from his work in the diamond trade to become a property owner of some standing.

It was in this row of houses that my grandfather visited his mother when he'd finally recovered from the bomb that fell on him in London. It was here, too, that Wil Van Oort summoned the courage to leave his position as the head of the Rijksmuseum paper restoration atelier, having exhausted his efforts to earn more respect and pay for the profession from the museum's hierarchy, and started running a private practice. In these rooms, Andre van Oort learnt how to let the paper your fingers were touching guide you towards what was needed to keep it safe, a skill that helped give him courage when he confronted *The Parakeet and the Mermaid*. And it was to this row of brick houses that Anna and Adri moved in 1967, when they could no longer afford their Krugerplein dwelling.

My great-grandparents were in their eighties when they came to stay, and there were no *De Stem des Volks* rehearsals in the lounge. But letters from their two children in Durban were pushed through the door with regularity, carrying news of grandchildren and, then, great-grandchildren, and keeping a thread running between South Africa and Amsterdam East that had begun more than fifty years earlier, when the Gemeentelijke Woningdienst Amsterdam looked to Boer history for street names for its newly developed area. Every day, *Het Vrije Volk*, the post-war successor to *Het Volk*, landed with a thud on the doorstep, bringing news of the kind that Adri's Fakkeldragersgroep would have animatedly discussed in his younger years. What would the couple have made of Bosma's party's populist, racist ideology? Of a man who boasts of a friendship with reactionary South African musician Steve Hofmeyr, and takes his South African visitors to see where Hendrik Verwoerd was born?

It's impossible to say for certain but my mother has a gut feeling. As we step back onto the street, on our way to the sort of multicultural gathering that gets the PVV feeling uncomfortable and to the pedestrian crossing that marks the place where Theo Van Gogh lay dying, she has a parting shot for the politician who has invited two strangers taking photos outside his front door into his home.

“My grandfather was a socialist and his views were very, very different to yours,” Emma says. “But thank you for the water.”

Chapter Sixteen

A few days before my mother and I visited the Transvaalbuurt, I spent an afternoon with Idelette van Leeuwen. I was eager to find out if there was a particular restoration that she felt most connected to in her twenty five years of working as a paper conservator, first as a senior book and paper conservator at the Royal Library in The Hague and, from 2001, at the Rijksmuseum. I told her that I also wanted to be able to see how techniques had changed in the years since Adri and Wil, and even Peter, were working in the Rijksprentenkabinet Atelier.

In an email she had promised to give it some thought. She was, she added, preparing for the International Association of Book and Paper Conservators International Symposium and had been thinking a great deal about my great-grandfather and Wil van Oort for her presentation on mounting traditions at the Rijksmuseum. She believed she had found some examples made during the time of Adri and Wil and would show them to me when I visited.

Before I pressed the bell outside the conservation studio in Hobbemastraat, I had taken a slow walk around Museumplein. The day was hot enough to make you imagine that spring had distractedly skittered past Amsterdam on its way to other parts of the world. As if to reinforce this, as I passed the Summerhouse that backs onto Museumstraat, I saw two young children playing in the fountain, their feather-light and moving limbs ghostly behind the jets of water that enclosed them like a rippling glass crown.

I felt strangely nervous about my meeting with Idelette but not because I thought that she wouldn't be welcoming and helpful. Of all the people in the art world that I had contacted out of the blue when tracking Adri's journey, she was the most generous, taking Catherine and me to see our great-grandfather's old studio while the museum was still under renovation, introducing me to Peter Poldervaart, and easing my way into the Rijksmuseum.

It struck me that Idelette's response to my many requests was quite unlike that of the Tate Modern. I had contacted the London museum with a request to interview the curators of the *Matisse: The Cut-Outs* exhibition during the few days I was planning to spend in London after my Amsterdam visit. I wanted very much to ask about the importance of *The Parakeet and the Mermaid* for the exhibition and the final decade of Matisse's work. I was also eager to find out more about the role of paper conservation in mounting an exhibition that was comprised of so many works on paper from the hand of a master, many coming from different parts of the world. The emailed reply was polite, but firm. The Tate curators, I was informed, weren't generally able to accommodate "unsolicited requests for tours or meetings with the public". "This is due to the sheer volume received and the pressure of the Curators' existing workload. Regrettably we are usually only able to answer enquiries from the public which concern specific works of art in the Tate Collection." It felt like I had been relegated with rolling eyes to the inbox reserved for those hunting for free tickets to an expensive exhibition.

My inability to get past the unyielding gatekeepers of the Tate Modern was a small blow to my research but it gave me a closer understanding of the strictly maintained hierarchy of the art world. The museum director. The curator. The artist. The art critic. The gallerist. The conservator. The ordinary member of the public. Everyone had a role and that role came with a status accorded by an unspoken agreement that was perpetuated over decades. Being used to accessing some of the world's top recording artists during twenty years as a music journalist, I had misjudged the hospitality of the art world.

But there was something altogether different on my mind as I walked down the tree-lined Hobbemastraat towards the Atelier Building where all the Rijksmuseum conservation departments are housed. What if, during research for her conference presentation – which, I had discovered, came with the title "100 Years of Mounting: Traditions and Recent Developments in the Mounting of Works of Art on Paper and Photographs in the Rijksmuseum" – Idelette had unearthed evidence that Adri and even Wil's mounting techniques were hopeless? Was it possible that, in the view of an intensively trained, twenty first century conservator with sophisticated equipment at hand, the former heads of the Rijksprentenkabinet restoration studio had done more

harm than good? What did those presenting the paper with her – Peter Poldervaart, Martin Jürgens and Dionysia Christoforou – have to say about those that came before them?

Idelette greets with me warmth and soon I'm up in the paper conservation studio, looking at what she has prepared for her presentation at the symposium that took place in Amsterdam in the middle of May. On a wide white table are several big dusky black and muted marooon boxes waiting to be opened, like mysterious presents from a time long gone. She lifts a lid and, with care, takes out a drawing held within a white mount. It is after the naturalist style of the eighteenth century Italian landscape painter Andrea Locatelli. In the foreground, four young figures frolick around a haybale in front of a languid river ringed by willow trees. A small putty-coloured castle is visible in the background. Although four hundred years separates them, the mood of the work echoed the insouciant summer scene I had just passed in the Rijksmuseum garden.

Holding the drawing up, Idelette says that it's a good example of a mounting technique that was used in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. But not one that has survived into the twenty first century. "The drawing is stretched inside the window and we now think it's a bit dangerous because it becomes like a drum this way and risks tearing," she explains, turning the drawing over to show me the back. Oh dear, I think. But the modern-day restorer standing before me is quick to contexualise this conservation approach. The stretching – probably achieved through moistening the paper and gluieng the artwork on the mount until it shrank again – was the way that paper restorers at the time believed that prints and drawings were best stored. "They wanted to have the artworks really, really flat and this was a way to achieve that."

There was more. "I also found this," she says, carefully lifting another artwork from a box. The pencil drawing from the eighteenth century is not just stretched inside the mounting window. It also slides into a specially constructed cardboard frame with a strong backing board. "It's very elaborate and when I was researching my presentation I at first wondered why – why did they do this?" she says. But when she found another example, this one from 1940 when Adri was working the atelier, the answer was obvious. Sliding the artwork out, she points to the tears and the weak

spots that are clearly visible on the back of the piece. “If you were storing a drawing like this one that is not in such good shape this kind of cardboard structure was seen as giving more protection. The drawing is still being stretched in the mounting but they constructed an extra layer of protection that also allowed it to slide out when it was needed. We would not do such a thing now. It’s too time consuming.” As I lean in to have a closer look, I notice the perfectly bevelled edges of the small window that frames the drawing. There is something imperceptible in the softly slanted edges that suddenly caught my heart. Could this have been Adri’s hand? Or Wil’s?

Like probably every museum around the world, the conservation studio at the Rijksmuseum doesn’t make its own boxes anymore. For many years now, these primary storage artefacts have been outsourced to a company that specialises in producing boxes, according to very strict conservation specifications.

I look down at the mountings, the sliding frame and boxes and suddenly the words in Atty’s memoirs come back to me. “My father was engaged as a ‘cartonneur’ at the Rijksmuseum. That is, he was hired to make boxes to store prints and drawings in. Before that, they were stored in maps.”

Although I cannot see it from the spacious conservation building in Hobbemastraat, my mind is suddenly filled with an image of Adri in the old atelier. He’s wearing his slate gray workcoat over a collared shirt and tie, and is slicing through a heavy sheet of black board with the knife that was as much a part of him as the round glasses on his face. With a touch as gentle as a mother’s embrace, he scores the cardboard so that the edges of the box can fold flat but are still hard-wearing enough to provide a dark, dust-free resting place. He’s so utterly absorbed in this work he doesn’t notice that the sleet that’s been coming down since lunchtime has covered the window pane and resembles the traces of wild heather pressed against glass.

When I first read about what my great-grandfather was employed to do at the Rijksmuseum, I felt a pang of disappointment. What about the artworks he saved from certain decay that I’d been told about from childhood? What about *The Night Watch*? Did making boxes have anything to do with any of these stories? But standing in the

new atelier, with its operating room shine and polish, I finally understand the importance of the job that first brought Adri to the museum. Making boxes and mounts and frames for an institution that is home to the biggest collection of Rembrandt drawings in the world, a place where works by revered Japanese and European printmakers like Dürer, Canaletto, Utamaro, Raimondi and Hokusai are found, was no small thing. In what seems the most natural thing to do in this moment, I reach down and touch the very thing that Adri set about making when he arrived at the Rijksmuseum in 1933. The handmade box beneath my fingers feels sturdy and safe, and the almost imperceptible ripples on the surface appear comfortingly unchanged since my great-grandfather last ran his hands over his handiwork.

The next set of drawings that Idelette shows me are from the period when Wil headed the atelier. In one example, a pencil drawing is surrounded by an olive and gold strip, a technique that was associated with the Director of the Rijksprentenkabinet in the nineteen fifties. In another, a drawing is mounted on slightly stiff, still bright white artist paper and glued to the left hand side of a backboard that is covered by a carefully cut cardboard overlay frame. "This is more or less what we do now," Idelette says of the technique. "But we do it with the Japanese paper that Peter introduced after he took over the atelier in 1980. He told me that Wil had always been looking for the right paper to mount the drawings on but had never been able to find just the right one." Was the paper too hard, I ask, anxious to know that my grandmother's cousin had done well by the artworks in his care? ""Oh yes," she replies. "This technique has withstood the years very well."

When I first contacted Idelette in 2012 I sent her a copy of a photograph that I had seen at André van Oort's the year before. In it, Adri and Wil are standing on either side of a narrow work table that's set in the middle of a room. "Ryksmuseum Oom Adri Marchal – Pa" reads the caption. Both men have their heads bent down as they go about their work. Wil is strikingly taller than Adri but their soot-coloured workcoats are nearly identical, ending just on the knee and snugly covering their clothes. Behind Adri, four elaborately framed paintings are stacked one in front of each other on the polished concrete floor, partly obscuring a velvet-covered couch pushed into an alcove. More framed artworks are visible through a curtain-covered

doorway into another room, some resting on a low bench of the kind you might sit on to view the paintings that are hanging at chin-height on the wall. “They must have been working on framing prints that were part of an exhibition,” Idelette replied when she saw the photograph.

I love this photo because it is one of just three I have of my great-grandfather working in the Rijksmuseum. It is physical evidence of a well-worn family story that made me feel special in art classes at school and again as a seventeen-year-old, when I was walking around the national museum of the Netherlands with my sister and grandparents. I love it too because it shows Adri and Wil together. The teacher and the diligent student who would go on to become a leading figure in the evolution of paper restoration and the struggle for the proper recognition of the profession.

But when I first saw it, I couldn’t help wondering why an unknown photographer had bothered to capture Adri and Wil engaged in mounting and framing work. Surely this wasn’t what restoration was? But now, standing in the studio, with Idelette patiently taking me through the steps of conservation, the photo gains even more resonance. A diligent practitioner must have a system, a way of mounting works of art on paper that keeps them just flat enough with the back and edges visible for curators to examine if needed. The mountings must be strong and free of acid, but not too stiff. They must also have boxes that can provide a sanctuary, free of light and dust and acid that can cause creeping process of destruction in a drawing, like a fishmoth descending through a box of stored winter clothes. These boxes must be sized just right – 30cm x 42.5 for the smallest and then doubled once to 60cm x 42.5cm and yet again to 60cm x 85cm. It’s in the sizes of the storage boxes that I discover that Wil left some of his many fingerprints on the way works of art on paper are restored and conserved at the museum. “Peter always said that Wil didn’t like the 85cm by 60cm size,” Idelette says with a smile. “Apparently he thought it was too long so he gave instructions that the biggest boxes would be 80cm by 60cm in size. The whole of the Netherlands has conservation boxes that are 85cm in length but here at the Rijksmuseum we have 80cm, thanks to Wil van Oort!”

