



# The Cut Out Girl

A Story of War and Family,  
Lost and Found

Bart van Es

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*The*

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*Cut Out*

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**ALSOBYBARTVANES**

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*Shakespeare's Comedies*

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*Shakespeare in Company*

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*A Critical Companion to Spenser Studies*

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*Spenser's Forms of History*

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**BARTVANCES**

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**penguinpress**

**29**

New York

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*for*

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*Charles de Jong and Catherine Spiero-de Jong*

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*and*

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*Henk van Es and Jannigje van Es-de Jong*

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01

**prologue:**

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*December 2014*

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Without families you don't get stories."

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The woman who tells me this stands making coffee in her

13

apartment in Amsterdam. Her name is Hesseline, Lien for short. She

14

is over eighty and there is still a simple beauty about her: a clear com-

15

plexion without noticeable makeup; a little silver watch but no other 16

jewelry; and shiny, unpainted nails. She is brisk in manner but also

17

somehow bohemian, dressed in a long dark gray cardigan with a flow-

18

ing claret paisley scarf. Before today I have no memory of ever having 19

met her. All the same, I know that this woman grew up with my fa-

20

ther, who was born in the Netherlands immediately after the War. She

21

was once part of my family, but this is no longer the case. A letter was 22

sent and a connection was broken. Even now, nearly thirty years later, 23

it still hurts Lien to speak of these things.

24

From her white open- plan kitchen we move to the seating area,

25

which is full of winter sunlight, filtered partly through stained glass 26

artworks that are fitted against the panes. There are books, museum

27

catalogs, and cultural supplements spread beneath a low glass coffee

28

table. The furniture is modern, as are the pictures on the walls.

29

We speak in Dutch.

S30

“You wrote in your e-mail about being interested in the family

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***Bart van Es***

01

history and about maybe writing a book,” she says. “Well, the family

02

thing doesn’t really play for me. The Van Esses were important in my

03

life for a long time, but not now. So what kind of writing do you do?”

04

Her tone is friendly but also business- like. I tell her a little about 05

my work as a Professor of English Literature at Oxford University—

06

writing scholarly books and articles on Shakespeare and Renaissance

07

poetry— but she knows most of this already from the internet.

08

“So what is your motivation?” she asks.

09

My motivation? I’m not sure. I think hers could be a complex and

10

interesting story. Recording these things is important, especially now, 11  
given the state of the world, with extremism again on the rise. There’s 12  
an untold story here that I don’t want to lose.

13

On this bright December morning we talk of world affairs, of Is-

14

rael, of Dutch politics, and about the situation in Britain, where David 15  
Cameron’s coalition government is nearing the end of its five- year

16

term. We move quickly from subject to subject, almost as in an inter-

17

view for a job.

18

After perhaps an hour she pushes away her empty cup and speaks

19

definitively:

20

“Yes, I have faith in this. Shall we sit at the table? Do you have a

21

notebook and pen?”

22

I had not wanted to arrive like a reporter, so I need to ask her for

23

paper and something to write with, but we are soon seated at the din-

24

ing table, which is made of pale laminate wood. I can ask anything I

25

want about what she remembers: what people said and did; what she

26

wore and what she ate; the houses she lived in; and what she dreamed.

27

We sit in the bright, warm modernity of the apartment and our

28

first meeting stretches on for hours. The documents— photographs,

29

letters, various objects— appear only gradually as she thinks of them, 30S

but by midafternoon, with the light outside already fading, the table is 31N

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### **the cut out girl**

covered in mementos. These include a children's novel with a bright

01

yellow cover featuring a steamboat, and a ceramic tile with a cartoon 02

on it of a drowning man. There is also a photo album of red imitation 03

leather that has a well- worn spine. On the first page of the album

04

there is a picture of a handsome couple with the words “Mamma” and

05

“Pappa” written beneath in blue pen.

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The woman in the photograph is Lien's mother, whose name is

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Catharine Spiero-de Jong. She is perched on the edge of a rattan chair, 25  
the curved back of which envelops her. The sun is full in her face and 26  
she is smiling a little shyly. Her husband, Charles, Lien's father, sits on 27  
the ground in front of her in his shirtsleeves, his large hands resting 28  
comfortably on his knees. He leans back against his wife, who has one 29  
of her hands on his shoulder, and he looks up with a confident,

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***Bart van Es***

01

ironical gaze. There is an air of nonchalance about him, laughing at

02

the idea of a posed photograph in a way that his wife, with her fixed 03  
smile, finds harder to do.

04

The man's confidence is also there in a few more photographs

05

pasted on the first page of the album. One shows him in the back of a 06  
motorcar, surrounded by a group of dapper young men. In secret he

07

holds his fingers, like bunny ears, behind the head of the friend who 08

poses in front of him with a pair of gloves and a cane.

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23

In another he stands, hat in hand, in front of a large black door-

24

way, his leg with its polished shoe thrust to the fore. There are about a 25 dozen of these early pictures. The most crumpled of them— torn,

26

folded, and restuck with yellowing glue— is of a beach party of twenty 27  
young men and women in bathing suits, smiling and embracing. A

28

woman in white at the center holds up what looks like a volleyball.

29

“Mamma, Pappa, Auntie Ro, Auntie Riek, and Uncle Manie” reads

30S

the handwritten text beneath.

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### **the cut out girl**

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01

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03

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06

holds his fingers, like bunny ears, behind the head of the friend who 07

poses in front of him with a pair of gloves and a cane.

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Although I am unpracticed at interviewing, a rhythm soon devel-

14

ops to our conversation. I ask countless questions, probing away at

15

some detail, scribbling down notes.

16

“What was the room like?”

17

“Where did the light come from?”

18

“What sounds could you hear?”

19

It is only when all the details of an episode are exhausted and she

20

can tell me nothing further that we move on.

21

Darkness has fallen by the time that Lien mentions her poesie al-

22

In another he stands, hat in hand, in front of a large black door-

bum: a kind of poetry scrapbook that nearly all girls in the Nether-

23

way, his leg with its polished shoe thrust to the fore. There are about a lands  
used to keep. At first she cannot find it, but then, after looking 24

dozen of these early pictures. The most crumpled of them— torn,

around in a side room, she suggests I stand on a chair and look on top 25

folded, and restuck with yellowing glue— is of a beach party of twenty of  
the bookshelf, where it lies wedged, kept safe from dust in a small, 26

young men and women in bathing suits, smiling and embracing. A

transparent plastic bag. It is a gray cloth album of around three by four 27

woman in white at the center holds up what looks like a volleyball.

inches with a faded pattern of flowers on the cover. Inside on the first 28

“Mamma, Pappa, Auntie Ro, Auntie Riek, and Uncle Manie” reads

of its facing pages there is a set of rhymes that are signed “your father”

29

the handwritten text beneath.

and dated “The Hague, 15 September, 1940.”

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**Bart van Es**

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They begin as follows:

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*This is a little book where friends can write*

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*Who wish for you a future bright*

17

*To keep you safe throughout the years*

18

*With many smiles and never tears.*

19

20

I stand for a moment reading the sloping hand. Opposite, on the

21

left, there are three old- fashioned paper cut outs in pastel colors: at 22  
the top, a wicker basket of flowers; and below, two girls in straw hats.

23

The one on the right smiles and looks happy, like Lien's mother in the 24  
photo, but the cut out girl on the left purses her lips as she clutches her 25  
posy. She glances sideways, as if unable to meet the viewer's eyes.

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*One*

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It is really Hitler who makes Lien Jewish. Her parents are members

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of a Jewish sports club (there is a team photo that shows her father

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dressed in thick socks and an open- necked shirt), but other than that, 14

they are not observant.

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They eat matzo at Passover and, under family influence, got mar-

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ried at a synagogue. Lien, aged seven, however, thinks more about

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the Dutch equivalent of Father Christmas, St. Nicholas, and still

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***Bart van Es***

01

remembers her fury at being told that he does not really exist. She

02

feels a trick has been played upon her by the adults and hides herself in 03

rage and embarrassment in the cupboard beneath the stairs that lead

04

to the apartment above.

05

That cupboard at 31 Pletterijstraat, The Hague, is just across the

06

hall from her bedroom, which faces you as you come in from the front

07

door. As you enter her room there is a line of four little windows right 08

up against the ceiling, too high to look out of, that give a rather dim 09  
light. These windows connect to the back bedroom, where her parents

10

sleep. The other bedroom, which looks out onto the road and con-

11

nects to the kitchen, is sublet by Mrs. Andriessen. She is elderly and 12  
rather a great lady, and, like everyone else, writes in Lien's poesie al-

13

bum. "Dear little Lien, remain obedient and good, / and all shall love 14  
you, as they should," she instructs the child. Lien pays more attention 15

to the flower pictures that are stuck in by Mrs. Andriessen than she

16

does to this wise advice.

17

By April 20, 1941, when Mrs. Andriessen writes her entry, it is not

18

easy for Jews to be obedient in occupied Holland. Jews must carry

19

identity papers stamped with a *J*; they are banned from the civil ser-

20

vice, from cinemas, cafés, and universities; Jewish ownership of a ra-

21

dio is a criminal offense. But for Lien things are still just about normal.

22

She goes to a mixed school and the children's names written in her

23

album with careful fountain pens are, for the most part, not Jewish:

24

“Let's remain friends forever, dear Lientje, what do you think of

25

that?” writes Ria.

26

“A sunny, happy life, may it remain yours forever” from “your girl-

27

friend, Mary van Stelsen.”

28

“Will you still remember me, even without this album page?” asks

29

Harrie Klerks.

30S

This last entry causes Lien some upset because, in spite of promis-

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ing to work tidily, Harrie blots and spoils a page of the album so that 8

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### **the cut out girl**

it needs to be cut out with a paper knife. Still, Lien generously gives 01  
him a second try.

02

Lien's real worries, if she could formulate them, are not about the

03

war but about her parents' marriage. When she was very young, just

04

two and a half, she had to leave the flat above a shop that they then 05

rented to go to live with Aunt Fie and Uncle Jo and their two children 06

in another part of town. Her parents got divorced. Mamma came to

07

visit her, but she did not see Pappa for a very long time. After two

08

years Mamma and Pappa got remarried and set up home in the Plet-

09

terijstraat, turning over a new leaf.

10

Pappa has stopped traveling as much as he did when he worked as

11

a salesman for grandpa and he makes an effort to stay home at night,

12

making children's puzzles out of wood at the table under the big light 13

in the kitchen. For Lien he makes a little painting of Jan Klaassen and 14

Katrijn, the Dutch Punch and Judy, which is her most treasured pos-

15

session. Jan Klaassen and Katrijn are sitting in the sunshine on top of 16

a gray cloud that is raining down beneath them, holding umbrellas

17

in their hands as they smile. Perhaps Jan Klaassen and Katrijn are a

18

little like Mamma and Pappa, who are happy now that they are out of

19

the rain?

20

Lien gets terrible stomachaches and does not like eating anything

21

except desserts. She has medicines from the doctor, and one time

22

when she got really thin she had to go and stay for six weeks in an

23

infirmary, where you have to drink a lot of milk and eat porridge. It 24

would be horrible to go back there, so she tries to eat as much as she 25

can of the farmer's kale- and- potato mash that Mamma makes her, but 26

it always takes a very long time.