Formal training for paper restoration was only introduced in the Netherlands in 1977. Until then Wil and, before him, Adri and P.W. Van Baarsel and all the other

paper restorers at the many museums strewn throughout the country only had a handful of books, the practices of the studio and their own experience and intuition to go by. There were no symposiums with keynote addresses, lectures and workshops, No digital apps that can cut documentation time down to a bare minimum. For most of the twentieth century, conservators were also limited by what materials were available to them, especially during times of duress. When I was in the Rijksmuseum library before meeting with Idelette I read how the Nazi occupiers had to approve the purchase of materials by the restoration ateliers at the Rijksmuseum. What did bureaucratic officials who were there by force know, or even care, about the pliability or weave of the paper that my great-grandfather requested?

Idelette is part of the new generation of restorers. She has a degree in Art History and Archeology from Radboud University in Nijmegen and qualifications in book and paper restorations from the Opleiding Restauratoren Amsterdam. The studio she heads at the Rijksmuseum is regarded as one of the best in the world and, within the Atelier Building, she's part of a team from the Rijksmuseum, the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands and the University of Amsterdam that pool their knowledge of restoration and preservation. When Idelette first took Catherine and me into the studio in 2012, she showed us the cutting machine for mountings that has replaced the knives that Adri and Wil wielded with such adroitness and that Peter Poldervaart still uses when carrying out his private conservation commissions. When Idelette treats a work of art, she knows she must hold in her mind multiple questions that define conservation and restoration in the current era. I read about these in the 2013 edition of *Managers of Decay* published by the University of Amsterdam: how to look at the physical condition of the work; how to asses how the materials have deteriorated and what interventions can be made; but also how that treatment intersects with the context in which the work was created and how it was passed on through history, along with its role as a bearer of culturally significant messages. There are also the issues of reversibility and documentation of each intervention. And the intervention itself must be always be minimal. Idelette is a key role-player in the unique trinity of the technical art historian, the conservation scientist and the conservator. These are the people I read about in *Managers of Decay*, who work for the "benefit of understanding and keeping objects of our diverse yet common culture as mirrors of human expression for current and future generations". But, as the IADA

symposium showed, it's only by looking back that conservation has moved forward; it's only because conservators believed paper should be returned to its white state by bleaching that the method was eventually discovered to cause damage to paper fibres; it was only when curators came to understand that leaving a print with some stains or yellowing was important to the integrity of the artwork. There was a move away from restoration to conservation.

Importantly, unlike the second-rate treatment of paper restorers that Wil fought so hard against, Idelette's role is respected. When the Rijksmuseum gets yet another request for Rembrandt drawings for an outside exhibition, she's part of the team that decides if the artworks can withstand another round of framing, transporting and being displayed. Curious to know, I ask her how many times a drawing by an Old Master like Rembrandt can be shown. "About three or four times in a decade," she replies, and adds that this decision was made in consultation with her colleagues at European museums with major print collections: the Louvre, the Albertina, the British Museum, the Copenhagen National Museum and the Kupferstichkabinet. Unlike the early restorers who worked by trial and error and mostly on their own, there's now a community that reaches all across Europe and into North America and beyond. If André was restoring the Matisse cut-out now, he would have a myriad of experts in the conservation community to talk to and establishing that *The Parakeet and the Mermaid* had been mounted on paper painted white would have likely taken a phone call or two.

Idelette has an enormous love for the subjects of her working life. When Catherine and I first went into her studio in 2012, she had a box of prints by Hercules Segers on her desk. There was to be a major exhibition of the artist from the Golden Age at the museum in 2016 and she was going to be working on the prints. The Rijksmuseum, along with the British Museum, holds the largest collection of the 183 impressions of Segers' prints off 54 copperplates that are known to exist. We had never seen a Segers before and Idelette removed the lid of the box with all the care of a custodian of history. The work was breathtaking. The prints from his original etchings were most often hand-coloured or treated in a way that gave them a mysterious quality. He created mountainous vistas that were bereft of humans and appeared other-worldly. It was as if J.R.R. Tolkien had immersed himself in Segers'

visual world before conjuring up his stories of Middle Earth. Standing at the side of Idelette's desk with the prints spread out in front of us, I felt enormously privileged.

Idelette had also worked with Sian Bowen over the two-year period that she was Guest Artist in Drawing at the Rijksmuseum. Bowen made a new body of drawings, artist's books and video works from the Nova Zembla collection of prints that Peter Poldervaart had restored. The prints provided an opportunity for the artist to explore what she called "the materiality of drawing and the ephemeral nature of museum objects on paper". Bowen made small scale velum bound works that responded to the sixteenth century temporary bindings that were discovered in the Nova Zembla Safe House. She also travelled to Nova Zembla, taking photographs and filming along the way. I envied the luxury of immersion that resulted in a wonderful body of work, captured in the book *Suspending the Ephemeral*.

But Idelette selected neither of these projects when I asked her to single out a restoration that was closest to her heart in a career of more than twenty years.

She chose the sixteenth century print album of Johann Georg Zobel that was put on the table in front of her during her first interview at the Rijksmuseum, when she was applying for the position of senior paper conservator. "What would you do with this?" Peter Poldervaart asked the thirty-five-year-old when she sat before the three-person panel. Looking at the prints, many of which were damaged by water and cockled, and the remains of the album that they had been bound in, she had to rapidly think about the possibilities. Is it ethical to accept that the items in the album would now be separated apart? Could it be put back together? Was that even sensible? What was the curator's plan for the prints? It would be another four years before Idelette began working on the print album. But her on-the-spot plan for treating must have been a convincing one: she started work at the Rijksmuseum in 2001.

On that warm day in May, Idelette took me to see the print album. On the way down to the depot, we pass the actors who recreated the Nova Zembla Safe House for children visitors to the Rijksmuseum as part of the museum's public activities. In the store, we come across Els Verhaak, who has been working in the print room since 1975. She tells me that at that time she joined, Van Oort (which is the way everyone I

meet at the Rijksmuseum who remembers him calls him) was the head of the atelier. She is making selections of fashion prints for an exhibition that will take place in Summer 2015 and, surrounded by the steel grey movable walls of the depot, we spend a few minutes talking about the years of work that go into preparing for temporary exhibitions.

When Idelette locates the box containing the Zobel Album, pulling open the walls of the store to reveal rows and rows of slender red-brown boxes with gold clips, I'm not surprised that she has been so drawn to it. Put together in the mid-sixteenth century by the man who would become the Prince-Bishop of Bamberg, the print album of Johann Georg Zobel I von Giebelstadt (1543-1580) must have been an enormous challenge to her experience of both book and paper conservation. Alongside the prints that belong to the Rijksprentenkabinet is the original album with its sixteenth century sewing. I can barely resist putting out my hand and touching the nearly five hundred year old objects.

When Idelette finally got to work on the sixty six prints in the album, she had been working as a senior paper conservator at the museum for four years. She set about repairing close tears with starch paste and very thin Japanese paper. Parts of the prints that were folded up needed to be flattened. She wondered at the subjects that Zobel was interested in as a young man. The album features comical prints and caricatures. In one a man is sticking his tongue out at another who is hamming it up, looking horrified. A woman shakes a roll of salami at another woman. It was incredible to Idelette her that a young man from Germany travelled to Italy himself, with no intermediary, to buy prints of people with weird faces and no clothes. After many painstaking investigations of the strips of paper that Zobel, as was standard for the time, used instead of glue to assemble his prints in the album, she made a miniature model of what the print album would have looked like.

Mostly, she tried to put out of her mind what might have been going through the mind of German antiquarian Konrad Meuschel, who dismantled the print album in 1999 after it had survived intact for nearly four centuries. The action was commercially inspired: the German knew that separating out the Roman and Venetian prints that Zobel collected and selling them to museums and collectors

would earn him much more money. But picturing the antiquarian seller taking his scissors to the paper and cutting in half a page that had remained untouched for nearly four hundred years was hard to bear. "For us it's much more of a cultural thing. We aim to preserve forever," Idelette told me simply.

But she was elated when the curator arrived with more of the Zobel album and she realised that it was the matching half of the "salami" print. Using thin Japanese paper that's hardly visible, Idelette brought the two halves back together again. At that moment, the reconstruction of the print album of Johann Georg Zobel I von Giebelstadt began in earnest. One of the few print collections to survive from the early days of print collecting was being resuscitated by the careful, devoted hand of a conservator. This was taking place in a studio far away from the eyes of the art lovers who might one day stand in front of it, amazed at how a youthful German chose a diversity of prints – modern, old, humorous, beautiful – for an album that now stands as one of the finest examples of sixteenth century print work.

Chapter Seventeen

Wilhelmus Petrus van Oort was born on October 22nd 1919, just over a year after my grandmother. He was named after his father and his mother was Tryntje Molenaar, whose arrival on 7 August 1891 had given my great-grandmother Johanna (Annie) a much welcomed younger sister. Annie and Tryntje were soon joined by the next Molenaar child – and the next, until there were twelve children in all, their births coming at regular intervals in the last decade of the 19th century and all the way into the first decade of the next.

There's not much written about the Molenaars, except for a brief, but enlightening, entry in my grandmother's memoirs. It shows a sprawling working class family that somehow managed to get ahead in life. "My maternal grandmother was brought up in an orphanage, or so the story goes," writes Atty. "Her name was Gerritje Wessel and she married Hermanus Molenaar who worked for the railways. He made it to First Engine driver and, needless to say, three of his sons followed in his footsteps. The girls all became domestic servants except the youngest sister. There was a twenty year age difference between my mother and her youngest sister (and a ten year difference between her and me). My youngest aunt became a sales lady at a bakery and later on at Vroom and Dreesman while my youngest uncle became a bank clerk. They had it easier as their older brother and sisters had married and there was more money. Through their own efforts the whole family did well and became respected middle class citizens. Only one uncle was a bit of a black sheep. We never saw much of him. He went off to sea to work as a chef and married a German widow. When he died, the widow, Tante Gretchen, went into mourning, and, as was the German custom, she dressed only in black and wore a black veil. I was most impressed by this."

Scrummaging amongst the piles on my desk, I also find an undated Familie Molenaar document. It is noted as being based on the memories of my grandmother

and her cousin, Jan Visser, one of Marie Molenaar's six sons. Along with his brother Herman, Jan became a doctor and the two typed pages are bursting with the sort of medical information a diligent doctor taking a patient's medical background would ask for. I linger longest at the entries about my great-grandmother and her sister, Tryntje. Wil's mother was the one who looked after the Molenaar matriarch in Utrecht's De Dinkelstraat, from the time Gerritje was widowed in 1934 until her death, nearly ten years later. This means that my great-grandmother not only had to face living under German occupation in Amsterdam, worrying about her son-in-law in the Prinses Irene Brigade, her daughter in South Africa and when her only son would inevitably be taken to a forced labour camp. The Second World War also saw her confront the death of her mother.

It's no wonder that Atty couldn't stop thinking of her family in the Netherlands in those war years. With eleven aunts and uncles on her mom's side and another eight on her father's, as well as the Reuvers and Van Coolwijk families and cousins scattered all over the Netherlands, there were a lot of loved ones to imagine struggling for food and trying to get on with their daily lives amidst the fearful atmosphere created by Seyss-Inquart's soldiers. I thought of Atty trying to picture the cousins – like Herman Molenaar, who lived in Amsterdam's Indische buurt, Jan Visser in Vreeswijk and Wil van Oort in Utrecht – who were around her age, hoping to find work in a country that had just emerged out of a depression and was now plunged into war. "So many people lost everything and had to start all over again," she wrote of that time.

The second time I visited Andre van Oort in Haarlem, he produced a box of personal artefacts left by Wil when he died in 2004. My grandmother's cousin was a meticulous record keeper and, amongst the many letters and notices of of his children's birth, were several items that Catherine and I had only heard about. As Andre spread these things out on the table, we fell silent. There, in front of us, were the ration cards that were distributed when food became scarce in the wake of Hitler's failure to keep his promise that the Dutch people would be protected under German occupation. Three Delft blue ration stamps, valid from 28 December 1941 to 21 March 1942. Two oblong sky-blue Brood A stamps. A book of ice grey Algemeen AA stamps. Light purple Reserve stamps. But by far the hardest to look at was an

identification card, with a Nazi insignia on the cover and Wil's details inside including his occupation (a printer) and his identification number (U16/083000). Just in case the bearer forgot who was in charge, the inside of the card also carried a second stamp of an eagle astride a swastika. To be able to hold in our hands things we had only read about in well-thumbed history books, opened on school desks in a far-off country, sent chills through us.

Wil had, in fact, managed to find work during the war. Even though a lack of money had forced him to leave school early, when he was just sixteen years old he had earned a diploma in machineschrijven by taking evening classes. Andre still has his certificate, issued by the Utrecht Gemeente and dated July 9th (my birthday) of the year 1936. Perhaps to show the seriousness of the qualification, it is signed by five members of the Commission of Oversight for Education in Trade and Administration Met Vrucht Heeft Gevolgd" – followed with success – says the writing on the right hand side. The qualification earned him a job at the *Utrechts Nieuwsblad* where he had the intention of becoming a typesetter. But his ambitions were curtailed when the division he was working for was done away with the outbreak of the war and he was deployed to different areas of the newspaper, including the binding and the printing house. After the war, he spent some time working on the newspaper's rotary press before moving to the Rijksarchief Utrecht, to work in the book binding department.

I read all of this in an article – *Een Stukje Geschiedenis van de Papierrestauratie in Nederland* – in a 1999 edition of *CARE: Conservation and Restoration* that I found stuck in one of my grandmother's plakboeke. It echoes what Andre told me, over several visits, about his father's journey to paper restoration. Still, I am taken aback by a short sentence in the six-page article. It turns out that the person who invited Wil to work at the book bindery at Utrecht's Rijksarchief, the place where he would learn many of the skills that would make him the main subject of an article on the history of all paper restoration in the Netherlands, was Jo Marchal.

When I began to follow the journeys of three generations of paper restorers in my maternal Dutch family, I knew a few things for certain. That my great-grandfather Adrianus Marchal worked at the Rijksmuseum in the restoration atelier. That he trained my oma's cousin, Wil, the son of his wife's sister. That Wil, in turn, trained

his son, Andre. But it now turns out that there might have been a fourth paper restorer, if not a fourth generation, in the family. Joseph Leendert Marchal, who was born on February 3rd 1896 and died on 14th October 1961, worked in the book bindery of the Utrecht Rijksarchief, which means he might too have undertaken paper restoration work. Did Adri, his older brother by nine years, get Jo into working with paper? Is paper in our genes? Is this why, so far away in South Africa, Catherine is a book designer, who really wanted to be a paper restorer when she was finishing school but had neither the means nor the citizenship to easily pursue this ambition? Is this the reason why I just can't give up the idea of a story and pictures printed on paper being more real than when the same words and images are suspended in a digital space that can never be touched?

On September 1st 1946, Wil officially joined the Rijksprentenkabinet as the assistant to Adri, who had already been chief of the restoration studio for nearly two years. He had married Johanna Wilhelmina Bossong on August 8th 1945 and a daughter was born in November of the following year, in Zuilen outside Utrecht. But the commuting soon became too punishing and Wil and Jo started looking for a place in Amsterdam. When one of the floors in Maria Reuvers's house near Oosterpark became available, the Van Oorts moved into the generously-sized flat. It would be the family's home for the next nearly fifty years.

In the box of artefacts that Andre took out for Catherine and me was a stack of rent receipts. I photographed one of them. Forty guilders from De Heer W.P. Van Oort Jnr. for the June rent at Oeterwalterstraat, received by Maria Reuvers van Coolwijk. The year is noted as 1950. Later, when Maria moved to an old age home, Annie and Adri took up residence in the ground floor flat, and Wil and Jo gave the same quiet care to my great-grandparents Marchal that they had given to my great-grandmother Reuvers. Later still, Andre bought the house from my grandfather and his brother Frank and, after renovating and renting it out for several years, eventually sold it. At that moment, the house in Oeterwalerstraat, the place where the Reuvers, Marchal and Van Oort families had been intertwined for decades, slipped out of my family history for good.

Coming after his older sister, Andre was born there on December 30th in 1947, and another three Van Oort children followed as Wil learnt about restoration from his uncle Adri and began making himself known amongst the curators of the Rijksprentenkabinet. I again take out the photograph showing Adri and Wil in one of the Rijksmuseum's halls, quietly preparing prints for an exhibition. The teacher and pupil relationship is unmistakable in the studious way that Wil is bent over the large print that he is framing, his face gently arching towards the artwork, while his much shorter uncle confidently works next to him.

Situated on the third floor of the Prentenkabinet, the Technisch Atelier voor Restauratiewerkzaamheden was created in 1927 with Van Baarsel as the sole paper restorer until my great-grandfather joined him. The job of working on the Rijkspretenkabinet collection was immense and another three cartonneurs came to work at the studio in 1937 among them J.M. Busing. At the time Wil joined his uncle, the atelier was divided into three parts, separated by slatted wood and glass doors, enabling a view through the entire studio. Two of the areas were working spaces with desks and tools, and the third was where the water basin stood, the natte atelier.

If a visitor were to have opened the door of the atelier in 1947, they might have come across this scene: It's a day so warm that someone has thrown open the window that looks out towards the treetops and an almost imperceptible breeze is moving through the work space. For those who were on the staff during the war years, the feeling of liberation that the wide open window brought was worth the very small chance that a print might flutter out and land at the feet of someone in the street. There, perched on a stool in the far corner, is Adri, examining Matthys Maris's *Gezicht op Lausanne* for flocking and tears. The drawing of the rooftops of the Swiss town and the mountains in the distance was purchased in 1938 and sent up by the curators, who needed a report for the director of the Rijksprentenkabinet. Adri motions for his nephew to come over and take a look. At six foot four, it only takes Wil a few strides to reach the desk. The older restorer shows him a slight tear on the left hand side of the drawing and sighs. With the war only just over, there is a shortage of mounting boards and Japanese paper for this kind of restoration work. It was hard enough to request supplies from the Nazi occupiers but now, with Europe in the process of rebuilding, importing paper from the devastated cities of Japan just

isn't a priority. Adri knows that it might not be possible to repair the tear before the exhibition being planned by the curators opens. As Adri and Wil discuss what to do, two of the other studio workers are making more boxes for the storage of prints and drawings. Sometimes it seems a never-ending task to replace the portfolios in which the Rijksprentenkabinet stores its collection, but Adri and his staff know that the starting point for any diligent museum is getting just the right storage conditions. Box-making and transferring artworks is part of the ongoing, daily work in the atelier. On a broad table just inside the first sliding door, Busing is framing a small Rembrandt print for an exhibition due to take place in the reopened Rijksmuseum. He's having to take the uttermost care of the mounting board because, like Japanese paper, such material is in short supply after the war so there is no room for waste. The visitor, standing at the threshold, is struck by the stillness of the studio.

In this environment, Wil was a fast learner, with an intuitive feel for the work. When Adri retired in 1952, he was appointed the chief restorer and began setting up the studio to his liking. He was happy when the availability of the right papers and boards became easier after 1950 and, with Busing, he began experimenting with paper bleaching methods that he had read about in Max Schweidler's book. Sheets were divided into four parts, to make a comparison between the different ways of bleaching. Was he busy with this, I wonder, when there was an explosion in the atelier that nearly blew the studio windows out? I heard this story from Peter and Idelette, who said was it still legend amongst modern-day students of conservation and restoration in the Netherlands. With their battery of scientific skills, high-tech equipment and strictly controlled studios, they can hardly imagine a situation where a restorer was experimenting with chemicals under the roof of the museum building.

Cautiously, and armed with the knowledge that an artwork could be lost forever if a mistake was made, Wil began working on the H.G. Waller portrait collection. The early bleaching methods, as described by Schweidler, made use of chlorated lime but Wil also started experimenting with chloramine. Even when using the chemical permanganate became a popular method of bleaching, he remained a firm believer in chloramine as the best way to return paper to its white state. He was expert at applying the chlorine with a soft flat brush and then using Japanese paper as an interlay. He also spent time perfecting and teaching a method of repairing tears that

his uncle had passed onto him. It quickly became known as the Van Oort Method and, these days, has an entry in another seminal restoration work, Otto Wachter's 1977 book *Restaurierung und Erhaltung von Büuchern*.

When I first contacted Idelette in 2012, she instantly recognised Wil's name, but not Adri's. "Everyone knows Wil van Oort – and not just because of the explosion story. For many, he is considered the father of paper restoration in the Netherlands," she wrote to me. "I think your great-grandfather is too far back in history for the last few generations of conservators to remember him."

But when I visited Peter Poldervaart in 2012 he suddenly remembered something. "I think it was your great-grandfather who invented the paper pulp," he exclaimed. In what I later came to know as typical Peter fashion, he quickly moved to give Catherine and me a demonstration of what he was talking about. With his knife he scooped out a small blob of dull grey mush out of a round container. Using a folded dishcloth, he pressed on it for several minutes and then gently pulled the cloth away to reveal a flat piece of wafer thin paper. "I'm doing this pretty rough now as you can imagine," Peter said as he picked it up with his knife. "But this method gave you the paper and form that you wanted, and so, at the beginning of every year in the atelier, we made paper pulp and had it ready for use, specifically to repair tears."

Then something unexpected arrived: yet another page from my grandmother's plakboek, this time with a two-page feature article, taken from the January 1950 issue of the magazine *Vizier*. "Voor het Eerst Achter De Coulissen van het Rijksmuseum," declared the headline of the extensive article, accompanied by ten photographs that gave readers the first behind-the-scenes view into the different restoration departments at the Rijksmuseum.

I immediately recognised the photograph at the bottom of the second page. A small photocopy was sent by Bep and Peter a year earlier. It is the only evidence I have of my great-grandfather working in the atelier. The caption reads, ""Jarenlang heeft de heer Marchel gezocht naar een goede papierpulp, waarmee hij oude, vergane prenten zou kunnen herstellen door het gieten van nieuwe randen, marges enzovoort. Zijn zoeken werd beloond en thans kunnen prenten of oude boeken nog zo uit elkaar

liggen, of de Heer Marchel weet ze te herstellen. Hij heeft zich deze kunst zelf moeten leren, omdat er nagenoeg geen literature over bestaat." [28] There it is. In three short sentences confirmation that my great-grandfather had looked, for years, for the right paper pulp that he could use to repair the borders and margines of old prints. He found the answer himself, as no literature existed to help him. On the faded photocopy of an article that confirms Adri's place in the history of paper restoration, I see that my grandmother took a pencil and politely corrected the Marchel to Marchal, ringing the caption in blue pen and drawn an arrow pointing down to her father. She didn't want to leave her father's importance to chance, at least not within the family. The photograph doesn't appear in the CARE article, although my great-grandfather is not totally lost to history. The writer Louis Damen, then head of the restoration division of the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam, refers to the *Vizier* article and Adri's invention of aanvezelen met de Oostenrijkse badborstel in the section on methods. With no literature to guide him, Adri created a method of using old paper to make pulp that is still used in conservation studios today. This method was then perfected by his nephew, who spread its use amongst the paper restorers of Europe and the United Kingdom.

There is another photograph that I love and look at over and over again. It's in Damen's short CARE article and captioned, "Wil van Oort working in the studio in the Rijksmuseum". Wil is standing in profile as if under a spotlight. He is working on a high table, a knife in his right hand. His white coat matches his by now white hair and it is as if nothing in the world matters to him except the artwork in front of him. I imagine that the photograph was taken by one of the steady stream of students who started coming through the studio three years after Wil was appointed its head. In 1956 Doreen Lewison arrived from the British Museum. She was followed by Frank Wetsteijn, who came from the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum. Before long, the atelier at the Rijkspretenkabinet was a destination for any serious student of paper restoration and conservation in Europe.

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[28] For years Mr Marchel kept searching for a good paper pulp with which to repair old and decayed prints by creating new borders, margins and so forth. His efforts were rewarded and nowadays Mr Marchel knows how to repair pictures or old books, no matter how much they may have have fallen apart. He had to teach himself this art as there is almost no literature to guide him.