27

For his new job Pappa has a little factory like grandpa's, which is

28

really no more than a shed and can be reached through the yard at the 29

back of the flat. He makes jams and pickles using vats of fruits and

S30

vegetables and various sizes of glass jars. Lien watches while Pappa

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***Bart van Es***

01

works, but she is not allowed to help because this is a very clean job 02

that children’s fingers might spoil. Instead she is mainly to be found 03

on the street singing nursery rhymes and playing games like “Where

04

shall I lay my handkerchief?” with children huddled in a circle and one 05

child going round and round until she finds someone to give the hand-

06

kerchief, who must then chase her to try to give it back. Lien loves this 07

kind of playing; she is almost always outside when there is sunshine

08

and will even put up with a bit of rain if there is fun to be had.

09

She also goes to ballet, which is very ladylike, and sometimes they

10

have shows. In Mamma and Pappa's bedroom there is a picture of her

11

in front of the stage scenery.

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26

It was taken after a performance: she is wearing her costume of

27

black skirt and white blouse and she holds up a glove puppet on her

28

right arm. The puppet is rather lumpy and bumpy and looks owlsh,

29

but it is supposed to be Mickey Mouse. Apart from the ballet costume, 30S

she loves her two best dresses. One is blue- gray silk, which she bought  
31N

with Mamma on a shopping trip to the Bonneterie, the enormous

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## the cut out girl

department store with glass doors and a high ceiling that swallowed

01

them up when they stepped inside. Its floors are so shiny you can see 02

your face in them, and when you look down from the inside balcony

03

onto the entrance hall the people below you look like ants. The other 04

favorite is a little bell- shaped dress (known as a clock dress) of satin, 05

with petticoats underneath that her mother made by hand.

06

Lien's world is a world of school, street games, and of grannies and

07

grandpas, aunts and uncles and cousins. There is family all around

08

them: at the end of short walks from the Pletterijstraat or at the end of 09

short rides on the tram. In the summer they take the tram to Scheve-

10

ningen, where they play on the beach. Pretty, the family dog, loves it 11

there— running as fast as she can on the wet sand, just touching the

12

water, leaving a long line of four- toed impressions for the sea to wash 13

away. When Lien throws a tennis ball for Pretty she gets it back, mo-

14

ments later, all soggy and sticky and covered in sand.

15

Her favorite cousins are Rini and Daafje. They are almost like a

16

brother and sister because Lien stayed with them for such a long time 17

when Mamma and Pappa could not be friends. On one of the many

18

days they spend together, Rini writes a short moral verse in the poesie 19

album about “taking people as they come.”

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**11**

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***Bart van Es***

01

The poem is not particularly appropriate as Lien does very little

02

judging of anything or anyone, but sometimes it's easier just to write 03

something standard, and that's fine if the handwriting and the

04

stuck-in pictures are beautiful, so Lien writes something moral and

05

improving in Rini's album as well.

06

And then there is Auntie Riek, with cousin Bennie and the two

07

little ones, Nico and baby Robbie, for whom Lien sometimes helps to

08

care. There is a photo of Aunt Riek and Mamma squeezed onto a

09

wooden chair, with Bennie (thumb in mouth) and Lien (with a white

10

bow in her hair) perched precariously on their laps.

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Mamma sits on one arm of the seat, holding Lien with her left

27

hand and Riek with her right. The chair looks terribly unsteady, the

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whole gang likely to topple over any minute, and though Mamma

29

maintains her serious camera smile you can see that her sister-in-law is 30S  
starting to laugh.

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12

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### **the cut out girl**

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01

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08

wooden chair, with Bennie (thumb in mouth) and Lien (with a white

09

bow in her hair) perched precariously on their laps.

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A favorite place is Uncle Manie's ironware shop nearer the center

16

of the city, filled to the ceiling with racks of screws, door knockers, 17  
hammers, and bicycle bells. One time Lien is given a beautiful pair of 18  
skates there, with white leather tops and long, sharp, silvery blades.

19

When it is winter Lien will be able to try them. She can already see

20

herself gliding without effort past other children, racing ahead in the 21  
sunshine, turning a pirouette on the ice.

22

23

24

War in May 1940, when Holland is invaded, comes out of a blue

25

Mamma sits on one arm of the seat, holding Lien with her left  
sky, in Lien's memory. Standing with her parents she sees planes up

26

hand and Riek with her right. The chair looks terribly unsteady, the

above and they tell her, “This is the war.” Apart from this, not much 27  
whole gang likely to topple over any minute, and though Mamma  
happens. There are German soldiers who sit at tables outside cafés and 28  
maintains her serious camera smile you can see that her sister-in-law is  
sometimes walk the streets. They are friendly. It is only slowly that 29  
starting to laugh.

things start to change.

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**13**

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***Bart van Es***

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From the autumn of 1941 onward the names in Lien’s poesie al-

02

bum become different. Or rather, they become more the same. Roosje

03

Sanders, Judith Hirsch, Ali Rosenthal, Jema Abrahams: those who

04

write their names from September ’41 to March ’42 are all unmistak-

05

ably Jewish, and this is because Lien now has to go to a Jewish school.

06

The poems they write are still about friendship, angels, and flowers, 07

but the pastel cut outs of bouquets and girls in crinolines, which were 08

stuck all over the early pages, are now rare. On September 15, 1941,

09

new signs appear outside libraries, markets, parks, museums, and

10

swimming pools: "Forbidden for Jews."

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**14**

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It is January 2015. Having met with Lien for one day in December,

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I have come back to the Netherlands for a few weeks to continue

13

our interviews. We have also decided that it would be good for me to

14

visit the places where she lived. This is to spark her memory with pho-

15

tos and also to get a sense of the locations myself. So I am on my way 16

to The Hague.

17

Historically speaking, The Hague was always considered a village

18

and not a city. The quiz question, What is the capital of the Nether-

19

lands? is difficult to answer because the Dutch talk of a “head city”

20

rather than of a “capital,” and the head city of the Netherlands is

21

indisputably Amsterdam. The Hague is merely the seat of govern-

22

ment. Though chosen as the meeting place of the States General of

23

the new republic at the end of the sixteenth century, it was not granted 24

the dignity of a university or even a town wall. The Protestant repre-

25

sentatives of the seven provinces who broke away from the Spanish

26

Empire met there precisely because it was neutral and unthreatening.

27

They held their meetings in a moated fortress, which is today still the 28

home of the Dutch parliament. In The Hague there is no great port or

29

tradition of trading, but all the same, its status as the birthplace of the S30

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***Bart van Es***

01

Low Countries is apt. The city sits on sand dunes and the remains of

02

a boggy shoreline that was first drained by subsistence farmers in the 03  
ninth century. Like so much of Holland, it was raised by human labor

04

from the North Sea.

05

Heading for The Hague I drive along motorways that slice through

06

the old sea floor, a monochrome carpet of identical squares. When

07

compared to England, where I have lived since I was a teenager, the

08

Dutch countryside feels seamlessly modern in its flat, perfectly orga-

09

nized uniformity. Every few minutes I pass a neat farmhouse of dark

10

reddish- brown brick with a sharply pitched roof. In the yards of these 11  
farmhouses there are spotless tractors and feed silos and none of the 12  
agricultural lumber that is found on the other side of the Channel.

13

Even the livestock looks standardized: rectangular cows all stamped

14

with variations of the same black and white. Straight, silvery ditches 15  
cut up the land into even portions that stretch into the morning mist.

16

As I reach the edge of the city, the farms are replaced by a succes-

17

sion of sleek steel- and- glass structures: car showrooms, distribution 18  
centers, noise barriers, and greenhouses inside which there is a con-

19

trolled environment of carbon dioxide and light. These buildings, just 20  
as much as the farms, feel almost artificial. Holland, when seen

21

through a car window, looks devoid of history of any kind.

22

Having turned off the motorway, I soon find myself in a district of

23

tired redbrick terraced housing. I park on the Pletterijstraat, the street 24  
on which Lien used to live. At the start of the last century, when these 25  
houses were built, the city was booming. Posters with Art Nouveau

26

illustrations promoted its virtues as a residential haven to farming folk 27  
from the overcrowded countryside and to immigrants from the colo-

28

nies and the Near East. The Hague, suddenly, was not just a city but a 29  
city for the world. In 1900 it became the home of what would soon be

30S

called the International Court of Justice, housed in splendor at the

31N

**16**

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**the cut out girl**

newly constructed Peace Palace. As it had been at its origin, it was, 01

once again, a neutral meeting place for great powers. The Pletteri-

02

jstraat, completed in 1912, held its place in this city of hope.

03

Today the street is still mainly residential, with a corner shop and

04

a couple of independent garages that sell secondhand cars. The

05

ground- floor flat at number 31 is now a small therapeutic gymnasium

06

with the logo Fysio Fitness splashed in yellow on its frosted glass. I 07

press the buzzer and wait until a tall young man in a tracksuit opens 08

the door. He is one of the gym instructors. Behind him in the lobby

09

are two older gentlemen in exercise clothing: bunched up shorts, faded 10

cotton jumpers, bright sneakers, and socks that are a bit too long.

11

I am left on my own in the little entrance hall, with the class

12

getting going in what used to be Mrs. Andriessen's room. I can hear

13

the exercise class in progress, with the instructor saying encouraging 14 things.

15

To the right there is the cupboard where Lien hid when she dis-

16

covered that St. Nicholas was not real. In front of me is her old bed-

17

room, now an office with health-care qualifications pinned up on the 18 walls. The windows let in some pale January light.

19

It does not take long to see the three-room apartment. Everything

20

is decent, ordinary, and of a reasonable size. Behind the office is the 21 bedroom of Lien's parents, which now contains a massage table and an

22

anatomical skeleton wearing a red knit hat with a pom-pom. Con-

23

nected to this is a galley kitchen with a kettle and some fitness leaflets 24 on the top. The scrubby backyard has become a storage place for ran-

25

dom objects: a metal bin, a snow scoop, a bicycle, some cinder blocks, 26  
a stack of plates, and some broken chairs. Looking over the fence I try 27  
to work out where Charles de Jong's little factory would have stood.

28

Having been in the flat for less than ten minutes, I make my way

29

out, waving politely to the gym instructor and the old men.

S30

N31

**17**

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***Bart van Es***

01

02

03

Back in the street and with nothing obvious to do next, I sud-

04

denly ask myself what I'm up to. Although I work as an academic, I am 05

no expert on Dutch history or on Nazi persecution. Is visiting the ad-

06

dresses where Lien's story takes me really research? Slightly on edge, 07

with that question hanging over me, I begin to walk down the street.

08

Toward the end of the interwar period this area was becoming in-

09

creasingly Jewish. In 1920, when the houses were new, there were just 10

seven Jewish families on the Pletterijstraat. By 1940 there were thirty-

11

nine. Almost directly opposite Lien's house stood the Jewish orphan-

12

age, which moved into its specially commissioned premises in 1929

13

and soon afterward began accepting German refugees. Thirty- five

14

thousand moved to the Netherlands after the Nazis took power in

15

Germany.

16

Those coming to these terraces in the twenties and thirties were

17

not the old Sephardic Jewish families who had escaped to the Nether-

18

lands from Portugal in the late fifteenth century. The newer arrivals 19

were German and Polish, but they too were following an established

20

route. Since the eighteenth century, many eastern Ashkenazi Jews,

21

whose first language was Yiddish rather than Hebrew, had migrated

22

to Holland. The first German or *Hoogduitsch* synagogue was built in 23

The Hague in the 1720s. Over the years, tens of thousands would

24

make their journey across the continent. Here there were no pogroms,

25

and it was possible to join guilds, to become a freeman of the city, and 26

even to pass the status of freeman down the family line. Although

27

there were areas of the city that were more Jewish than others, there 28

were no lines of division. From generation to generation, the immi-

29

grants took on the tastes and the habits of their compatriots and be-

30S

came straightforwardly Dutch. So when Napoleon took direct control

31N

of the Netherlands in 1811 and ordered the registration of surnames,

**18**

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### **the cut out girl**

many Jews took the opportunity to naturalize theirs. Joseph Izak,

01

for example, as a long- standing citizen, opted for the plain, native-

02

sounding “Joseph de Jong.”