In 2012, Catherine and I went to meet Annelies van Bekkum, a paper restorer working in Den Haag. It was Annelies who gave the eulogy when Wil died in January 2004. She called him her "paper father". He referred to her as his "paper daughter". It was a relationship that had its roots in a BBC programme on paper restoration that Annelies saw when she was just seventeen and that led to what she calls "a moment of enlightenment". "Even though my parents made me study to become a legal secretary, I knew then that I had to become a paper restorer," she told us. By 1975 Annelies had found her way to the Utrecht Rijksarchief where she started learning about book conservation with Bert de Graaf. Before long, he suggested she should approach Wil for more in-depth paper restoration training, and so she arrived at the atelier in 1976. Twice a week, for four years, she traveled from Den Haag to Amsterdam for what she still describes as the most incredible learning experience of her life. "At twenty six years of age I had a key to the Rijksmuseum," she told us, with wonder still evident in her voice. "It was an enormous privilege to learn under Wil, in such a historical space. It was like going to Olympus. But he was also an incredibly sharing teacher, who didn't want to keep his knowledge to himself like many others at the time. He was interested in what his students thought and the atmosphere in the studio was one of openness. At that time Peter (Poldervaart) was in the attic working on the Nova Zembla restoration, picking at all these horrible mucky pieces of paper. It was all so stimulating. I remember getting off the tram one day and hearing the street organist playing and thinking ' this is happiness'."

But Annelies, now one of the most respected paper restorers in the Netherlands, known for her ability to work with old pastel drawings, also remembers the challenges that Wil faced. "You entered the wet area and the studio extended back from that. Sometimes it was so damp in the atelier that the water would condense onto you and your work from the ceiling. There were gas cylinders standing in the corridor, just outside a place where we might be working on drawings by the Old Masters. They were unbelievably difficult conditions to work in and Wil worked hard at getting things changed but it wasn't easy. We were of course 'just' paper restorers."

Annalise found Wil in his second period of employment at the Rijksmuseum. In a letter dated 9th December 1963, a full ten years after he took over the studio from Adri, Wil stated the problem plainly. "Al sinds vele jaren is er voor het Restauratie-

Atelier van Tekeningen en Prenten van her Rijksmuseum te Amsterdam een onderwaardering voor de werkzaamheden aldaar verricht, dit in tegenstelling met het Restauratie-Atelier voor Schilderijen in dezelfde instelling door het Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken." [29] For this experienced restorer and teacher the issue was plain. He and his colleagues in the paper restoration studio deserved a similar salary to the painting restorers of the same grade. Their work required real skills and commitment to a national art collection. They were the ones putting in the risky work of experimenting on new restoration and conservation techniques. Like the painting restorers, the paper restorers also had to put themselves in the mind of the artist, trying to understand the vision and technique that someone had employed sometimes hundreds of years before, in order to properly preserve a piece of art for generations to come. Wil signed off the letter by stating that he wasn't prepared to put up with this situation any longer and tendered his resignation as of 1 January 1964.

"The funny thing is that it was my mother who eventually posted the original letter of November 1963 in which my father asked for a modest increase of about one hundred guilders a month," Andre told me. "She backed him all the way and gave him the final push to go on his own."

The years that Wil ran his private restoration studio at the house in Oeterwalerstraat were not easy. Andre remembers waking up many nights and seeing his father's studio light still on. But his reputation at the Rijksprentenkabinet soon helped him extend the circle of private clients that he had already built up by working in the evenings after he had come home from the museum. Art dealers, private collectors and auction houses l came calling for Wil's skills as a framer, a restorer and a conservator. Many contemporary Dutch artists, including Hans van Norden, Hans Buyens, Nicolas Wynberg, Meta Korenstra, Ard Veldhoen and Sam Middleton, also found their way to his door in Oeterwalerstraat.. He was contracted by Otto Busch of the Kunsthalle Bremen and travelled to the German city for a week every month to work on its print collection that had been damaged during the war. Amongst the

[29] For many years already, there has been an under-appreciation by the Minister of the Interior for the work done in the Restoration Studio for Drawings and Prints at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, this in contrast to the Restoration Studio for Paintings at the same institution.

artists in the collection that now have Wil's invisible fingerprints are works by Albrecht Altdorfer, the Renaissance painter, architect, engraver and printmaker.

But in 1971, Wil received an unexpected call. Charlotte Wolff had been requested to go and work in the Central Laboratory. Would he be interested in returning to his position as head of the Rijksprentenkabinet atelier? The answer from the experienced restorer was positive, provided his requirements were met. An increase to bring his salary closer to the head of the painting restoration studio was a victory for Wil, who returned and began the task of building up the studio again. A wet and a dry studio were created and the internal wooden doors were removed from the main studio to created one big workspace. The studio space above these now housed an installation that allowed for the handling of prints and drawings with moisture. During the seventies, the studio continued transferring the artworks in the collection onto acids-free paper. Under Wil's watchful eye, the drawings and some of the old graphics were treated with new methods. Between this conservation and restoration work, the studio regularly helped prepared artworks for exhibitions. Wil continued to teach and worked ceaselessly for the professionalisation of paper restorers, sharing information at conferences and contributing to the creation of the first formal qualification for paper restorers, which was inaugurated in 1978.

It was consuming work, being the best restorer and teacher he could be, and taking up the fight for the professionalisation of art on paper restorers and conservators. But Andre remembers his father as a man who was full of energy, with an abundance of enthusiasm for his five children. On weekends, he would help them make kites to fly in the park. He took them swimming and fishing and to the cinema and shows. He made time to be involved in his sons' football club.

And he became a passionate collector and restorer of Frans Everbag acquatints acquiring the biggest collection in the Netherlands by the time he died and becoming the national expert on this Dutch artist. Everbag was born in 1877 and one of the first etchers working in printed colour in the early years of the twenthieth century. Wil loved his beautifully refined style that elegantly balanced colour and composition. Birds, rabbits and scenes of cities like Amsterdam earned him a reputation as a gifted colour intaglio printmaker. Everbag's flowers – morning glories, rhododendrons,

chrysanthemums – tumbled off the walls of the Van Oort's Oeterwalerstreet flat, and throughout the Netherlands, dealers knew who to call first when one of his prints turned up.

These days, Wil's Everbag collection is spread amongst his children. On each of the hundreds of prints, his father has typed a short description of the artwork along with the artist's details, and placed it on the board. Frans Overbag, geb: 25 October 1977, Amsterdam, overl: 10 Junie 1947, Amsterdam. *Zuiderkerk met de Raamgracht, Amsterdam, Pothuis aan de Herengracht, hoek Korsjespoortsteeg* and many other artworks that Wil so diligently and passionately collected. In 2011, Andre gathered together all his father's writings on the artist – the personal history of the aquatint master, his different printing techniques, his artistic output – and gave it to the Rijksmuseum. "I wanted it to be in a public collection, for anyone wanting to learn about Everbag, and where better than at the Rijksmuseum," Andre said.

But Everbag wasn't the only artist to become inextricably linked with Wil and Andre. In 2014, Andre came to the end of a lengthy, personal restoration project and contacted the Gemeentemuseum in Den Haag. Would they be interested in ninety-two drawings and three Helen Ernst prints that he had restored? The answer was yes, and now the collection Andre created out of a two packages that were given to his father in the sixties has a permanent home.

When Andre tells me the story of the woman whose artworks ended up in his restoration studio in Haarlem, I'm suddenly saddened by a creative life half-lived.

Helen was born in Greece in 1904 as the illegitimate daughter of the Imperial Consular Secretary Otto Ernst and his house maid Bernhardine Ebermann. It's a jolt to read in the only entry I can find on the internet, but Otto didn't marry Bernardine when she gave birth. Instead he "dismissed" her and then formally adopted his own daughter, raising her on his own. The diplomatic life meant that Helen was schooled in different multiple cities – Zürich, Stuttgart and Berlin – but in 1921, at the age of seventeen, she enrolled at the Berlin Art Academy and graduated in 1924 as a drawing instructor. Driven by a powerful creative streak, she later enrolled for a part-time course in fashion sketching and costume design part time at the Reimann School.

But she soon underwent a political awakening, driven by the dual events of the Great Depression and meeting her impoverished mother. Soon Helen joined the German Communist Party and the Association of Revolutionary Visual Artists. Like Albert Hahn, she began using her artistic skills to serve the party she belonged to and drew many illustrations for the communist newspapers *Rote Fahne* (Red Flag) and *Illustrierte Rote Post* (Illustrated Red Post).

Her membership of the Communist Party proved to be a turning point for Helen when the Nazis came into power in 1933. In that year, she was arrested twice. The first time, she was incarcerated in the women's prison on Barnimstrasse; the second time, she was arrested for her participation in a flyer campaign for the communist party. Each time Helen was arrested, she had to witness the destruction or confiscation of her artworks and, early in 1934, she took the decision to emigrate to the Netherlands.There, she became an art teacher and joined the resistance against the Nazis. With Eva Raedt-de Canter she wrote a book titled *Vrouwengevangenis* about her experiences in prison in Germany. It was no surprise when, in 1938, her German citizenship was taken away for "transgressions against the interests of the German people abroad". That didn't stop the Nazis from arresting and deporting Helen to the Ravensbrück concentration camp, where she spent four years. She was moved to Barth in Mecklenberg when it was liberated by the Red Army on 1 May 1945, and, after the war, she headed to Schwerin in East Germany. But Helen's troubles had not ended, even though she worked for the Victims of Fascism and married its leader, Paul Beckmann in 1946. One of her fellow concentration camp inmates accused her of having been a Nazi informant and her status as a victim of fascism together with her pension was discontinued by the East German government. She was only cleared of the allegations two years before her death, in 1948, from tuberculosis.

Little of Helen's art survived this fifteen year horror. But, before she was arrested and sent to Ravensbrueck (check), she gave two packages of drawings and prints to a friend for safekeeping. She would retrieve them when the war ended, she said. She never did, and somehow the package made its way to Wil more than twenty years later. Uncertain about what to do with them, Will kept the packages in protective storage, waiting for the time to be able to work on them. When, after his father's death, Andre finally took them out and examined them, he saw that the

drawings, mainly in pencil and black ink, were in need of restoration. Years of storage in a damp city attic during the war had left them damaged. It took Andre nearly six years of evening and weekend work to rescue Helen's work and prepare a collection that is now being protected and cared for by a museum.

It's impossible not to be moved by the picture of Andre working in his second floor studio, quietly, out of sight of the world, year after year, on a collection of drawings that no-one knew existed, by an artist that history had tried hard to extinguish. He did this not for money or even acknowledgement. He wanted to honour the work of a woman who had loved nothing more than taking a pencil to a piece of paper and making a drawing, whether of a fashion study or an illustration to support the political party she believed in, even if it meant risking imprisonment. With a view into the streets of Haarlem and a photo of his father at work in his Oeterwalerstreet studio hanging on the wall behind him, Andre brought the skills of three generations of paper restorers to Helen Ernst's work.

Chapter Eighteen

It felt unseasonably hot day in August when Adri left for the atelier at the Rijksprentenkabinet. As he finished his breakfast of beschuit and coffee, he slipped on his watch and shouted goodbye to Anna, who was busy smoothing out the corners of the bedspread with the embroidered flowers in their room on the first floor of the flat on fifteen Krugerplein. Their son, Frederick, just sixteen, was home for the holidays and his father gently knocked on the door with his folded up newspaper to wake him up. He had promised to water the flowers that framed the flat's windows looking out towards the square and besides, eight in the morning was late enough for even a teenager. Adri himself had been forced to leave school at fourteen. As the oldest of the Marchal children and with his father frequently spending the wages he made as a cigar maker in a factory on drink, he had to help support the family.

As usual, Adri was dressed in a collared shirt; a lightly striped tie was knotted round his neck. His clothes weren't much different to most of the men who worked at the Rijksmuseum but, as a restorer, they would be covered by an overcoat made of strong, thick cotton as soon as he got into the studio. As he walked across the Nieuwe Amstelbrug he knew this day wouldn't be like any other. From from the articles he had been reading in *Het Volk* and the discussions of his Fakkeldragersgroep, it was becoming increasingly clear that everything was about to change. In spite of the agreements that had been signed with Germany the year before, the newspapers editorials made it plain that Hitler was on a terrifying course to invade Poland and increase Germany's *Lebensraum*. Adri had been the secretary of the SDAP's Utrecht branch in the early nineteen twenties and was close to many of the party's inner-circle. Even though he felt a lifelong kinship with the party's deeply-rooted resistance to the parliamentary work that could detract from its revolutionary core, he knew that meetings had taken place with the Protestant politician Dirk Jan de Geer. Under discussion was the urgent need for country's political parties to come together to form a national coalition that would steer the Netherlands through the difficult times that unquestionably lay ahead.