03

The Portuguese, as the first settlers, remained distinct from these

04

newer, more working- class arrivals. They were a kind of aristocracy, 05

closely integrated with political power and trade. These Sephardic

06

Jews, who had emerged as moneylenders after 1179 when the Third

07

Lateran Council forbade the charging of interest among Christians,

08

had escaped southern persecution and prospered in the seventeenth

09

century in the great ports of Europe's northern coast. Though less

10

than 0.01 percent of the population, Dutch Sephardic Jews owned a

11

quarter of the sugar plantations in Surinam, and they were crucial to 12

the financial structures of the new republic. It was the Portuguese-

13

Jewish banker Isaac Lopez Suasso, for example, who advanced the

14

necessary two million guilders and arranged the hire of six thousand

15

Swedish mercenaries when William III of Orange set out to claim the

16

British Crown in 1688.

17

If anything, the Sephardic community in The Hague was even

18

more accepted than that in Amsterdam. It was here, in 1677, that the

19

skeptical Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza was buried in great

20

splendor in the Protestant New Church. This was an astonishing ges-

21

ture of acceptance, even if the church authorities broke up the grave 22

soon after for nonpayment of fees.

23

Village status, combined with its place as a royal residence, made

24

The Hague an easy place for special pleading. Thus when, in 1690,

25

there was a little local difficulty over some passages in the Talmud, a 26

solution was not hard to arrange. The problem involved the carrying

27

of objects in public on the Sabbath, which was clearly forbidden. The 28  
question, though, was what counted as “in public”? In Amsterdam it

29

had been decided that the whole city, as a walled unit, could reason-

S30

ably be defined as “a home.” The Hague, unfortunately, did not have

N31

**19**

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***Bart van Es***

01

town walls. Learned rabbis had determined, however, that if the two

02

stone bridges over its canals were to be replaced by drawbridges, then 03

The Hague too would, logically, be a home. In consequence, a Jewish

04

delegation approached the governing magistrate. Might the bridges

05

be modified at their cost? Two years later, in the true spirit of political 06  
accommodation, they were demolished and replaced.

07

German and Polish immigrants living in the Pletterijstraat in the

08

1920s and '30s were hardly in a position to incur such expenses, even 09  
supposing they had the commitment to that degree of ingenuity in

10

interpreting God's laws. Yet although not rich, the River District was 11  
perfectly pleasant. Then as now, it was a place of diversity, where dif-

12

ferent races and religions lived neighborly lives. There was, it is true, 13  
some resentment among non- Jews at the level of migration, and in

14

response the government had put a cap on numbers. Depending on

15

what circle you moved in, Jews could be feared as socialists, as capital-

16

ists, as Zionists, as poor and low skilled, or as rich and overqualified, 17

taking the best jobs. In the 1930s it could be hard for Jews to get a 18

restaurant booking. Still, even in 1937 there was only a 4 percent vote 19  
for the Dutch fascist party, the NSB.

20

21

22

Leaving the old orphanage behind me I take a turn off the

23

Pletterijstraat onto a side street, hoping to find a café. I pass a primary 24  
school with neat Jugendstil lettering over its doors announcing its year 25  
of completion: 1923. Since that time a mural has been added that

26

shows a giraffe looking out of a painted window with a smiling girl

27

seated on its back. At ground level there are other figures of children 28  
on the brickwork and a Plexiglas sign that tells me this is a Protestant 29  
Christian school. Further up the street I can see a kind of shopping

30S

precinct so I head up in that direction in search of a coffee.

31N

When I get there, I see that the precinct is something different

20

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### **the cut out girl**

from what I expected. It is as neat and tidy as it looked from a dis-

01

tance, with attractively lit shop fronts, but the rows of windows show 02

only women in lingerie perched on barstools with dark red, dimly lit

03

cubicles to the rear. Some of the windows have closed curtains; others 04

display messages such as sensual massage, two women, or kinky

05

sex. Across the street from me there is a steel outdoor urinal where

06

two men are urinating while they survey the scene.

07

As I walk through, feeling intrusive, it is difficult not to make eye 08

contact with the women. My gaze moves quickly from one window to

09

another and I am conscious of my presence as a time waster as well as 10

a representative of the general crowd of men. Behind the glass in the 11  
warm light and with their thick layers of makeup, the women look

12

almost ageless, like bored but desperate sales assistants hovering at the 13  
front of a shop. A blond young woman looks across at me, smiling,

14

and then, as I pass, goes back to checking her phone.

15

16

17

In three or four minutes I have passed through the precinct

18

and am back on the main road that leads to the station. From here I

19

can loop back to the Pletterijstraat and get to my car.

20

Once again I am struck by the strangeness of this familiar country,

21

which I left as a three- year- old forty years ago, returning only for the 22  
holidays every summer. I am now probably more English than any-

23

thing, which is why the neat precinct for prostitutes is so foreign to 24  
me. The Dutch are pragmatic about these matters: it is logical to have 25  
sex or drugs or euthanasia out in the open, honest and regulated, and 26  
if it ends up less than a hundred yards from a primary school that

27

cannot be helped.

28

This last hour, I feel, has been an immersion into the Low Coun-

29

tries: perfect motorways, a Protestant primary school, a red- light dis-

S30

trict, and the former home of a Jewish family, now converted into a

N31

**21**

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***Bart van Es***

01

physiotherapy gym. This is a country of tolerance: letting people get 02

on with things, not minding others' business if it does not interfere 03  
with your own. This makes the Netherlands progressive. But might it

04

also explain why the Germans were so often allowed to act as they

05

did? The Netherlands of the 1930s was still what was called a society 06

of "pillars": separate strands, such as the Protestants, the Catholics, 07

and the liberals, who brushed shoulders and exchanged polite greet-

08

ings, but who rarely went further than that. One followed the law and 09

kept things tidy. Everything else was another's business, no need to

10

interfere.

11

12

13

Of the eighteen thousand Jews in The Hague in 1940, two

14

thousand survived. Of the four hundred old Portuguese Jews, so

15

deeply embedded in the fabric of the state and the city, just eight re-

16

turned. The entire Jewish orphanage, which stands across the road

17

from me, was liquidated without survivors on March 13, 1943.

18

19

20

21

22

23

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30S

31N

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

01

02

*Three*

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11

Jew.” In May 1942 Lien sees her mother at the dining table in the

12

kitchen with a large sheet of yellow cloth. There is a pattern of

13

stars upon it with black outlines, each with a word printed at its cen-

14

ter: "Jew." Around every star there is a thin dotted line to make it

15

easier to cut out. They must now wear these stars on each item of

16

outside clothing, so Mamma carefully stitches a star reading "Jew"

17

onto the silk of the Bonneterie dress.

18

The children on the street, whom she knows, are the same as ever,

19

but those on the way to school are not so kind. Sometimes they throw

20

stones. Then one day a group of children runs up and grabs her, push-

21

ing her into a side street, chanting "We have caught a Jew." When she 22

does not come home, her father goes out to find her. The gang backs

23

away when it sees him, but once he takes her hand a bold lad edges

24

closer. "Dirty Jew," he mumbles, half embarrassed, poised and ready

25

to run off. Pappa ignores him but not with his normal calmness; there 26  
is a tremor to his fingers as he leads her away from the alley and back 27  
to the flat.

28

As they reach number 31 they see Mrs. Andriessen standing in the

29

stairwell of the apartment block, half out on the pavement, looking

S30

out for them. There is a worried, searching expression on her face and N31

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***Bart van Es***

01

then a tense half smile of relief when she sees Lien. This feels odd be-

02

cause Mrs. Andriessen is almost always to be found in her soap- scented 03

room. The old lady turns and calls something into the open door of

04

their flat, her cheeks shiny and red. She seems to be telling Mamma

05

that everything is all right. Lien suddenly thinks that because Mrs.

06

Andriessen is allowed to stay with them at the Pletterijstraat she must 07  
also be Jewish, like they are, though she is not sure about that.

08

Aunt Ellie, on the other hand, is not Jewish, because she is not

09

really an auntie, just a good friend of Mamma's who visits all the time 10  
even though she doesn't have to wear a star.

11

When the summer holidays come, Lien often stays in the yard or

12

the kitchen or on the outside stairs at the front of the house. She gets 13  
to know Lilly, who lives at number 29 upstairs. Lilly draws four evenly 14  
spaced pencil lines into the album and copies a poem perfectly onto

15

the middle of the page:

16

17

*Roses big and roses small*

18

*Soft as velvet on a wall*

19

*But the softest petal part*

20

*Is the rose of Lientje's heart.*

21

22

Lilly draws some extra lines crosswise on the left- hand corner of

23

the page: "I lay in bed and mucked about / so mum got cross and

24

started to shout." Every time they read it aloud to themselves they

25

start to giggle.

26

27

28

Then one evening in early august, still in the holidays,

29

Mamma comes into her bedroom, just as always, to tuck her in and

30S

kiss her good night. She sits down on the chair beside her, rests one 31N

24

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### **the cut out girl**

hand on top of the covers, and uses the other to stroke Lien's hair. "I 01

must tell you a secret," she tells her. "You are going to stay somewhere 02

else for a while."

03

There is a silence. Whatever comes after this becomes hazy, but

04

this sentence, spoken in her mother's voice, stays fixed. Lien remem-

05

bers that her mother was very lovely, and kind, and that she felt loved.

06

The excitement of the secret presses heavily the next morning

07

when Lien sits outside on the high stairway with Lilly and a few other 08  
children beside her, wanting very much to tell. It feels special to have 09  
a secret, but it is not fun to have to keep it for so long. When Mamma 10  
comes home Lien runs down the steps and catches up with her. “Can’t  
11

I tell?” she whispers. “I think it’s a really nice secret.” But Mamma 12  
won’t let her; it is very important that nobody else knows.

13

That evening there is a gathering of aunts and uncles, who squeeze

14

themselves into the kitchen, and then, as its gets ever fuller, find a 15  
place to look into it from the doorway of her parents’ room. It is not a 16  
birthday party because there are no other children (except for her and 17  
baby Robbie), but still Lien is the center of attention: she has the gooey 18  
taste of chocolate in her mouth, which is almost unfamiliar, and is

19

asked to sit on nearly everyone’s lap. For some reason she decides to 20  
behave badly, laughing in the high- pitched squeal that Mamma

21

doesn’t like as she points to a spot on Aunt Ellie’s nose, but, no matter 22

how much she squeals and points at people, she is not told off. Her

23

shrieks cut through the murmur of the other voices; the adults speak

24

low to each other and have eyes only for Lien. Everything goes so

25

quickly. There is no time for talking or even for thinking about the

26

questions that emerge and then edge away, just out of sight, in her

27

mind. It all feels rushed, but still the evening runs on for hours as a 28

succession of hugs and whispers; she is only half conscious of being

29

carried slumbering to her bedroom in her father's arms.

S30

N31

25

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***Bart van Es***

01

02

03

In the morning, soon after she has had her bread and cheese, there

04

is a lady at the door, even grander than Mrs. Andriessen and not so old.