Suddenly Adri was struck by thoughts of his daughter Adriana. She was thousands of kilometres away, in a place he had little reference to imagine. He had tried, when he drew the menu for her proxy wedding in November the year before. He wasn't given to humour, but was carried away by the occasion. The menu card featured a hand-drawn map of the Netherlands in the left hand corner and a sailing boat in the shape of a clog that would take Atty to the big ship, and then all the way to South Africa. There, floating in approximately Northern Rhodesia, was her new husband's head, peering from a grass hut that had the outline of a table and two chairs within it. From Atty's letters, he knew that South Africa had trains and trams and buildings and brick houses but his daughter had ended up living on a farm, having to pump her own water and make her own bread. In the end, his depiction of what her life might be like in this new country wasn't totally wrong.

News had come that Atty was pregnant with her first child. "Maria has bought Atty a baby sleeping basket and filled it with napkins and clothes to be sent to South Africa," Anna had told him a few months before when he'd returned from work, referring to her daughter's mother-in-law who lived a short walk away, in a house much grander than their flat. He had never met Mrs Reuvers' late husband, but knew that he had worked his way up the diamond trade and had left his wife some decent money when he died. "At least Atty doesn't have to worry about travelling too far to get everything she needs for the new baby," his wife added.

Adri knew Anna fretted about her daughter, especially when her letters were filled with stories of furniture bought but never delivered ("It was so ugly anyway Moeder," her daughter wrote), snakes, fires and shops that took a day by train to reach. His wife, he knew, hoped for the same experience of motherhood that she had enjoyed when Atty was born. She thought her first baby was a wonder and used to sit for hours next to her cradle, just watching her sleep. Adri, too, worried but felt sure that his daughter would make a good life. She had always been quietly determined. Just look how she managed to convince her parents that converting to Catholicism wasn't an awful betrayal of the atheism that they both believed in. Being only twenty, she needed their permission to marry. Adri wasn't given to flights of romance but sometimes he couldn't help thinking that his daughter carried something special with

her. After all, she was born in 1918, the year that universal suffrage, one of his party's most important beliefs, was implemented and Dutch women were able to vote in the general elections for the first time. The decision to participate in parliamentary elections had caused a rupture in the party but the SDAP had won twenty-two seats. One of these was taken by Suze Groeneweg, one of the first woman in the Dutch parliament. That was twenty years ago. Since then, the party had become a fixture in politics, even though it was kept out of government by the joint muscle of the confessional parties. The Roman Catholics and the Protestants had vowed that they would never form an alliance with a party that had atheism as one of its fundamental principles. The common threat of Hitler and his Nazi party, however, quickly turned sworn enemies into people who could put the interests of a country before politics.

He was now approaching Hobbemastraat and was looking towards the building that had been his working home for six years. How relieved he was when the offer of the job was made, even though at first there was talk that he might need to also do shifts as a security guard. But his experience at the *Utrecht Nieuwsblad* and as an amanuensis for the professor at the Botanical Gardens very quickly enabled him to make himself useful in the restoration studio. He knew he was especially good at making storage boxes for prints and drawings and his framing technique was appreciated by those in charge of the Rijksprentenkabinet. After several years of box making and framing he had began taking the paper in his hands and came to know the extraordinary strength in something that was as light as a dandelion. Starting to help restoring the vast collection of artworks in the museum was a natural step to him. . Yet it wasn't always easy. The atelier was run like a government department, and those working in it were technicians on different levels, with each level associated with clearly designated work. Changes in job description often had to be mediated by the Gemeentearbeiders. He knew it was an important part of the work, but it seemed to him that the atelier often put as much emphasis on systems of numbering and storing artworks as on actual restoration. Adri was always much more than a technician. He had won awards as an amateur photographer, taking and developing his own prints, and was an accomplished painter

He was still as amazed at the artworks that came through this part of the museum as he was when he first started working there. In 1937, a Dirck Barendsz

drawing *De bruiloft van Antenor*, arrived. Finding a new drawing by the Dutch Renaissance painter was a rare occasion and it was thrilling to look at it when it was brought into the atelier. Adri also loved the more modern work collected in the prentenkabinet, like that of Belgian lithographer and engraver Henry de Groux. Thanks to the F.G. Wallerfonds the new acquisitions were always extensive and significant, and took up pages and pages in the annual reports that detailed the goings-on at the museum.

No matter how many times he looked at an artwork that was centuries old, no matter if it needed restoration, Adri still felt moved by paper. When he stopped and thought about it, it was almost magical that something utterly unknowable until it was touched by a human hand holding a pencil, could be turned into piece of art that could tell a story, or imagine something altogether new, like a drawing by Hercules Segers, and then survive for hundreds of years. It was because of this that Adri found himself walking at a rapid pace up the stairs that led into the atelier from Jan Luijkenstraat. The day before, the Dutch army had been instructed to begin its mobilisation. The Netherlands was neutral during the First World War and had held onto its policy of independence even after the Nazis had come into power in 1933. But there was no mistaking Hitler's aggressive intentions: the *Anschluss* of Austria, the occupation of Sudetenland and the invasion of Czechoslovakia had given notice to the European states to prepare for battle. Late the previous afternoon, the Museum Director, Dr Schmidt-Degener, had gathered the staff and informed everyone that, starting on August 25th, the Rijksmuseum would close its doors and begin the biggest movement of artworks in the history of the country.

The directive sounded shocking. It was unimaginable that artworks that the museum staff were sometimes challenged to care for, even within the ideal circumstances of a dust-free, cool, well-guarded and rigorously run national institution like the Rijksmuseum, would be taken on the open road to destinations not at all intended for their protection. What if it rained? What if there was an accident on the way? Adri looked across at his colleagues – men and women like the restoration atelier head P.W. Van Baarse and others, He knew that amongst them they had differences of opinion about how the studio should be run, about the nature of their daily work, even about whose bicycle was placed closest to the entrance of the small

shed in the gardens. But now was not the time for any of this. As they listened to their museum director gravely outlining the momentous task at hand, their only thoughts were of the evacuation that was about to start the next day.

In fact the museum had for some time been quietly preparing for this moment. Adri and his colleagues had been working hard on more storage boxes and portfolio holders that would create a protective environment for the Prentenkabinet's artworks, even if they should be stacked in a cave for who knew how many years. Procedures had been created by the Inspectie Kunstbescherming and the Rijksgebouwendienst for the protection of the country's artworks; shifts would be introduced to make sure the transportation of the works would take place as fast as possible. Civilian volunteers were also going to help with the packing of parts of the museum like the Loudon Collectie, containing blue-white and multi-coloured Delft faïence that was given to the museum in 1916. Each of these delicate tin-glazed objects, including the rare violin, were to be wrapped first in plastic, then paper and carefully placed in large wicker baskets.

The most important works were to be evacuated to different locations around the country to protect them from the destruction that war would certainly bring. The basement windows of the museum itself would be shored up with sandbags to protect what remained in the stores beneath, and there was a plan to replace them with shard-free iron shutters if their effectiveness proved inadequate. It was of course impossible to remove everything but it was imperative that the most important cultural treasures be taken to safety, including those from other museums – the Frans Hals Museum, the many municipal museums, the Oranjezaal van het Huis Ten Bosch, the Museum Boymans. It was a long list of establishments, each holding a different part of the Kingdom's art treasures.

When Adri entered the atelier at the top of the stairs, he knew that the work of packing up the Pretenkabinet works would have to be spread out. The two rooms that made up the studio in the eaves were hardly big enough for everyone who worked there, even in ordinary times. Along with other members of the atelier, he began making preparations for a long day of careful but rapid packing in the library, situated close to the studio. He loved the nineteenth century space with its vaulted ceilings and

its untroubled atmosphere and before long, he was methodically laying prints, drawings and etchings in the boxes he felt proud to have helped make.

He was deep in thought, wondering how different Europe might have been if parties like his own, which disavowed nationalism and militarism, had been in power, when he heard a shout. “Come Adri,” said a voice from one of the library’s upper floors. “We need your hands.” Pushing his circular glasses back onto his nose, Adri hurried up to where the voice had come from. With no-one in sight he moved towards the huddle of activity that he could see in the Nachtwachtzaal, where Rembrandt’s masterpiece was hanging. At that moment Adri knew that the decision had been taken to prepare *The Night Watch* for transport – and that he was being asked to help. With no hesitation, he moved closer to the oil painting that dominated the far wall, the two heavy velvet curtains that flanked it never detracting from the exquisite light falling on Captain Frans Banninck Cocq and Lieutenant van Ruytenburch and the young girl to their right.

He had held Rembrandt drawings in his hands before, and had marvelled at the master’s poetic lines, executed, it always seemed to him, with a gift that few could match. He had frequently stopped before the *Nachtwacht* while going about his business in the museum, in awe of the large-scale creation of a man who never considered works of art on paper beneath his dignity. As much as Rembrandt was a master painter, he was also a master printmaker; his gift for drawing could take your breath away. You only needed to lay eyes on *Slapende jongetje*, a drawing that Adri loved just about more than any other.

Without questioning why he’d been asked to join in the immense task of taking the 379.5 cm high and 453.5 cm wide painting off its frame, Adri step forward to steady the wide-bottomed ladder that reached nearly to the hall’s roof. Five men held the bottom of the frame and another held a second ladder. At the top of the painting two men were working to remove it from the wall. It took several shifts of the ladder to unhinge the painting along the whole of its width – and then, all of a sudden, in one quick move and with a shout of voorzichtig!, the framed work was freed from the wall and laid out on the floor. The great icon of Dutch art looked strangely defeated, like a dog turned on its back as a bigger one bears down on it.

With the knife that he had made himself and always kept in his left-hand pocket, Adri knelt next to the painting and, together with three others, began slowly detaching the canvas from the frame. His heart had been thundering when he looked up to see the men pulling the painting off the wall but now it was slow and steady. He knew what to do with his knife. He knew how to take Rembrandt's masterpiece off the wood with all the tenderness of a father carrying his child.

When the job was done, the frame was placed back on the wall and the painting staff began covering the faces of the officers and other civic guardsmen of the Militia Company of District 11 of Amsterdam with protective material. His help now no longer needed, Adri stepped back and turned to look at the empty frame. He wasn't sure why but he immediately started counting the wooden notches that gave it its regular pattern. Ten on either side. Twelve at the bottom. He was startled to see that there was piping and an electric box behind where the painting had hung just minutes before. How was it possible that something so mesmerising was concealing items of everyday use, objects that could be seen in any house in Amsterdam? Behind him, the *Nachtwacht* resembled a carpet that was ready to be unfurled and placed under a dark-wooded, mint velour covered settee. For how many years would Rembrandt's work disappear from view? he wondered. Nodding to the men who now turned their attention to the task of moving the three hundred and thirty seven kilogram artwork, Adri made his way back to the library.

Chapter Nineteen

I can't remember precisely when my great-grandfather turned into a hero in my mind but by the time I reached high school, I didn't mind very much that I wasn't able to make art in the way that I could write stories for English. While I might not have been able to draw a still life of apples in a bowl, I had something unique to offer when it came to art history: a story that I was absolutely certain nobody could match, especially in isolated South Africa. I'd wait until the teacher turned to the Old Masters and, after she had listed them – Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, Rembrandt – and outlined the reason for their importance, I would put up my hand. "My great-grandfather actually helped save *The Night Watch* from the Nazis," I'd say. "He was working at the Rijksmuseum during the war and was an art restorer," I would hastily add when the teacher gave me a thoroughly disbelieving look. And, by way of further explanation, I would often add, "My mom's family is Dutch, not Afrikaans."

The last bit was always important to me. Even though my father's surname was, we believed, an Anglicised version of the typically Afrikaans name Coetzee, I was often mistaken for having Afrikaans heritage and, during National Party rule, quick to distance myself from people I saw as bearing no relation to me and my family's liberal views. That would change when I got to University and encountered Voëlvry, a movement of dissident young Afrikaners making music that I loved, and later, Max Du Preez and his *Vrye Weekblad* newspaper. But, in the one-dimensional view of my high school years, I wasn't prepared to see Afrikaners through anything but a lens of resentment and deep-seated dislike.

There were reasons why my sister Catherine and I held onto the story of my great-grandfather and his heroics during World War Two. Many of these came into sharp focus when I became a Dutch citizen in 2011 and immersed myself in memories of growing up with my grandparents. At the time, it struck me how they never traded in their Dutchness for assimilation into South African society, even after having lived in the country for nearly four decades. It wasn't just the food they ate and the

traditions they kept. Nor was it simply the Dutch they always spoke to each other – and also their children, until word came in the nineteen fifties that the Nationalist government wanted to get all Dutch-speaking children out of English schools and into Afrikaans ones in an attempt to bolster their numbers. Atty and Jules wanted nothing to do with this apartheid government notion and made an effort to speak more English to Emma, Jules, Robert and Anne-Marie at home. It's partly the reason why my mother never thought to pass the ability to speak the language she grew up with onto us, her children. Their Dutchness was also visible in the Dutch friends they had, among them Anton Voorvelt, an architect who designed the home they eventually built in Umhlanga Rocks and who went on to become a highly regarded stained glass artist.

It was also in the trips they made back home, starting with the six month boat trip in 1955, and all the ones that followed with their children and their grandchildren. And there was always the art – prints mostly, simply framed artworks that are now found scattered in the homes of my family members throughout South Africa.

Amongst the photographs that my mom gives me towards the end of 2014, there's one in particular that catches my eye. Pulled out of an album to commemorate a 1997 trip by their now grown-up children to visit Atty and Jules in their home in Huis ter Heide, the photograph was taken in Wil Van Oort's studio. My Oma's cousin has his arms around my mother and uncle Jules, who is looking at the contents of a slender box placed on top of a set of artist paper drawers. Atty has captioned the picture "Choosing prints". Although she's slightly blurred, my mother is beaming with happiness. Here she is, in the home of a family member who so brilliantly carried on the work of the grandfather she adored, about to make her selection from the things she treasures most about her heritage, a Dutch print.

The manifestations of my new Dutchness, frequently in a minor nationalist fervour during times like the soccer World Cup, became an ongoing, light-hearted joke between my partner and myself. I ran into trouble with some people in my university group when I wrote about my feelings about gaining dual citizenship after so many years of longing for it. They disliked the uncritical way I embraced being officially Dutch and wondered what that said about my attachment to South Africa.

The irony was that my great-grandfather – anti the monarchy, anti the army, anti the Church, anti nationalism – would probably have agreed with them and their point was something that I would usually have been sensitive to.

But the truth was, twenty years after I queued outside a school in Cape Town to cast my vote, I was buckling under the weight of my disappointment with of the African National Congress in government. I was under no illusion that my journalistic work for Press Trust News Agency, *Post Natal* and *South* newspaper, was not much more than a minor contribution to the struggle. But, even so, the growing distance I felt from the ruling party was like a wound. There were other things too. I was at first shocked to realise that, no matter what our constitution says, many of our politicians and leaders were religious conservatives deep-down whose private views on women's and gay rights were radically different from mine. When, in November 2014, I read about the patriarchal views expressed at the Ministry of Women in the Presidency's launch of 16 Days of Activism For No Violence Against Women and Children campaign, my heart sank even further. I wanted to write about it but knew that it would do nothing but invite the kind of vitriol that I had experienced when writing about music. I didn't have the stomach for it. It seemed to me like the privilege accorded by my whiteness meant my and other voices were increasingly being waved away as inconsequential and irrelevant. It could have been fuelled by the demise of *Rolling Stone* and a low-grade mourning for that part of my life, but it felt like part of me was being extinguished.

All of this conspired to give me a pure and uncomplicated relationship with the Netherlands that I had no interest in interrogating. It reignited my pride in the role of my great-grandfather, Wil and Andre, three generations in all, in the evolution of paper restoration in the Netherlands and beyond. The story of my great-grandfather and *The Night Watch*, the one that made me feel attached to an act of historical importance in the stifling climate of the nineteen seventies and eighties in South Africa, floated back up through the decades. It helped set me on the journey for this book.

Out of the blue my brother Nicholas phoned. He had just moved into a new home and was sorting out his possessions. "I have a book that you might be interested

in," he said. "It's about the storage of artworks from all the museums in the Netherlands during World War Two." He gave me no more details but said he would keep it safe until he next saw me.

I imagined that the publication would support the research I had done in the Rijksmuseum library during the trip that I made with with my mother. In the *Verslag Omtrent 's Rijks Verzamelingen van Geschiedenis en Kunst* I had read Dr Schmidt-Deneger's introduction to the annual report of 1939 that described one of the most exceptional years in the history of the museum. "Het jaar 1939 zal te boek blijven staan als het meest uitzonderlijke in de geschiedenis van het Rijksmuseum en naar wij hopen een uitzonderlijke jaar in deze geest. Gedurende de laatste drie jaren kwam, hetgeen nu geschied is, telkens nader, en telkens in dreigender vorm. Toen op 24 Augustus de voor-mobilisatie werd afgekondigd sloot het museum de dag daarop en moest de gehele aandacht van staf, personeel en voluntairs gericht worden op een zoo snel mogelijke evacuatie van het meest belangrijke."[30] The only people singled out by the museum director in his general overview of this crucial moment were the Inspecteur Kunstbescherming Dr J. Kalk, the conmmander of the Amsterdam Fire Brigade, Mr C. Gordijn, the volunteers who helped with the evacuation of the artworks and the scientific assistant H.P. Baard, who oversaw a system of day and night monitoring during the evacuation. This confirmed what Idelette said to me when I told her that the story of Opa Adri and the Night Watch was so important to me as a child. "Everyone helped with the evacuation so even if he wasn't directly involved with the The Nightwatch, he would definitely have helped pack many another important artworks."

When Nicholas handed me the book during a week that I spent writing at his house in Oranjezicht, I was thrilled. It turned out to be a contemporaneously written account of what took place from the moment of deciding to hide the artworks until the

[30] 1939 will be remembered as the most extraordinary year in the history of the Rijksmuseum – a year which we hope will remain an exception. During the last three years that which has now come pass was approaching ever closely, and always in a more threatening form. When on 24th August the preliminary mobilisation was announced, the museum was closed the day after and the full attention of managers, staff and volunteers needed to be focused on the quickest possible evacuation of the most important work.

end of the war. And there is more: *Kunst in schuilkelders* was written by the same H.P. Baard who is mentioned in Schmidt-Degener's report and who turns out to have been the director of the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem. The book was published in 1946 by D.A. Dadmen's Uitgeversmaatschappij and is amply illustrated with photographs depicting the packing, transporting, hiding and eventual return of the artworks. The edges of the seventy-page book are rimmed by water stains and there is flocking on the inside cover pages, as well as an ink stain near the back that resembles a strange insect flying backwards. But when I read the handwritten inscription on the flyleaf in Nicholas's house, I knew that I was holding something that wasn't just a lucky find. There, above the inside title page, was my great-grandfather's elegant signature. Underneath it, in ink that was now faded to slate grey, he wrote,

Voor Jules & Atty
1946
Nederland
Vader

At the moment I read it, I felt certain that Adri had, along with all others working at the Rijksmuseum, been given the book in appreciation for his participation in the evacuation and the care he gave to the museum's artworks during the occupation. In turn, he had passed it on to his daughter and son-in-law in South Africa, to give them an understanding of the momentous task of safeguarding what Baard calls, throughout his book, the art treasures of the Netherlands. Adri and Anna's first visit to Johannesburg was in 1948 so my great-grandfather must have posted *Kunst in schuilkelders* to Atty and Jules in 1946. For my grandfather, who almost died while serving as a soldier for his country, was in his later years even prouder of Adri, Wil and Andre's work than my grandmother. Reading Baard's account must have been a profound experience for him. Somehow this book, written in Haarlem, published in 'S Gravenhage, presented to my great-grandfather in Amsterdam and sent in an envelope to Johannesburg, survived nearly eighty years of family movement and the sifting and shifting of household content, to end up in the house of my brother, an architect and academic acutely aware of what taking care of national treasures can mean.

Back in Johannesburg, I work my way through Baard's book. The combination of enforced Afrikaans lessons at school and years of hearing my grandparents talk to each other when we lived below them in Umhlanga Rocks has given me a passable understanding of Dutch. I smile to myself when I read the opening paragraph. "Wanneer ik ga vertellen van de lotgevallen van de nationale kunstschatten gedurende de oorlogsjaren, ben ik er min van bewust, dat velen daarvan een levendig relaas verwachten. Een relaas, dat hier en daar de sensationele climax zal benaderen van zekere reportages, die reeds tijdens de Deutsche bezetting over de vlucht van ons oude meesters circuleerden." [31]

So I wasn't the only one who imagined heroics and drama! Indeed, Baard writes that during the six long years of back and forth movement of the national treasures there were perilous moments that gripped those involved with some terror. But these rarely provided the material for a full-on adventure novel with the Old Masters as protagonists. The exception were those August days of 1939, when the atmosphere was filled with palpable tension and charged emotion as the Rijksmuseum staff went about taking care of the evacuation and conservation of the art. "After all, this was no commonplace move," Baard notes, with dry understatement. Those who worked in the museum profoundly understood the seriousness of the moment and the great responsibility that they bore for ensuring that the thousands of art works and objects were packed in a way that would protect them, not just from the threat of destruction but also from an unstable environment.

But Baard warns that his account would be mostly prosaic; that it would detail the repeated move from one depot to another, and be a monotonous litany of the many concerns around the monitoring and protection of the art treasures, including the constant fear of German interference. His book, he explains, is about the resigned waiting for the "endless shining moment" when the Old Masters could resume their place in a peaceful society. Still, at times Baard can't help himself and strays easily

[31] In setting out to tell the story of the fortunes of the national art treasures during the war years, I am setting aside the awareness that many readers would expect this to be a lively account. An account that would approach the sensational climax of certain reports about the escape of our great masters which were circulating even during the German occupation.

from the prosaic into the poetic. “Het was dikwijls verfrisschend de vertrouwde werken in dit landelijk milieu te zien, onder ongewone belichting en vrij van de museumsfeer en de stadslucht, waarvan zij nu eenmaal moeilijk los te denken zijn.” [32] The image of artworks, unmoored from the protective cocoon of the museums and leaning in a stack on a gravel driveway, waiting to be placed in a school or church hall, is thrilling and liberating.

It is the journey of *The Night Watch* that breathes life into Baard’s words. Once it had been prepared for transport, on September 4th 1939 the painting was lowered though a special slit cut into the brickwork that ran above the bicycle path, which Cuypers designed to run through the centre of the museum. There, it was placed carefully on a truck used for transporting large sheets of glass. The frames that usually held the glass in place had been reduced in length to ensure that the trucks were able to pass below bridges and electricity lines. A convoy led by police motorcycles headed for the Radboud Castle in Medemblick about sixty kilometres from Amsterdam, where the painting was placed behind steel shutters with other works in the main hall. But it wasn’t long before Rembrandt’s painting was on the move again. The Germans had begun their invasion of the Netherlands in May 1940, and the danger posed by the presence of an invading force was spelled out by Baard: “Ernstiger gevaar dreigde op den derden oorlogsdag, Zonday 12 Mei, toen ik des morgens vroeg tegenover het kasteel te Medemblijk een mijnenveger ontwaarde, gelegen langs de noordelijke havenkade onder de beschutting van een rij huizen. Het gevaar bestond natuurlijk hierin dat dit schip beschieting kon uitlokken van vijandelijke vliegtuigen waarbij het kasteel met zijn kostbaren inhoud niet weinig gevaar liep.” [33] The diligent museum employee called Amsterdam with the news and, during the course of the morning, watched as the minesweeper fired at an enemy aircraft approaching from the northeast. Thankfully, it missed its target and the projectile weapon headed towards Enkhuizen, disappearing into the sea. Later that

[32] It was refreshing to see familiar work in this rural environment, under unusual lighting and free from the atmosphere of the museum and the city air.
[33] A more serious threat presented itself on the third day of war, Sunday May 12th. I was standing in front of the Medemblijk Castle early in the morning when I saw a minesweeper on the northern quay, sheltered by a row of houses. This ship could provoke bombardment by enemy planes and put the castle with its precious contents in danger.

day, the minesweeper moved away from its position near the Radboud Castle. Baard breathed a sigh of relief.

But with Rotterdam lying in tatters and rumours that, as Baard put it, the Germans would soon be marching in their gumboots over the IJsselmeer, a decision was taken to remove *The Night Watch* and other paintings. The most valuable items belonging to the Rijksprentenkabinet were to be relocated to deeper and safer spaces in Radboud Castle.