05

She has a firm, jol y manner, just like the nurse at the doctor's surgery, 06

saying nice things about her and asking questions about her schoolwork 07

and about what books she enjoys. Lien is embarrassed that she does not 08

do much reading, though she remembers to say that she likes Jan Klaas-

09

sen and Katrijn. The lady is quite young, but not at all like a mother. It 10

is a real adventure to be going with her, the kind of adventure that gives 11

you a little feeling of sickness in your mouth. On the outside she is ex-

12

cited, but on the inside she feels calm. They are unstitching the stars 13

from her dresses, the two women's fingers moving very fast.

14

Lien can keep her own name and her surname, de Jong, but she

15

must not say anything about Mamma or Pappa or family. She is not to

16

be Jewish now, just a normal girl from Rotterdam whose parents have

17

been killed in the bombing. If anyone asks, she must say that the lady 18

is Mrs. Heroma and that she is taking her to her aunt who lives in

19

Dordrecht, which is a different town. It is important to stay very close 20

to the lady, hugged tight into her body so that nobody who knows her

21

can see that Lien is not wearing her star. Mamma says exactly the same 22

things as the lady and gets her to repeat them, even though Lien feels 23

she knows them already. Then, a kiss with a hug that hurts a little and 24

she is outside in the Pletterijstraat, walking fast in step with the lady, 25

trying hard to keep herself pressed into her coat. The little bag of her 26

things, including her poesie album and Pappa's puzzle, is over Mrs.

27

Heroma's shoulder and bangs its edge against her with every stride.

28

29

30S

It is not far from lien's house to the station, so their walk

31N

through the streets and then through the park (where Jews are

26

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### **the cut out girl**

forbidden) to the Hollands Spoor railway station is over almost as

01

soon as it starts. The station front looks like a palace, but there is no 02

time to look at it because their train is about to depart. Lien thinks for 03

a moment about her bedroom, close enough for her to run back.

04

Mrs. Heroma talks to her about funny place- names. There are lots

05

in Holland, she says. For example, the Double Sausage Street in Am-

06

sterdam, the Mustache in Groningen, or Ducksick Road in Zeeland.

07

There is also a road called Behind the Wild Pig. Lien thinks these

08

names are funny. She likes Mrs. Heroma and giggles as they watch

09

the houses of The Hague pass faster and faster through the window of

10

the train compartment, the *kchunk- kchunk* of the wheels on the railway 11

growing louder and closer together. The smoke from the locomotive is

12

dirty but it smells clean. “Does Lien know any funny place- names?”

13

After a lot of thinking, she remembers Cow Thief Street, which Mrs.

14

Heroma had not known about. “Cow Thief Street, that’s a good one!”

15

Mrs. Heroma says. Lien is about to say, “It’s not far from our house”

16

when she stops herself just in time.

17

18

19

Unlike The Hague, Dordrecht has only one railway station. It is

20

also like a palace, only a bit smaller, without the princess towers of the 21

station they left behind. They walk through another park— bigger

22

than theirs at home and sleepy in the afternoon sunlight— then

23

through streets with little houses, nothing at all like the three- story 24

apartments of The Hague. Her legs are tired now and it takes a bit

25

longer each time to get to a new corner, but at each one Mrs. Heroma

26

tells her the street name and then a funny one from somewhere else in 27

Holland, so Lien presses on. Mauritsweg (Trousers Street), Krispi-

28

jneweg (Buttermountain Street), and finally Bilderdijkstraat (Rab-

29

bitpipe Street), and they have arrived. All the houses that Lien has

S30

passed seemed little compared to the city, but these ones in the

N31

27

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***Bart van Es***

01

Bilderdijkstraat are the littlest of all. In fact the street doesn't really 02  
look like it has houses, it just has two long, low, redbrick walls with 03  
doors and windows set in it, stretching as far as Lien can see.

04

In the road a group of boys is running and shouting. Mrs. Heroma,

05

ignoring the commotion, walks straight to the door of number 10 and

06

knocks hard on the little round windowpane. In her coat pocket, un-

07

beknownst to Lien, there is a letter. It is written in the same steady 08

hand that her mother used on the second page of the little girl's al-

09

bum. The letter, which still survives in Lien's apartment in Amster-

10

dam, is dated August 1942. It reads as follows:

11

12

*Most Honored Sir and Madam*

13

*Although you are unknown to me, I imagine you for myself as a*

14

*man and a woman who will, as a father and mother, care for my*

15

*only child. She has been taken from me by circumstance. May you,*

16

*with the best will and wisdom, look after her.*

17

*Imagine for yourself the parting between us. When shall we ever*

18

*see her again? On 7 September she will be nine. I hope it will be a 19*

*joyful day for her.*

20

*I want to say to you that it is my wish that she will think only of 21  
you as her mother and father and that, in the moments of sadness*

22

*that will come to her, you will comfort her as such.*

23

*If God wills it, we will all, after the war, shake one another by 24  
the hand in joyous reunion. Directed to you as the father and*

25

*mother of:*

26

*Lientje*

27

28

29

30S

31N

**28**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 28

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Augustus, 1911

Mijn Geachte Heer en Mevrouw,

Alhoewel persoonlijk geheel onbekend, heb ik mij door een man in een brief, die als de vader en moeder van mijn zoon leest, weten van uw omstandigheden, even als zij afgegaan, naar beide zijden in water stelde langere.

Stelt ik vast om, dat afgeleide tusschen hem en ons, kunnen stellen, dat hem een van? of afgeleide wordt hij, nogal juist, dat loep, dat het om hem een beetje volk, dat zal worden.

Trouw afgeleid ik de laatste uit, dat zij de geest als een vader en moeder zal bepalen, en dat ik hem in een grootje opgeleide, die opgeleide alle hem te de, verdere, dat hem bevoelt.

Als God wil, zullen we elkaar allen na de ontbijt de lous, welke in Bly en gelukkig wezen.

Uw loyale vader en moeder en

Leidy

## the cut out girl

01

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S30

N31

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01

02

*Four*

03

04

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10

11

I am on a train approaching Dordrecht (colloquially known as Dordt),

12

the city to which Lien was brought in the late summer of 1942. Seen

13

from the railway bridge before we pull into the station, its Great

14

Church rises up between pretty gabled houses, beyond which lie har-

15

bors and a heavy industrial zone. Though small by today's standards,

16

with a population of around one hundred twenty thousand, this was

17

once the biggest city in Holland. Built on an island that was created by 18

a confluence of rivers, its heyday lies back in the fifteenth century, 19

when it became a natural center for the handling of agricultural goods.

20

For a while it was a merchant city. The silt- filled rivers, however, 21

proved unsuitable for the larger ships that soon became necessary for 22

ocean trading, which meant that, over time, Dordt was overtaken by

23

its larger westerly neighbor, Rotterdam.

24

It was here rather than in The Hague that Dutch independence

25

really started. In 1572 the city hosted the First Assembly of the Free States, at which William of Nassau, Prince of Orange, announced his

27

open rebellion against the Spanish king. It was also here, at the Synod of Dordt, that the new republic, having proved victorious, decided on

its state religion. From 1618 to 1619 the Protestant churches of Eu-

S30

rope gathered to debate the great theological questions. On the one

N31

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***Bart van Es***

01

side stood the followers of Arminius, who felt that some kind of ac-

02

commodation with Catholicism might be possible: perhaps grace (that

03

great act of divine forgiveness for man's innate sinfulness) could in-

04

deed be fostered by human action, such as penitence or good deeds?

05

Opposing them were the Calvinists, who insisted on what they termed

06

the total depravity of human beings. According to Calvin, only a small 07

band of individuals, already chosen by God before the beginning of

08

time, would be saved from damnation, no matter how fervently the

09

others might try to join that “elect.” The synod ended in a Calvinist 10

triumph and only four days after its conclusion the main protector of 11

the Arminians, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, was led to execution on the

12

block. Total depravity was thus confirmed.

13

14

15

After leaving the functional interior of the station, I

16

look back over my shoulder at its classical facade and then head down 17

the main street into town. My plan is to begin by visiting the small

18

local war museum. It is only a short walk, first through an area of

19

modern office blocks and then through a set of pretty medieval streets 20

that are full of cyclists and shoppers. At this hour of the morning

21

these are mostly retired couples wearing practical clothing such as

22

jogging bottoms and zip-up raincoats in bright artificial colors, like 23

purple, lime green, and pink.

24

The museum, which is located in a town house across from the old

25

harbor, is like hundreds of others: a little faded and cramped, with over-

26

bright lighting so that nothing looks real. In the entrance hall, pride of 27

place is given to an army jeep that stands in the middle of the foyer on a 28

dais of artificial grass. Stiff mannequins sit inside it. Their clean hel-

29

mets have tightly fitting chinstraps and they smile, eyes forward, like 30S  
Lego men. Behind, there are maps showing the German landings

31N

and then the Allied liberation. Bold arrows show troop movements

**32**

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### **the cut out girl**

accompanied by numbers and dates. Elsewhere there are photographs

01

and display cases full of weapons, documents, and medals.

02

Dordrecht was one of the towns that saw real fighting when the

03

Germans invaded. Paratroopers were dropped at first light on May

04

10, 1940, to seize the bridges. The city had a garrison of fifteen hun-

05

dred soldiers, but the Dutch army, which had not fought a real war for 06

more than two centuries, was spectacularly ill prepared. Few of the

07

men had received full combat training and much of their ammunition

08

was locked in a central depot for safekeeping, so they had only a min-

09

imal supply of rounds. In the early hours, many of the defenders sim-

10

ply looked up to the sky in awe of the Junkers bombers. Others wasted 11

their supply of bullets trying to shoot them down.

12

All the same, once the shock of the landing abated, there were

13

pitched battles. On day one, dozens of German assault troops were

14

killed or wounded and around eighty were taken prisoner and shipped

15

to England just in time. Then on May 13, around twenty Panzers

16

rolled into the city, of which fifteen were disabled at the cost of

17

twenty- four Dutch lives. After just four days of fighting, however,

18

Dordt, like the rest of the Netherlands, surrendered and the troops

19

spent the last of their energy destroying their own equipment to pre-

20

vent it from falling into enemy hands.

21

22

23

As the sole visitor to the museum, I feel a little intrusive.

24

Around me the men who work here (I should imagine on a voluntary

25

basis) are checking stock lists, cleaning objects from the display cases, 26

and reorganizing the small library of books about the war. As I stand 27

scanning the battered spines, I turn to a man in a blue shirt with white 28

hair who is sorting piles of volumes at a desk. He looks up, pleased at 29

my interest in history and still more so when I tell him about Lien and S30

her journey here from The Hague. At the mention of Mrs. Heroma,

N31

33

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***Bart van Es***

01

who brought Lien to Dordrecht, a look of recognition crosses his face.

02

He asks what information I have.

03

On my laptop, which I take from my suitcase, there is a photo-

04

graph of a document: a yellow sheet of lined A4 paper covered in jot-

05

tings, some crossed out. It is headed “What should play a role in the 06

construction of a new law?” The document is in the hand of Mrs.

07

Heroma, and I took the photo of it in Amsterdam. It came to Lien

08

after Mrs. Heroma’s death. By the time these jottings were made, long 09

after the war, Dieuke Heroma- Meilink (known as “Took” to her

10

friends) was a Labor politician, first in parliament and then at the UN.

11

The annotations on the paper are practical, with Lien cited only briefly 12

as a case of an only child who had to join a larger family. A detail

13

makes the situation human: as Lien’s mother pulled the front door

14

shut at the Pletterijstraat, Mrs. Heroma heard her beginning to sob.