So it was that, at eight thirty in the evening of May 13th, *The Night Watch* was again placed on the back of a truck and sent on a journey to the dunes near the North Sea town of Castricum. The trip wasn't easy and that night it exchanged the hall of honour for modest lodgings in a blacksmith's shed in the town of Winkel. This was the first space to have been been constructed specifically as a safe haven for the Kingdom's artworks.

In 1938 the Amsterdam Gemeente had sent Jhr W. Sandberg, a conservator at the Stedelijk Museum, to Spain. There, he studied how works by the likes of Goya, Velazquez, El Greco, Titian, Dürer and Bosch were protected during the Spanish Civil War. Inspired by the building of safes in underground rocks, he concluded that something similar should be built for Amsterdam's artworks. The presence of groundwater meant that the Dutch couldn't replicate the Spanish solution, but the dunes offered a good alternative to rocks. So in November 1939, the building of the first dune depot began and by April 1940 it was ready to receive the artworks. But it wouldn't be long before *The Night Watch* was travelling again. On March 21st 1941, the painting was moved to a bomb proof shelter that had been built in Heemskerk (with another in Zandvoort). Even this was to be another temporary shelter. On December 15th 1941, building had begun on a safe in the St Pietersberg caves, 35 metres underground and far away from the dangers – a sea assault by the Allies, variations in temperature, a battle close to shore- posed by the North Sea. By March 1942 plans were being made to transport *The Night Watch* to what would turn out to be its home for nearly three-and-a-half years. In his description of the painting's journey to the historic St Pietersberg caves, Baard cannot resist more poetic language. Under the ghostly lighting in the catacombs, flanked by two rows of men, the heavy

roll of canvas was slowly and silently taken deeper and deeper into the three hundred metre long tunnel. For the technician, this peculiar spectacle evoked nothing less than a royal funeral – one in which one of Rembrandt's grandest creations was to be interred in a crypt.

My imaginings of my great-grandfather being called on to use his skills with a knife to help take the painting off its frame were off the mark. In fact, *The Night Watch* remained on its stretcher until it reached the dunes of Castricum, when it was discovered that it could not possibly fit into the specially-built vault. Unlike the moment in 1715, when it was moved from the Kloveniersdoelen to the Amsterdam Town Hall and a decision was made to trim it on all four sides, the painting was quickly taken off its stretcher and rolled up, with Rembrandt's paint strokes on the inside. It was then placed on the same cylinder that had already been used to transport the canvas of the more than four metre by four metre *De regenten van het Aalmoezeniersweeshuis te Amsterdam* painting by Cornelis Troost from 1729. It would remain on this cylinder as it moved from Castricum to Heemskerk and then Maastricht and, finally, back to Amsterdam. For much of that time it was housed in an open wooden structure, surrounded by portfolios, boxes and wicker baskets containing many of the other artworks that were being safeguarded. To prove to Dutch citizens that their cultural treasures were preserved during the occupation, shortly after its return, an exhibition of Old Masters was held at the Rijksmuseum with *The Night Watch* back in its wooden frame.

And the Nazis? It turned out that the German occupiers knew precisely where *The Night Watch* was being guarded by the Dutch military police – that it wasn't, as was whispered at the time, sealed in a watertight steel cylinder and dropped to the bottom of a lake (a story fuelled by the fate of a collection of Van Goghs from the Amsterdam University and the City Hall, that were stored in ships moored in the vicinity of the Alkmaardermeer). The hiding of art wasn't so much about keeping it out of German hands as it was about protecting it from the artillery that the Germans and the Allies were scattering over Europe like a virus. In fact, at some point, the German officers began paying visits to the stored artworks – something that Baard, for one, found "difficult to endure". He reported that the Germans were both arrogant and ill-informed about art and art history, recounting several episodes to serve as

proof of this. During a visit by a major, Baard remarks with a mixture of incredulity and amusement, that the museum personnel and guards were told that Rembrandt's work should be seen as nothing less than German. "Als ik zo 'n gratis college goed begrepen heb, moest daaruit de conclusie worden getrokken dat wij, Hollanders, Rembrandt hebben te aanvaarden als Duitschlands grootste schilder, met wie ons niets anders verbindt dan de vereerende omstandigheid, dat wij hem doek en verf hebben mogen leveren om de Germaansche geest s onsterfelijk te maken." [34]

In one last ditch effort to connect my great-grandfather with *The Night Watch* I take out the magnifying glass my mother gave me and scour *Kunst in schuilkelders*. . The closest I get to him are two photographs. The first was taken in the Rijksmuseum basement, under the struts on the roof of the underground space. It shows five rows of Rijksprentenkabinet boxes waiting for transport, each pile higher than the man (not my great-grandfather) standing in the righthand foreground. The second is of the interior of the Doopsgezinde Church of Nieuwe Niedorp where scaffolding was constructed for the storage of boxes and portfolios. The boxes and prints, drawings and photographs inside them would surely have felt Adri's hand as he and the other members of the atelier worked to prepare the Rijksprentenkabinet's collection for transport? And there's something else. In a booklet *De Kluis in de Sint-Pietersberg* that a tourguide recommended to my mother and me when we visited Maastricht, there's a photograph of a man sitting at a desk, in the space just outside the safe. He's dressed in a thick overcoat and has round glasses on his nose. His white hair is combed back, and thinning. On the wall next to the vault door, made from thick steel by De Haas Brandkasten Fabriek, is a glass cabinet containing several rows of shiny keys. The man appears to be reading a sheaf of papers. Above the photograph the caption reads: "Vanuit de suppoostenruimte werd nauwgezet de administratie bijgehouden van in en uitgaande kunstvoorwerpen." There is no identification of this member of the administration who was charged with keeping track of movement of items in and out of the safe but something about the man makes me call my sister. "I'm looking at a photograph that probably isn't but could be Opa Adri sitting outside

[34] If I understood such a gratuitous lecture correctly, it must lead to the conclusion that we, the Dutch people, have to accept Rembrandt as Germany's greatest painter, to whom nothing connects us apart from the honourable circumstance that we could supply him with canvas and paint in order to immortalise the German spirit.

the vault in the St Pietersberg," I tell her. Holding the phone in my left hand, I take out the magnifying glass again. "But his nose and chin are different, I think, so it's probably not him at all and just me being a wishful thinker." Of all the people close to me, Catherine best understands my quest to unearth some evidence, something written or printed on paper, of our great-grandfather's heroics in the Rijksmuseum. We embarked on this journey together with the money that I received from an incident that unmoored me in ways I had never anticipated. From the beginning, we knew that the quest was fuelled by a family story that had become muddied over the years but was still claimed by the two of us, partly to make us stand out and feel special, but mostly because we loved it. In the end, the true story of *The Night Watch* and the Nazis was was less important than its abiding effect on us.

But there is a core of truth: my great-grandfather did help to protect *The Night Watch* because he belonged to a group of Dutch men and women – curators, guards, volunteers, office staff – who worked unceasingly during those August days of 1939 to prepare some of the Netherland's most important artworks for safe transit and storage. In this, the restorers played no small part. Writing about the fact that Rembrandt's masterpiece emerged from five years of moving and storing unscathed, Baard says, "Een woord van lof is hier zeker op zijn plaats voor de prestaties der vakkundige museumrestaurateurs die onder zulke ongunstige omstandigheden deze geheel geïmproviseerde maatregelen moesten treffen." [35]

[35] A word of praise is needed for the work of the professional museum restorers, who under what were certainly adverse conditions, had to improvise measures [*for the restoration and conservation of the artworks*].

Chapter Twenty

In 2013, I took my children to the Netherlands with my mother. Like her parents had done with my sister and me, Emma wanted to show her grandchildren the home of their ancestors. “Before I get too old, Diane,” she said when we began planning the trip. Although it seemed impossible to think of my independent mother, who had raised four children and taught hundreds and hundreds more, as anything other than capable, she was showing signs of ageing. I couldn’t argue. Emma also wanted to introduce them to the country of their new citizenship, of and generously insisted on paying for our accommodation in the bungalow village of t’Eeekhoornnest just outside Soest. We would spend ten days there before heading for Paris and then London, to meet up with my partner Jeremy.

I was thrilled at the prospect. I wanted the children to share in the journey I had embarked on to discover the truth about *The Night Watch* and trace the three generations of paper restorers in our family. I only wished that Jami, my oldest daughter, could have joined us. But she had undertaken her first trip to Europe that January, and was already deep into her final year at university when we left.

I knew that I was being swept up by the sentimentality of connecting, for my children, the two countries that defined my family across four generations. But Jami, Hannah, Zach and Emmylou are unusual in having a great-grandmother who is still alive and living just a six-hour drive away. Over many visits, they have come to know her and her essential Dutchness. On the walls of their rooms are the cross-stitch pictures Atty made to commemorate their births, with the specific details (date, time, weight, name) depicted between icons of Dutch life (windmills, sailing boats, tulips). Unlike my cousins, I was lucky enough to have my children when my grandmother was still able to see well enough to do the handiwork that she was so good at. But there was something else about Atty that made her stand out in the eyes of her great-

grandchildren. A mere fifteen days after Atty made her appearance in Utrecht, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was born in the Eastern Cape village of Mvezo on July 18th 1918. To have been born in the same year as the most important historical figure of their time gave their great-grandmother a special status.

It was an unseasonably cold spring when we arrived and Hannah, Zach and Emmylou gasped when they stepped into the cold air of the underground station at Schiphol airport. We all laughed at Zach's feet, clad only in socks after his shoes, already too small at the start of the flight, wouldn't get back onto his feet as we were preparing to land. "Take out another pair when we have our luggage," I instructed him. "I have no others," he replied as we headed towards the carousels. This didn't surprise me. Like just about everything that happens in our family, our departure for this trip was wrapped in a layer of chaos brought about by too much work and too much to do.

Shoes or no shoes, we were happy to have arrived and bundled our luggage onto the train to Amersfoort. The children chose their seats and waited for the train to leave. As middle-class South Africans, train travel was a novelty to us; it only happened once a year, on our summer holiday, when the children and I would take a trip to the fishing village of Kalk Bay a few stations away. That first trip on a fast, spacious train was the start of a love affair that hasn't ended for them yet. They also loved Eekhoornnest and our cottage on the edge of the forest, bordered by an open field where rescued horses roam, healthy and free, and from where walking trails led into the dunes.

Every day we would set out for somewhere new. We took the train to Utrecht where we debated climbing the Domtoren, but settled instead for a visit to Dick Bruna Huis, where Hannah and Emmylou watched, entranced, an audio visual display of Dick Bruna bringing Miffy to life with a few simple strokes of black ink. We traveled to The Hague, with me clutching original copies of our birth certificates, to register at the gemeente. On our way there, we stopped off at Madurodam, where the children got their first look at miniature models of the most important buildings in the Netherlands. There they saw Rijksmuseum, where their great-great-grandfather

worked, and a factory delivering bite-sized Mars bars on tiny mechanised trucks when you put a coin in the slot.

In Madurodam we unexpectedly came across a model of the railway station at Groningen which had been built by their great-great grandfather on the Van Coolwijk side of the family. "The Van Coolwijk family was in the building business and he (*my grandfather's grandfather*) built the beautiful station at Groningen although something went wrong and it nearly bankrupted him," I read out aloud from Atty's memoirs after our return home. "Jules' mother and her twin sister were educated at a French school and Maria was the first woman to get a job at the main post office in Amsterdam, sending Morse messages." The children were especially impressed with this last piece of information. A great-great grandmother who knew how to tap out Morse Code conjured up a picture from history that pleased them greatly.

We got lost on the way to the offices where we would officially be entered into the birth register of the Netherlands and ended up on the beach in Scheveningen, where we lunched on fish and chips on the promenade and looked out towards the North Sea, trying hard to imagine whether the scene on a hot summer day would be much like our holidays. It felt even colder on the day we took a lengthy bus trip to get to the Kröller-Müller Museum. It was the children's first encounter with such an extensive art collection and Emmylou engaged seriously with the business of reading the descriptions of artworks by Piet Mondriaan, Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock and Constant before they all headed outside to ride the white bikes through the Hoge Veluwe National Park.