15

The man calls others toward him and soon a small group is look-

16

ing over my shoulder at the document on the screen. As I scroll

17

through the images on my computer— the poesie album, the letters,

18

and the photographs— a strong feeling of shared interest fills the

19

room. The one who really knows about this, I am told, is Gert van

20

Engelen, a local journalist who also works for the museum. E-mails

21

are sent and messages are left on answerphones and meanwhile the

22

group checks indexes and databases, giving suggestions as to where I

23

might go to find out more. They feel almost like friends. By midafter-

24

noon I have a list of Web sites and publications and am watching a

25

video recorded by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

26

twenty- five years ago in which Mrs. Heroma, somewhat reluctantly,

27

reveals the things that she and her husband did during the war.

28

29

30S

In the 1930s the Heromas lived in Amsterdam, where Jan Heroma,

31N

having first completed a degree in psychology, was studying at medical 34

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### **the cut out girl**

who brought Lien to Dordrecht, a look of recognition crosses his face.

01

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after the war, Dieuke Heroma- Meilink (known as "Took" to her

09

friends) was a Labor politician, first in parliament and then at the UN.

10

The annotations on the paper are practical, with Lien cited only briefly  
school. The two of them were political y progressive, deciding to live 11

as a case of an only child who had to join a larger family. A detail

together rather than get married, sharing a flat with the future socialist 12

makes the situation human: as Lien's mother pulled the front door

health minister Irene Vorrink (who was to become famous for decrimi-

13

shut at the Pletterijstraat, Mrs. Heroma heard her beginning to sob.

nalizing recreational drugs in 1976). Having trained as a social worker, 14

The man calls others toward him and soon a small group is look-

Took was employed by a trade union to provide political education for 15

ing over my shoulder at the document on the screen. As I scroll

working- class women. At night in the flat, at a small desk with a type-

16

through the images on my computer— the poesie album, the letters,  
writer, she translated German academic literature written by Jews into 17  
and the photographs— a strong feeling of shared interest fills the  
Dutch. This was necessary because, without these translations, Ger-  
18

room. The one who really knows about this, I am told, is Gert van  
man Jewish academics, persecuted at home by the Nazis, would find it  
19

Engelen, a local journalist who also works for the museum. E-mails  
difficult to find jobs in the Netherlands. To the Heromas, liberal, polit-  
20

are sent and messages are left on answerphones and meanwhile the  
ical y neutral Hol and seemed a natural place of refuge.

21  
group checks indexes and databases, giving suggestions as to where I  
By the time of the invasion, Jan Heroma had his own medical

22  
might go to find out more. They feel almost like friends. By midafter-  
practice in Dordrecht, in an elegant white terraced house at 14 Dub-

23

noon I have a list of Web sites and publications and am watching a  
beldamseweg. An extra door had been fitted to allow patients direct

24

video recorded by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum  
access to the waiting room at ground level, and from there they could 25

twenty- five years ago in which Mrs. Heroma, somewhat reluctantly,  
cross straight to the doctor's study. The couple themselves lived in an 26

reveals the things that she and her husband did during the war.

apartment upstairs.

27

At first, the German invaders did little to disturb ordinary life

28

in the Netherlands. They took over the reins of power (appointing

29

In the 1930s the Heromas lived in Amsterdam, where Jan Heroma,

Arthur Seyss- Inquart as Reichskommissar in charge of the civil ad-

S30

having first completed a degree in psychology, was studying at medical  
ministration), but the structure of government and the operation of

N31

35

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***Bart van Es***

01

services such as the police, the school system, shops, churches, and

02

businesses remained more or less the same. Anti- Jewish measures

03

ramped up over time almost imperceptibly: exclusion from air- raid

04

shelters, an “Aryan Declaration” for members of the civil service, a

05

requirement for the registration of all Jews. Then, from February

06

1941, mass arrests began, slowly at first. Those whom the Heromas

07

had brought to apparent safety in their own country were now under

08

threat, and the translations and new posts in the universities they had 09

once provided were no longer of use.

10

From November 1941 onward, regular ads were placed in the bot-

11

tom left- hand corner of the classifieds page of the local paper. Next to 12

announcements from the dentist, the fashion boutique, and the con-

13

cert hall, there were notices such as this:

14

15

**J. F. HEROM A**

16

physician

17

*change of*

18

*consultation hours*

19

On Krispijn at 11 o'clock

20

daily, apart from Saturdays;

21

private consultation

22

daily from 1.30 to 2 o'clock

23

24

Where it mattered, people knew what these messages meant.

25

Across Holland, as the occupation gained in intensity, networks

26

were being constructed to resist the Nazis: delicate lines of trust that 27

connected couples like the Heromas in Dordrecht to distant others

28

whom they had never met. These webs often clung to the holdfasts of

29

prewar society, such as medical associations, student fraternities,

30S

churches, and political groups. Jan Heroma was a doctor and a mem-

31N

ber of the Social Democratic Workers' Party and also the friend of

**the cut out girl**

many Jews in the academic world. This made the house at 14 Dubbel-

01

damseweg a point of intersection. The little car that the Heromas

02

owned made them unusually mobile, so that journeys between the

03

houses of patients, sometimes far out into the countryside, traced

04

fragile, invisible strands.

05

As Jan Heroma and his wife ferried people across the country and

06

kept them hidden in their basement, others too were beginning to

07

take action as part of networks in different towns. Jooske de Neve, for 08

example, part of a resistance group called the Unnamed Entity, sat on 09

trains from Amsterdam accompanying groups of children, herself

10

shaking with a feverish headache of fear. Speaking long afterward,

11

she recalled that she could always detect the moment at which other

12

passengers recognized the quiet cluster of boys and girls as Jewish.

13

She just had to hope that they would not tell. Once, a set of train

14

guards began moving through the carriage, checking IDs and tickets.

15

A wave of panic overcame her, andAun she ran to the toilet and

16

flushed her pack of false identity cards (which she was ferrying in ad-

17

dition to the children) onto the tracks below. It haunted her conscience 18

forever afterward that these false papers were found.

19

In Utrecht, Hetty Voûte, a biology student, joined a group that

20

called itself the Children's Committee. Searching for addresses to

21

hide young boys and girls now separated from their parents, she cycled 22  
around the countryside calling at random on farmers for help.

23

As she stood at the gate of one farmhouse the owner told her, "If it

24

is God's wish that those children are taken, then that is God's wish."

25

Hetty looked straight at him. "And if your farm burns down to-

26

night, then that is also God's wish," she replied.

27

Back home in the bookcase in her room she had a leather volume

28

with the title *The Assembled Tales of John Galsworthy* stamped on the 29  
spine. Within, there lay hidden a system of index cards that recorded S30  
the names and addresses of the 171 Jewish children she had saved.

N31

***Bart van Es***

01

Around the same time, in Limburg, at the southern tip of the

02

country, another farmer was being presented with children to shelter, 03

starting with a three- year- old girl who was left at his door. Looking 04

back, one can see that it was hard for this man, Harmen Bockma, to

05

keep his head above water. He already had a milk round early each

06

morning and worked shifts at the local mine to make ends meet. To

07

hide children he would need special spaces in his farmhouse, which

08

would take money as well as time. And so, in order to get the paid

09

leave from the mine that would be necessary for the work to be com-

10

pleted, Harmen Bockma cut off part of a finger from his own hand.

11

More stories such as these are to be found in the museum and in

12

the Dordrecht municipal library. In a high- ceilinged café I talk with 13

Gert van Engelen as he writes down e-mail addresses and phone

14

numbers in my notebook and suggests places of wartime significance

15

that I might visit beyond and within the town.

16

Two final stories stick with me. One is the case of Ger Kempe, a

17

student doing the rounds in search of funding for a resistance group

18

hiding children in late 1942. Having knocked at an unknown door, an

19

old lady answered and tentatively invited him in. Perched on a sofa in 20

her sitting room, the young man delivered a speech that was met with

21

awkward silence. The woman waited for a long time, giving no an-

22

swer, then eventually told him to come back in a few days' time. When 23

he did so, expecting little or nothing, the old lady gave him sixteen 24

hundred guilders: a fortune that saved many lives.

25

The second story concerns a number of female students. By late

26

1942 the situation for the remaining Jews in the Netherlands had be-

27

come utterly desperate, so much so that mothers were now leaving ba-

28

bies and young children on doorsteps in the hope that they would be

29

taken in. The German authorities, aware of this trend, put out an offi-

30S

cial notice: from now on, all foundlings would be assumed to be Jewish

31N

and even those who had earlier been accepted and adopted by Aryan

**38**

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## **the cut out girl**

families were to be hunted down by the police. The group of young

01

students could see only one solution. They would register Jewish ba-

02

bies as their own children, fathered by German soldiers. This would

03

bring the certainty of safety, but also, of course, tremendous shame to 04

the women themselves. Years afterward, An de Waard retold the story

05

of her experience at the registry office, where she was made to wait on 06

public view for a very long time. Eventually, under the clerk's con-

07

temptuous gaze, she was able to register the child as William, a royal 08

name, which for her was a little gesture of resistance. Like the five 09

other babies saved in this manner, William survived the war.

10

11

12

Meanwhile, in Dordrecht, the Heromas continued to ferry, to

13

care for, and to hide Jews of all ages, although they were increasingly 14  
fearful that their activities were being tracked. Once, Jan Heroma

15

headed out to look after a sick Jewish woman in hiding who, in spite

16

of his best efforts, died of natural causes after several hours. As there 17  
was no way to remove her body without its being noticed, he dug a

18

secret grave for her in the back garden under cover of night. In another 19  
case, he and Took rushed out to a house that had been hit by Allied

20

bombing, aware that a Jewish couple was hidden inside. They guided

21

the couple back to the Dubbeldamseweg, where they hid them in the

22

cellar. After this, Jan went out in his little car to fetch the bombed- out 23  
couple's daughter, who had been taken to a farmhouse far away. At

24

first the little girl, long separated, did not recognize her mother. Then, 25  
when she suddenly did, her delighted screams of recognition brought

26

terror of discovery to the house.

27

For months all went well, but then one night there was a knock at

28

the door. A group of policemen stood waiting outside. In the dead of

29

night, with Jews still hidden in the cellar, Jan Heroma was led away to S30  
prison and an uncertain fate.

N31

**39**

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***Bart van Es***

01

02

03

During my time in Dordrecht I visit many places, but it is

04

only toward dusk on the final day, just before taking the train back to 05

The Hague, that I head to the Bilderdijkstraat to see the address

06

where Lien first arrived in the town. It is a ten- minute walk from the 07

station, so I go there trundling my suitcase, first through the park in 08

the weakening sunshine and then along the broad pavements of a sub-

09

urban trunk road that is beginning to fill with commuter traffic.

10

The Bilderdijkstraat itself is narrow and rather gloomy. For the

11

first fifty yards both sides of the street have high, gray panel fencing 12

that is faded and marked by graffiti tags. After this, on the left, it 13

opens out onto an urban playground filled with the smooth- edged

14

concrete of bicycle and skateboard ramps. I come to a halt and look out 15

at the empty swings and slides, which are of a high- quality polished 16

metal that makes them look like abstract works of art. A few trees

17

grow on little islands of gray soil surrounded by asphalt, but there is no 18  
grass. About half a dozen teenage boys of North African appearance

19

sit chatting, perched on the seats of their bikes. Across the way, a

20

corner shop advertises cheap international dialing and halal meats.

21

Since the 1970s the Netherlands has become a country of immi-

22

gration. One fifth of the population was either born outside the bor-

23

ders or are the children of those who were. Integration, especially

24

among the two million that are of non- Western origin, has, on the

25

whole, been only moderately successful, and that feeling of isolation is 26  
evident on this street.

27

Looking for number 10, I begin scanning the doorways, my suit-

28

case clunking on the pavement slabs. Toward the end of the road there 29  
is a block of new terraced housing, different from the low- rise brick 30S  
tenements that surround it. Some of this is occupied, but other parts 31N  
have steel grilles over the windows that seem to have been there for a 40

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### **the cut out girl**

good while. The new build has confused the number system, so I end

01

up walking along the same stretch of pavement again and again.

02

While the boys on bicycles are in no way threatening, they regard me

03

with increasing interest as an oddity, as well they might.

04

By the time I decide that number 10 stood on what is now the

05

playground, the sun is casting long shadows across the street. I reach 06

for my phone and take a few pictures, first of the concrete skateboard 07

ramp with the spindly trees around it and then of the row of houses

08

that stands opposite. The entire terrace is a single flat- roofed unit. It is 09

as if its long front wall was rolled in some factory and then had win-

10

dows and doors punched out of it by an enormous machine.

11

As I return the phone to my pocket, a door opens and a middle-

12

aged man in a kameez comes toward me asking suspiciously, with a

13

heavy accent, what I am doing. Meanwhile, the boys on bicycles begin

14

to hover round. Faced with their questions I am suddenly evasive, ex-

15

plaining in a vague manner that I am conducting research about the

16

Second World War.

17

Why is it that I do not tell this man about Lien as I did at the Plet-

18

terijstraat? I have done so at addresses across Dordrecht, where I have 19  
sat happily chatting in people's front rooms over the last few days.

20

Why do I feel guilty here?

21

It is because I sense a distance between us. It is because I assume

22

that Jewish history will not be welcome in this place.

23

“You ought not to be spying on people,” the man tells me, and as

24

he says this I suddenly see myself from the outside, with my wheeled

25

suitcase and my phone camera, and my scuffed, expensive, brown

26

leather shoes. Perhaps if I had told the full story this might have forged 27

a connection? Instead, we retreat away from each other, equally ner-

28

vous, and I head out again toward the commuter traffic on the main

29

road where the cars have now switched on their lights.

S30

Walking back to the station, I am reminded of the obvious fact

N31

**41**

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***Bart van Es***

01

that the Muslim community, in terms of the hatred directed toward

02

them, is probably closer to the Jews of the previous century than any 03

other. There are no easy parallels, but all the same, the language of 04

Geert Wilders (whose Party for Freedom has hit 15 percent in na-

05

tional elections) has an air of the 1930s to it. According to Wilders 06

there should be a ban on the Koran and on the building of mosques.

07

He has called the prophet Mohammad a “pedophile” and he calls Is-

08

lam “evil.” He has spoken of the threat of an “Islamic invasion” and

09

wants no more Muslims to enter the country at all. He has even de-

10

manded the abolition of Article 1 of the Dutch Constitution, which

11

outlaws discrimination on the grounds of religion. It is hardly surpris-

12

ing, given this background, that the inhabitants of the Bilderdijkstraat 13

should feel suspicious. All the worse then, that I came here trundling 14

a suitcase, pointing a camera, only to look and not to tell.

15

16

17

18

19

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21

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25

26

27

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29

30S

31N

**42**

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01

02

*Five*

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

Everything is different. The family in the Bilderdijkstraat in Dor-

12

drecht have a *mooie kamer*, a room at the front of the house that is 13

kept for special occasions and for the rest of the time stays unused, 14

cool and dark. After a few months of staying there Lien gets very ill 15

with suspected tuberculosis, and she lies there on the sofa for days on 16

end, watching the light of the day brighten and fade through the cur-

17

tains, waves of cold and heat shaking her frame. "Auntie," as she is

18

told to call the mother of the new household, brings clear soup in a

19

teacup with a piece of toast that cuts when it touches her throat. She 20

washes Lien's face with a damp towel and helps her to sit up. The

21

room, like the rest of the tiny single-story apartment, is sparsely fur-

22

nished, with just two chairs facing the sofa on which she lies. Beside 23  
the unlit coal burner there is one precious object: a cabinet of dark 24  
polished wood with a china teapot and matching cups set out on top.

25

The cups, which are never used, are pure white inside and they gleam

26

even when the curtains are closed. If she picks one up and holds it to 27  
her eye, ever so gently, she can see her reflection in it. The curved 28  
sides of the cup bend the walls of the room so that they surround her 29  
like a burrow.

S30

When you are ill the whole world exists at a distance. She senses

N31

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***Bart van Es***

01

movement outside on the street through the curtains and the front

02

windows: men calling in the Dordt accent, so different from her own.

03

At the end of nearly every sentence they say “Hey.” As the children

04

arrive from school there is noise from the adjoining kitchen: voices, a 05

chair scraping, a tap running. “Be quiet! Lien is asleep next door, hey!”

06

The kitchen is where the house comes to life. Mothers and children

07

enter without knocking from the back of the house, bringing friends

08

and news. Auntie’s voice is the loudest. “Do you know what they are

09

charging for mincemeat at the butcher’s?” “Nell is getting her meat

10

straight from the farm, Kokkie told me, hey?” Movement here is

11

rougher than it was in Lien’s old house. There is banging of pots and 12

cutlery and if Kees behaves badly his father will give him a whack on 13

the arm. But everyone is welcome, the neighbors are friends and there 14

are always new voices at the dinner table. The men talk of workers'

15

rights and of the bosses at the factory with a sense of confidence and 16  
strength. A strong smell of cigarettes pushes its way into the silence of 17  
the front room.

18

19

20

Even though it happened a few months after she first ar-

21

rived, Lien's strongest memory of the house in the Bilderdijkstraat is 22  
that of being hot and feverish in the *mooie kamer*. When Mrs. Heroma 23  
first brought her, she also went to the *mooie kamer*, sitting on the sofa, 24  
looking across at Auntie, a big woman with a rosy- cheeked face, who 25  
told Lien about her new cousins. Besides Lien, there are three other

26

children in the household: Ali, who is eleven; Kees, who is nine; and 27  
little Marianne, who is nearly two. Ali and Kees first had a different 28  
mother, but she died.

29

After their talk in the front room, Mrs. Heroma says good- bye,

30S

leaving Lien behind with Auntie, who takes her through into the back

31N

of the house. In the kitchen Lien is absorbed into the hubbub. Because **44**

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### **the cut out girl**

there are so many people coming and going it is impossible to feel like 01

a guest for long. As she enters, little Marianne totters on uncertain 02

legs in the corner, half supervised by Ali, and then slumps into a heap.

03

Lien feels grown up as she crouches to comfort her and she and Ali

04

soon have the little girl in fits of laughter. When Lien does a ballet 05

dance Marianne sits rapt with attention, looking up with adoring eyes.

06

At bedtime, from Auntie's arms, Marianne gives Lien several wet

07

kisses, leaving a little trail of cold baby spit on her cheek.

08

The first dinner is not so easy. She is given a deep plate with a

09

mountain of potatoes, sprouts, and a meatball, all covered in gravy.

10

Everyone is already eating— the talk continues uninterrupted except

11

for the regular scrape of spoons. Lien toys with a potato. The digestive 12

medicine, which Mamma normally gives her with a glass of water

13

before a meal, is in her bag. She raises her hand to ask if she can go 14

and get it. It takes a long time for her to be noticed but eventually 15

Auntie calls out in her loud voice to ask what she wants. “Medicine?”

16

Auntie loudly repeats the word as if it is something in a foreign lan-

17

guage. Lien slips away to fetch the brown bottle and holds it out, label 18

first, so as to explain. Auntie’s rosy face is all scrunched up with suspi-

19

cion as she examines this object that Lien has brought into her house.

20

Then she delivers her verdict. “You don’t need this, you can just eat 21  
your dinner with everyone else, hey,” Auntie tells her and pours the

22

thick white liquid into the sink. Returning to the stove, Auntie con-

23

tinues to take part in the conversation, turning only briefly to instruct 24

Kees not to bolt his food.

25

Around her, the plates are already emptying. The moment one is

26

finished, Auntie reaches over the seated person, picks up the plate,

27

brings it to the sink for a vigorous wash, then returns it steaming with 28

fragrant tapioca. Gradually the kitchen fills with the smell of the hot 29

pudding. Lien would like to leave her sprouts and potatoes and move

S30

on to her sweet, which was often what happened at home. The boy

N31

45

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

Kees, nearly finished, has stopped eating— he looks over at her with a 02  
conspiratorial, comradely air. Auntie, though, gives short shrift to the 03  
rebellion. The last of the tapioca is scraped from the pan and divided 04  
among the existing pudding eaters, who barely notice the ladle as it

05

reaches down over their heads. Plates are cleared and not a word is

06

spoken about the uneaten sprouts and potatoes. Lien is dumbfounded

07

and feels a hollowness inside her— it is all so different— but she joins 08  
Kees and Ali to head outside.

09

After dinner they are allowed to play for another hour. Kees takes

10

Lien with him and introduces her to his fellows. He seems proud of

11

her. He is certainly proud of his ability to walk on the crumbling brick 12  
wall in the wasteland beyond the houses and scoffs when she notices

13

afterward that he has cut his knee. Lien merges easily with the group 14  
of children who stand watching Kees as he jumps from one brick stack

15

to another. Although they notice her accent and listen vaguely to her 16  
story she is soon part of the group.

17

As the late summer evening darkens, a new consciousness settles

18

over the children, who move almost in union like a flock of birds.

19

They melt into the little terraced houses, exchanging brief words about 20

tomorrow's plans. At number 10 the bustle is over. Auntie has finished 21

cleaning the kitchen and is now knitting; Uncle sits reading, his face 22

stern with concentration beneath the room's only light. Kees, Ali, and 23

Lien wash themselves at the sink and visit the loo. "*Trusten*," says 24

Auntie, which is short for *welterusten*, meaning "good night."

25

The children share one bedroom, with the adults and baby Mari-

26

anne in the other. Within minutes, Kees and Ali are sleeping. Lien

27

lies listening to their regular breaths. As far as she can remember she 28

has never slept in a room with other people. For a moment she thinks

29

of her bedroom in the Pletterijstraat. At home Mamma always comes

30S

to sit by her in the evening, stroking her hair before she kisses her 31N

good night.

**46**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 46

11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

01

02

Kees shakes her awake in the morning. It is still holiday time and

03

today he is going to catch tadpoles. He knows a place where you can

04

find them even in August and Lien can come. They wolf down their

05

bread and cheese at the kitchen table while Auntie watches and then

06

scramble out the door. Outside the sun is shining, so she barely notices 07

the chill as she runs following Kees through the empty lanes.

08

After ten minutes they are already in an area of farmland and in-

09

dustrial depots, which is where the secret supply of tadpoles is to be 10

found. The blocked-up ditch that is their home has a slippery slope of 11

grass and brambles and Kees edges down carefully, plowing the soil

12

with a stick in his right hand to keep him steady, holding a jar in his 13

left. He looks over his shoulder at Lien above him, then turns to paw 14

at the water. Lien is not sure what he is trying to do, but after a few 15

sweeps Kees seems satisfied. He holds his eye to the glass and then

16

picks his way back up to her, the jar now filled with milky green liquid 17

that sloshes over his hand.