Hannah had read *The Diary of a Young Girl* twice and so, early one day, we trekked to Amsterdam and stood, frozen cold, in a line on the Prinsengracht to visit the Anne Frank House. My fourteen-year-old daughter was close to tears when we entered the secret annex and moved through the rooms where the young diarist lived. So close to the age Anne was when she was in hiding and finally discovered and sent to Bergen-Belsen, Hannah frequently felt overcome with emotion as she examined the original pages of Anne's diary. But she cheered up later in the day when, after a rondvaart in the canals, we left her younger brother and sister with their grandmother and walked, just the two of us, through the edge of the Red Light District. She

listened, rapt, as I recounted yet again the story of Catherine and I walking with my grandmother as my grandfather strolled ahead, waving and smiling at the prostitutes sitting in windows under rosey red lights. With no grandfathers still alive, it was a scene that had extra poignancy for my daughter.

The three of them loved hearing about their Dutch family and relished the cultural immersion that the trip provided – but sometimes it was enough. "Can't we just stay at home and ride bikes today," Zach said in the middle of our stay. My nature-loving son was happy just riding on the trains, drinking Chocomel and watching the landscape go by, or pedalling through the forests that enveloped t' Eekhoornnest. "Do you think they will feel something when we go to see the Matisse," I asked Emma as we sat in the wooden cottage's heated lounge, drinking coffee. In a stroke of bad timing, the Rijksmuseum was having its official opening just days after we were due to board the train at Rotterdam, headed for Paris. We had booked our tickets months earlier and so there was no way I could take the children into the museum where their great-great grandfather had worked. But the Stedelijk Museum was open and I planned a trip for them to see the most important artwork that Andre van Oort had ever worked on.

I didn't have to worry. Armed with an iPad, Hannah and Emmylou provided a running commentary as we approached the room where *La Perruche et la Sirene* now hangs. When the three of them finally saw Matisse's cut-out masterpiece they fell for it instantly. "Big ups to our distant relative who restored this," Hannah said, directly to the camera. "It's huge! I would have been too scared to have touched this artwork, which is probably priceless." Emmylou, then eight, had a different approach. "I could have done that easily with my art class," she announced as she walked closer to the six-panelled artwork. Zach wanted to know why the edges of the cut-outs had pencil marks on them and were jagged in some places. In the moment of seeing the enormous cut-outs close up, he was suddenly struck by the notion that art didn't have to be perfect; that his teacher's insistence that everything be done "just right" was wrong, as this unconventional boy knew it was.

After some time of close examination, Hannah, a student in drama at a specialist art school, drew them towards the description on the wall. She started,

"Henri Matisse, gouache on paper, cut out and pasted on paper, mounted on canvas, acquired with the generous support of the Vereeniging Rembrandt and the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds, 1967." After making sure her brother and sister were paying close attention, she read on. "After Matisse determined that loosely painted passages distracted from the contours of the composition, he became defined by flat areas of pure colour. When illness prevented him from painting, Matisse cut shapes out of brightly painted paper and, with the aid of assistants, glued them onto vast sheets of paper. *La Perruche et la Sirene* is one of the largest paper cut-outs produced by Matisse. The rectangular composition features leaves, pomegranates, and two shapes at either side, on the left, a parrot, and on the right, a mermaid that gives the work its title. The artist, having been confined in his house, said of the piece. 'I have made a little garden all around me, where I can walk.'"

Hannah paused. "That's such a beautiful image, Mom." I smiled at her as the three of them skipped back to stand in front of the Matisse again. "A parakeet and a mermaid and a mermaid and a parakeet," Emmylou sang softly to herself as she moved from the one end of the artwork to the other. Suddenly, they turned to pose for my camera. Hannah smiling, with her hands on her hips. Emmylou crouched on the ground, looking serious. Zach moving across the face of the cut-out like a dancer. A trio of South Africans who were now also Dutch citizens, connected by a slender, but strong, thread to the artwork behind.

It was a thread that none of the other visitors to the museum that day could see, nor the visitors who surrounded my oldest child when she had stood before the Matisse three months earlier. But I could see it, with a clarity that made everything worth it. The nastiness that sent me on a journey to find out whether the stories that had sustained me growing up in a cruel place were true. The desperate moments of trying to find the space to write amidst the collapse of a magazine I loved and the urgent need to find a new way of earning a living. And the sadness of knowing that Atty would never be able to read what I have discovered about her father, her cousin and his son and their role in the evolution of paper restoration in the Netherlands.

As I write this, in February 2015, Atty spends her days in a frail care facility. Once a week she visits my aunt and uncle in the house that she and my grandfather

built on the slopes above the Indian Ocean. On these days, my cousin Kate also visits so that Atty can hold Sophia, her thirteenth grandchild, born in December 2014, just a few months after my youngest brother's daughter Isla and my cousin Natalie's third child, Riley. Three beautiful baby girls, all arriving within months of each other. On Sundays, my mother pushes Atty in a wheelchair to her flat, which is in the same retirement village. They drink coffee and eat gebak. Emma shows her photos or leans right into her ear, to tell her news of the family. Every few months my aunts and uncles come up from the Cape, and there are also visits from her niece, Jennifer Marchal, her brother Fre's daughter and members of the Reuvers family when they are in town.

But, mostly, Atty waits out the days in a small, shared room, hardly able to see her surroundings or hear the goings-on of the nurses and visitors and other residents. The twenty-year-old who set out for a strange country, who survived diptheria and years of not knowing whether her family was alive, who loved bringing her children up in her adopted country but wanted to return to her beloved Netherlands even more, is waiting for the end.

I long to be able to tell her what a delightful memoirist she is. The pages of the plain notebook that she filled are brimming with life and details that have helped me create a picture of my Dutch family. There are also interjections showing that starting to capture a life at the age of ninety was no easy task. "I have not written for a long time. It is an effort but I promised Mathew and Diane that I would try so here I am again" she writes midway through the pages, and, further on, "Oh dear, what an effort it is for me to write but a promise is a promise!"

But, after starting out in 2008, Atty would show up on the page, day after day until she was no longer able to. On April 20th 2011 she writes, "This is as far as I can go on with the writing. It's not that my memory fails me but my eyesight is bad. Did I write that I went to the eye specialist? Nothing can be done about my eyesight. My right one is a dud and my left one is deteriorating."

Still, she perserveres for another ten pages, describing events like my cousin Kate's wedding at The Oyster Box Hotel which overlooks the red and white

lighthouse that I must have walked around hundreds of times as a child. “I met so many old friends from the time we came to live in Umhlanga Rocks and at last our family was reunited. Children, grand-children and great grand-children. When I looked around, I really felt proud of my family. They have all done so well.” Her final entries are in the month of July of the year that she turned ninety three. In one, she reminisces about her first years in Umhlanga Rocks. “It looked quite different at that time. It had a caravan park at the corner and we stayed there in Fre and Stien’s borrowed caravan until the house was finished being built. When our furniture arrived and we moved in, it all felt so little in that big house. But our new life started.”

Her final entry is dated July 22nd and came after my mother brought her news of the ceremony that gave my four children their Dutch citizenship. “Today my whole family became Nederlanders except for Emma and Anna-Marie but they are working on it. The family went to Pretoria to swear allegiance to Queen Beatrix. I am rather proud of the fact that they wanted to be subjects of this little but important country called Holland. Jules would have been so proud. I just can’t express how I am feeling.”

With tears in my eyes, I put the notebook to one side and take out the small book of photographs of the trip to Holland with the children. In their spontaneous pose in front of the huge artwork, Hannah, Zach and Emmylou have captured the exuberance of Matisse’s *La Perruche et la Sirene*, and also the way I feel when I see my South African-Dutch children in this photograph.

That was not the last time I saw *La Perruche et la Sirene*. In 2014 Jeremy and I went to the Matisse Cut-Outs exhibition in London. It was the first time that so many of Matisse’s paper cuts had been gathered together in a single exhibition and it would prove to be a hit in both London and, later, New York. As we walked through the fourteen rooms I felt a sense of anticipation. How would *The Parakeet and the Mermaid* fit into such a comprehensive exhibition, one that also contained *Blue Nudes, The Snail* and *Large Decorations with Masks?* When we walked into Room 10, I could instantly see, in the brightness of the white background, how Andre’s restoration had brought back the unfettered joy that Matisse meant to convey when he created a virtual garden in his studio. “As all the works in this room demonstrate, the

white background was not just a neutral setting but an active part of the work," stated the exhibition pamphlet. "Matisse felt that white's contrast with the coloured cut paper gave it a 'rare and intangible quality'."

With people pressing on me on all sides, I try to make visible in my mind the years of work that Andre van Oort invested in one of the most stunning pieces of art of the 20th century. In that crowded room, no-one but me could see his invisible fingerprints on every single piece of the six hundred and thirty four pieces of painted and cut paper. These fingerprints carry with them the spirit of Wil and Adri; they connect me and my children – and their children to come – to a work done in a hotel in Nice in 1952 by a man who never believed he would create art again. *La Perruche et la Sirene* didn't fall into disrepair when it could have. Instead, like a magnet, it is drawing people from all over the world to look at a masterpiece created from paper.

Glossary

Words:

Aardappelen - potatoes
Afsluitdijk – Dam
Algemeen AA – General AA
Appelflappen – apple fritters
Avondmaal - Supper
Badmeester - lifeguard
Beschuit – rusk
Bevrijdingsdag – Liberation Day
Binnenstad – City centre
Boterkoek – Butter biscuit
Brood A – Bread A
Burgermeester – Mayor
De Haas Brandkasten Fabriek – De Haas Safe Factory

De Kluis in de Sint-Pietersberg – The Safe in St Pietersberg

De Stem des Volks – The Voice of the People

Dodendraad – barbed wire

Doperwten - peas

Drop - liquorice

Evenaar – Equator

Fakkeldragersgroep – Torchbearer group

Fricandeau – dish of thinly sliced veal, braised with vegetables and white wine

Gebak – pastry

Gemeentelijke Woningdienst – Municipal Housing Agency

Gezellig – homey

Glijbaan – slide

Grootvader – grandmother

Haringvijver – Herring Pond

Inspectie Kunstbescherming – Inspection of Arts Protection

Joodse Buurt – Jewish neighbourhood

Joodse markten – Jewish market

Kinderen, klein en achterkleinkinderen – children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren

Koekkrummels – cake crumbs

Koekje – cookies

Kroeg – pub

Kunst in schuilkelders – art in the shelters

Kwartierstaat – family tree

Machineschrijven – typesetting

MULO - Meer Uitgebreid Lager Onderwijs: More Advanced Primary Education

Natte atelier – wet studio

Oliebollen – donuts

Oma – grandmother

Opa – grandfather

Ordedienst – Order Service (Dutch resistence movement)

Oranje Boven – Orange on top

Oranjesluis – Orange lock

Oranjezaal – Orange hall

Overgrootvader – great-grandfather

Pannekoek – pancakes

Restauratieatelier van prenten – Print Restoration Workshop

Rijksarchief – record office

Rondvaart – boat trip

Rooie dorp – red village

Rolmops – pickled herring

Snoepwinkel – candy shop

Speculaas – spiced biscuit

Sperciboonen/ sperziebonen – green beans

Sportfonds-en-Bad – Sports Fund and Bath

Stamppot – dish made with mashed potatoes and vegetables

Stroopwafelen – syrup waffle

Vlaamse Frits – hot chips

Voorzichtig – caution

Vrouwengevangenis – female prison

Wortelen – carrots

Zuil – silos

Phrases:

Voor mijn man – for my husband

Hier ben ik! – here I am

Hier woont Reuvers – Reuvers lives here

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[ii] Page 15. Buchberg, K, Cullinan, N, Hauptman, J and Serota, N. (Ed) *Henri Matisse: The Cut-Outs*. Tate Publishing. 2015.
[iii] Page 55. Kirby Talley Jr, M. Preservation in the Future: Any Reason For Optimism. *IADA*.
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[v] Page 88. *Agenda: A Journal About Women and Gender*
[vi] Page 106. https://www.historici.nl/resources/bwsa-biografisch-woordenboek-van-het-socialisme-en-de-arbeidersbeweging-nederland
[vii] Page 107. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_Democratic_Workers'_Party_(Netherlands)
[viii] Page 118. Mark James, Advocate HJB Vieyra (1902—1965) and his contribution to the Roman Catholic Church's stance on Apartheid. Thesis.
[ix] Page 125. Emma Brockes. 2014. She Left Me The Gun: My Mother's Life Before Me. Penguin.
[x] Page 130. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_Netherlands_Motorized_Infantry_Brigade