18

Lien hardly dares touch the wet container, and it takes her a while

19

to spot the strange tailed and legged creature swimming inside. She

20

has never seen anything like it, though she has been told in school

21

about tadpoles. It looks like a frog gone wrong. After a bit she is

22

goaded into trying to catch one and finds herself sliding a little on her 23

way down the slope. Reaching into the brown- green water she has the 24

horrible sensation that there is something trying to climb its way into 25

her shoe. Kees is confident about everything and calls down encour-

26

agingly, adding instructions to improve her technique, and soon there 27

is a fellowship between them, which makes Lien more certain about

28

what she is doing, so the air is filled with mutual cries of admiration 29

as they work. At the end of the morning they have a whole set of the

S30

little monsters decanted into a single jar. After scrutinizing their catch N31

47

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 47

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

through the glass, giving them names and characters, they pour the

02

tadpoles back into the murk.

03

With this adventure behind them, Lien and Kees become firm

04

friends. On other days there are different excursions. Kees teaches her 05

to ring the doorbell at people's houses and then scamper away to hide 06

and look. They also climb the great bridge over the canal and peer

07

down on the barges, which Kees tries to hit with little stones. He is 08

very good at throwing and sometimes they hear the satisfying tinkle

09

of glass. The town of Dordt and the countryside around it is their

10

playground, and they can disappear into it for a whole unimaginably

11

long day at a time. The two of them follow only the rules that they

12

themselves decide on, glorying in their liberty as only children can.

13

When they return in the evening to the Bilderdijkstraat they feel like 14

conquering heroes, worthy of the banquet of sprouts, meatballs, and

15

potatoes that awaits.

16

For the first time in her life Lien is free of her tummyaches. She

17

eats happily in the little kitchen, she loves the talk and the bustle, she 18

loves the freedom of running wild. At home she looks after little Mar-

19

ianne, telling her stories as she feeds her, one extra bit of story with 20

each bite. Everyone follows the rules of the household— bedtimes,

21

mealtimes, keeping your things tidy— but really she has to do almost 22  
nothing. Auntie cooks, washes, and cleans, seemingly without having

23

to think about it, and for dinner everyone is always welcome to bring 24  
friends. If Uncle is studying in the evening they have to be quiet. She 25

is a little afraid of him but she also admires him terribly. Men and

26

women listen when he talks to them and they always do what he says.

27

28

29

Then, after a month, she is back in school and it is her ninth

30S

birthday: September 7, 1942. She gets to choose her own dinner and

31N

she chooses sprouts. After breakfast, Auntie brings her some letters

**48**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 48

11/23/17 12:47 AM

## the cut out girl

and packages from home. When Lien arrived in early August there

01

were three dates ahead of her: her birthday (which was the most im-

02

portant), her mother's (a long way ahead on October 28, when she

03

would surely be home), and then far away in the distance there was

04

Pappa's in December, further off even than St. Nicholas. Now the

05

first of these dates is upon her and she is nine. First, she opens the 06

packages: two big bags of sweets, including one of licorice, of which 07

she takes one and then two. There is also a knitted thing and a book

08

that she puts to one side.

09

Four letters. It is strange to sit here in silence looking at them in 10

the *mooie kamer*, where she has hardly been since she arrived. The first 11

she reads is Pappa's, which has "7 SEPTEMBER" written in bold

12

capitals in the top right- hand corner to make sure it is read on the 13  
proper day. She recognizes Pappa's faultlessly joined sloping writing, 14  
which is also there on the first page of her poesie album. It is four 15  
sides long:

16

17

*Dear Lientje,*

18

*I am writing this letter on the occasion of your birthday. I*

19

*congratulate you on your ninth birthday and hope that you will*

20

*have many happy returns in future years to remember this day.*

21

*Then, of course, we will be together again and will celebrate this 22*

*one an extra time. As Mamma is sending you a present (I don't*

23

*know what it will be?) I will do the same and so enclose one guilder, 24*

*with which you can buy something that you like, or you can use it to 25*

*give others a treat if you have a ration card for sweets.*

26

*I have heard you are having a nice time there and that you are*

27

*learning to swim. Can you swim well already?*

28

*We are always happy to hear news from you and if you ever have*

29

*not so much to do, write to us with some news. It doesn't have to be S30*

*a long letter and it will help you to practice your handwriting. You N31*

**49**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 49

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

*are probably back in school now? That must be nice, because then*

02

*you won't be behind the others when you come back.*

03

*Hey Lien, I saw the menu for your birthday meal; it looks*

04

*delicious. I think we will eat exactly the same things on the day 05  
itself, because it is kind of also a celebration for us (is “celebration”*

06

*with an “e” or an “a”?).*

07

*If you sit there with the six of you I would really like to see your 08  
pudding. Draw it for me if you like, because that must be a big*

09

*pudding. I don’t know who had the last bite of it, but I think it was 10  
you. We will have to remember because when you come back we will*

11

*start from where you left off.*

12

*Are you always the first or the last to be dressed in the morning?*

13

*And with food? You can win that race I think. You will have to*

14

*write to me about all this and about how you celebrated your*

15

*birthday.*

16

*Don't forget Mamma's birthday!! [Pappa squeezes in "28*

17

*October" in little letters, deciding afterward that she might have 18  
forgotten the date.]*

19

*Lientje, I hope that you have a very, very, very, very happy*

20

*time of it and we here will have a nice glass of lemonade and let's 21  
hope that we will soon be together, the three of us, maybe even*

22

*before Mamma's birthday. That would be the best present. Hey*

23

*Lien, the paper is nearly full and I had wanted to write so*

24

*much more.*

25

*Thank your foster parents on our behalf, also for their kind letter 26  
to us, and look after yourself, then the time will go quickly, till we 27*

*col ect each other from the train.*

28

*I also have to pass on the congratulations of the family. Both*

29

*grannies and grandpas, Auntie Fie, Uncle Jo, Rini, Daaf, Auntie*

30S

*Bep, Uncle Mannie, Auntie Riek with the three children, Uncle*

31N

**50**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 50

11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

*Bram, and Auntie Ro. Have I forgotten anybody? Because they*

01

*have all told me that I must congratulate you on their behalf. I had 02*

*nearly forgotten to send a greeting from Pretty.*

03

*Lien, many more years after this one.*

04

*Hip, hip, hip HOORAY.*

05

*from Pappa*

06

07

The second letter is a short one from Mrs. Andriessen:

08

09

*Dear Lientje,*

10

*Many congratulations on your birthday. I hope that you are*

11

*healthy and are having a nice time. Also, best wishes to your*

12

*housemates. You should have a pleasant day and let us hope that*

13

*everything will be normal again soon, like it was. I am wel . You'll 14*

*see a small present for you. Now Lientje, take my warm greeting,*

15

*in thought*

16

*many kisses*

17

*from Mrs. R. A.*

18

19

The next letter is from Aunt Ellie, who wrote a poem in Lien's

20

album, decorated with a beautiful fan. She leaves a lot of space at the top of her big sheet of lined paper, below the date, "The Hague, 2

22

September '42":

23

24

*Dear Lientje,*

25

*Many congratulations on your birthday and I hope that you will*

26

*become a big girl to make Mamma and Pappa even prouder of you*

27

*than they are now!*

28

*Aunt Ellie had wanted very much to come and see you but it is*

29

*better not to. Your present, you knew what it was anyway, you will S30*

N31

51

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 51

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

*get from somebody else now. Babs has knitted it beautiful y,*

02

*hasn't she?*

03

*I have heard that you are having a nice time and that everything*

04

*will be fun.*

05

*If you want to see Aunt Ellie very much, just for a moment, you*

06

*should ask your aunt and uncle if they can think of a way to do it.*

07

*But over there you have lots of new aunts and uncles and*

08

*playmates, so perhaps you have forgotten us already long ago!*

09

*Dear little thing, I'm stopping with this. A nice happy day, I*

10

*hope that you can have one, and enjoy your lovely birthday meal.*

11

*Very many kisses from*

12

*Aunt Ellie*

13

14

E. Monkernuis,

15

Kanaalbrugweg 87, The

16

Hague

17

*The licorice is from Granny and Auntie Bep!*

18

19

Finally there is Mamma's letter; the one she wanted to save till

20

last. Crosswise at the top is written "meant for 7 September":

21

22

*Dear Lieneke,*

23

*Heartfelt congratulations on your ninth birthday. Although I*

24

*cannot congratulate you myself now, because of this I still think of 25  
you the whole day and I hope that you will have just as much fun as 26  
you would with us at home. I will send you a book and some nice*

27

*things to eat and you will have to make do with that this year. I 28*

*have not been able to buy a watch for you. I hope that Aunt Elie 29*

*will come to you herself, that would be very nice for you and for me.*

30S

*If she doesn't go then the package will go in the post and you will 31N  
still get everything. I hope that you are now going to school and that 52*

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 52

11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

*you will be happy and that you will appreciate what Aunt and*

01

*Uncle are doing for you, because that is a lot. I don't know if Pappa 02*

*can write to you, because he is out of town. But please believe that 03*

*he will also think of you the whole day and that he thinks it is a 04*

*shame that we cannot be together. But maybe everything will come*

05

*good again. Think of that love. Write Mamma a little letter back, 06*

*but don't put it in the mail, because we don't live at the*

07

*Pletterijstraat anymore. So just give the little letter to Auntie and 08*

*Uncle, they will make sure I get it. Or you can give it to Auntie 09*

*Ellie, if she comes.*

10

*Good- bye angel, a really lovely day for the rest and thousands of 11  
kisses from your loving*

12

*Mammie*

13

14

The book that Mamma sends her is called *About a Happy Holiday*.

15

Its cover shows three children, drawn in pastel colors, who are stand-

16

ing on a quayside with a lady in a green hat looking protectively on.

17

Behind them is an enormous ocean liner at which the children are

18

waving excitedly as it comes in to dock. The whole thing is cheerful

19

colors: the bow of the ship is a solid triangle rising above the quay and 20

above this there is a long white line marked with regular black circles 21

that are portholes. Right at the top, above the waving figure of what 22

must be the captain, an orange funnel puts a little puff of smoke into a 23

bright yellow block of sky. In a picture like this, going away seems like 24  
a simple and beautiful thing.

25

Lien takes the book and places it high on a shelf in the *mooie kamer*, 26  
where it remains untouched.

27

28

29

There is an alien, grown-up sadness in these letters, like the sad-

S30

ness she felt when Mamma and Pappa quarreled and she had to go

N31

**53**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM



***Bart van Es***

01

02

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

12

13

14

15

away to stay with Daafje and Rini. Suddenly Lien wants more than

16

anything in the world to be home. Real home, in her own bedroom in

17

the Pletterijstraat. But now she thinks that maybe her bedroom has a

18

different girl living in it, just when she wants so much to be lying in 19

her little bed with Mamma stroking her hair.

20

Lien feels a tightness in every part of her and sees that she is weep-

21

ing and once she knows it she cannot stop. The tears just keep coming.

22

Her breathing gets all muddled and she begins to sob in hard, sharp

23

bursts. Then grief overwhelms her like sickness, rolling over her as a 24

great, dark wave.

25

Now she finds herself crying constantly, for days, for hours on end.

26

There is no comfort possible, she just wants her Mamma and Pappa

27

with an all- consuming hollowness. Desperate, not knowing what to

28

do with her, Auntie takes Lien for a walk in the park, where she just 29

carries on crying, so unhappy that it hurts like a raw wound. Then

30S

both of them are weeping, hand in hand with the gray autumn sky

31N

54

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 54

11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

above them, the leaves still dark green and brown on the trees. They

01

just walk round and round the same paths, seeing the same faces, not

02

speaking at all. As they cry together, Lien holds herself close to this 03

warm, strong woman, and the feeling of loss is joined by a new feel-

04

ing, of love.

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

12

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29

S30

N31

55

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9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 56

11/23/17 12:47 AM

01

02

*Six*

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

The ceiling of The Hague's Central Station is like an Escher print

12

of squares within squares. I stand looking up at it for a moment

13

and then resume scanning the crowd. I am here to carry out research

14

at the National Archives, just across from this building. There are

15

papers there on the police service in Dordrecht, which was active in

16

the war years hunting out hidden Jews. Steven, the cousin with whom

17

I will stay, is due to meet me and after ten minutes I spot him. His

18

lean frame and handsome cheekbones stand out; he is tall, even by

19

Dutch standards. He is wearing a sort of baseball jacket with black

20

jeans and black skateboarding trainers and a peaked cap. A little

21

medal with faded ribbons sits askew on his chest. I feel the medal as 22

he bends down to give me a hug.

23

We have not seen each other for at least a year, but when I e-mailed

24

he was quick to answer that it was no problem for me to stay at his

25

place, which is close to the station. I should arrive, he suggested, fairly 26

late in the evening. He would pick me up, take me on a tour of his

27

workplace, and then we could head home in the early hours. Steven

28

has a mix of professions: visual artist, festival emcee, local politician; 29

he also manages an arts center cum nightclub that he set up himself,

S30

which is where we are heading now.

N31

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 57

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

I hear the club before I see it. A dull regular thud. After twenty

02

minutes' walk, we have reached a light industrial zone, with ware-

03

houses and 1930s office blocks looming up in the darkness behind

04

high steel gates. This is an area of deprivation and the building in

05

which the club is located is part of a project to try to revive it, attract-

06

ing small businesses, but there is still a lot of empty space. The huge 07

block stands out against the night sky in outline and makes me think

08

of an oil tanker, weighed down, engines running, trying to get up to

09

speed.

10

Once we are inside, the club, though half empty, envelops us. At

11

the entrance, Steven trades air punches with a muscled bouncer and

12

bear hugs the girl at the desk. Beyond this there is dry ice and music, 13

a series of large rooms with young men standing at turntables, each lit 14

in different pulsing colors. The style of the place has an edge of irony 15

to it. Room one is themed as a 1970s beach club, with a retro glitter 16

ball and pinkish slides of a desert island projected onto the walls.

17

Most punters at this stage, I am told, will be tuned in via Internet ra-

18

dio, checking Facebook and Instagram, deciding whether to come.

19

By 2:00 a.m. the news is positive: the club is filling up. Parties of 20

friends make their way past the bouncer and onto the dance floor,

21

checking for familiar faces, ordering drinks. They compliment each

22

other's clothing and check their phones. Soon there is live Japanese

23

painting in time to the music and I watch as a great bird emerges from 24

spots of color on a white wall. The steel tanks on the ceiling, Steven 25

proudly tells me, contain two thousand liters of beer that is piped to 26

the bars. There are people now of all races, mainly young, who move

27

with an aura of pleasure, raising their hands. A man who might be in

28

his sixties— with a shaved head and gray stubble, dressed completely 29

in black— stands beside me on the sidelines as he nods his head rhyth-

30S

mically with the sound. Later, in a courtyard surrounded by smokers,

31N

we hold a brief conversation. He is a patent lawyer and travels Europe 58

11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

catching events such as this whenever he can. Berlin, he tells me, is 01  
especially great.

02

Berlin. That word's meaning has changed so completely. Today it

03

means a weekend break or a conference. And Tokyo, from where the

04

young men at the turntables come, is now a riot of neon advertising,

05

Hello Kitty kitsch, and minimalist design. The old Axis capitals have 06

been conquered for the rainbow flag of youthful globalization, which

07

is all around me in the club. This is the other side of the immigration 08

that I saw in Dordrecht this morning: instead of marginalized and

09

tribal, the young here are united by music and by a set of witty, ironic 10

Internet memes. But then this was there too, in another form, in the

11

1930s. Those pictures of Lien's father (first with the dapper young

12

men in the motorcar and then posing with his fedora hat and polished

13

shoes) make me think that he would have fitted quite easily into this 14

happy cosmopolitan crowd. And yet all that unity, at least in Berlin, 15

was wiped away by the Great Depression, a catastrophe not entirely

16

different from the crisis that laid waste to the industrial estates that lie 17

all around us in darkness, locked up behind gates.

18

19

20

It is nearly morning when we get to Steven's apartment, which,

21

like the club, is in a derelict building. Although marked for demoli-

22

tion, it can be used in the interim on a short-term lease. The huge 23

rooms, more than sixty-five feet long, have high ceilings and rows of 24

uncurtained windows that look out onto a skyline of silent, lit-up

25

roads. This was originally the testing laboratory of the Dutch Trading 26  
Standards Institute and the glass doors still bear their original labels.

27

They read Destruction Experiments, Radiology, and Endur-

28

ance Repetitions. It feels like a film set, especially because Steven 29  
and his housemates have placed various art objects on the floor in

S30

pools of light. There is a full- sized plywood paper sailboat that greets N31

59

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 59

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

you on first entry and opposite, at the far end of the room, a smashed 02

chandelier that sits on top of a plinth. In the midst of all this is a 03

kitchen island with a glass- fronted fridge and a stove.

04

Steven heads straight for the stove, puts the kettle on, and begins

05

chopping a piece of ginger to make tea.

06

“No light in the toilet— you have to use your phone,” he warns me

07

after I ask the way.

08

And soon we are talking with the city spread out below us. I hear

09

about Steven’s various projects: local Hague politics, an art residency 10

in Japan, the club, and his girlfriend’s work for an urban redevelop-

11

ment corporation in Amsterdam. He asks me about my family: my

12

wife’s new job at the hospital and especially about my eldest daughter, 13

Josie, with whom he has a special bond. He sits roughly between her

14

and me in age. She has had some tough years lately, but her life has

15

turned a corner, and he listens with enthusiasm about her move to

16

London, where she now works. In all the flood of information my

17

search into Lien's life barely gets a mention, which is partly because I 18  
am sheepish about it, wrapping it up in my description with various

19

other bits of university work. The fact is that Lien's story is not a com-

20

fortable one for the Van Esses: asking questions about it threatens the 21  
reopening of old wounds.

22

Half an hour later I am drifting toward sleep on a mattress in the

23

music room, surrounded by piles of records, a keyboard, and a drum

24

kit, with the night sky already turning gray.

25

26

27

The next morning I sit at a large table in the modern, brightly lit,

28

reading room of the National Archives. In front of me there are three 29  
plain cardboard boxes. Others are reserved and waiting behind the

30S

desk. Beyond the glass doors at the back of the librarians' office you 31N  
can see the archivists shifting material on trollies that look as though 60

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### **the cut out girl**

they belong in a mortuary. With uniformed officers moving about in

01

search of hidden cameras, warning readers not to lean over their pa-

02

pers, the place feels military and clinical at the same time.

03

Between 1945 and 1950 the Dutch authorities investigated around

04

230 police officers for their role in the Holocaust, a process that pro-

05

duced a vast amount of documentation, which now sits on shelves that

06

stretch for over two and half miles. Most of the prosecutions relate to 07

Amsterdam. But Dordrecht, whose 300 Jews were almost all mur-

08

dered, has a fair section of shelving reserved for itself.

09

The Jewish wartime death rate in the Netherlands, at 80 percent,

10

was more than double that of any other Western country, far higher

11

than that of France, Belgium, Italy, or even Germany and Austria

12

themselves. For me, vaguely brought up on a myth of Dutch resis-

13

tance, this comes as a shock.

14

There are various factors that help to explain the exceptionally low

15

chance of survival. The population was urban, persecution began

16

early, escape across the borders was almost impossible, and the regis-

17

tration process (which was aided by a blindly cooperative Jewish

18

Council) was efficient. But the active participation of Dutch citizens—

19

who did the work of informing on neighbors, arrest, imprisonment,

20

and transportation— also played a significant part. Unlike Belgium,

21

where the SS were the Jew hunters, or France, with its complicated

22

mix of Vichy and direct military occupation, in Holland it was the

23

native administration that brought death to the Jews.

24

Here, unlike anywhere else, a scheme of financial bounty was es-

25

tablished. A price of seven guilders and fifty cents was placed on the 26

head of every Jew. This was personal money that the responsible po-

27

licemen, informers, or civilian operators received in cash. On top of 28  
this, the authorities established a system of competition, with two in-

29

dependent agencies being given the power of arrest. One of these was

S30

the ordinary police force, which set up various specialist units with N31

61

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***Bart van Es***

01

names such the Central Control, the Bureau for Jewish Affairs, or the 02

Political Police. The other was a semicommercial company, the *Haus-*

03

*raterfassung*, a Dutch- staffed body whose technical job was the seizure 04

of Jewish property, but which expanded its business to seize people as 05

well. In spite of having just fifty agents, the *Hausraterfassung* tracked 06

down around 9,000 Jews. Through such measures, the Dutch author-

07

ities quickly exceeded the targets that were set by their German mas-

08

ters and, in the end, delivered 107,000 “full Jews” to the death camps 09

in the east.

10

In Dordrecht it was three men on the regular police force— Arie

11

den Breejen, Theo Lukassen, and Harry Evers— who did most of the

12

work. From the moment Lien arrived in the city in August 1942,

13

these individuals would have been trying to track her down.

14

I hesitate for a moment, sitting in front of my laptop, then open the 15

first box.

16

When I do so, it seems at first as though I have entered the world

17

of Willem Frederik Hermans’s classic postwar Dutch novel *The Dark-*

18

*room of Damocles*. The last part of this book is set after the liberation, 19  
with investigators attempting to work out who was good and who was

20

bad in the Netherlands during the war. The main protagonist, Henri

21

Osewoudt, awaits their verdict, but, as years pass, the evidence (made 22  
up of stacks of incomprehensible photographs and contradictory wit-

23

ness statements) simply gathers on desks. As he describes this situa-

24

tion, Hermans plays a literary game with the symbolic objects of the

25

photo negative and the mirror, so that by the end of the book the

26

reader can no longer tell who is the hero and who is the villain.

27

The first box of Harry Evers's files gives the same impression.

28

There are mysterious photos, several of which show the interior of a

29

cupboard with hidden electrical circuitry. Others show microfilms

30S

with lines of code. Mixed in with these, apparently at random, are

31N

**62**

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### **the cut out girl**

handwritten letters, typed up witness statements, and official forms.

01

Some describe Evers's violence: the kicking in of doors and the vicious 02

interrogations that he carried out as he searched for illegal items such 03

as radios and guns. But then, like Osewoudt in Hermans's novel, Evers 04

himself writes in outrage, saying that he has been wrongly accused.

05

He was, he claims, in reality a resistance fighter who only joined the 06

Political Police after instructions from above. Members of the resis-

07

tance write in to support this story. There were, they report, frequent 08

tip-offs from Evers about raids that were coming; he helped with the 09

repair of weapons; and he assisted in the shooting of a collaborator in 10  
the final stages of the war. Then, toward the bottom of the box, comes 11  
a report from the investigatory committee, dated August 10, 1945,

12

which declares Evers innocent, a war hero even. Press cuttings follow, 13  
which tell the adventures of Evers the undercover man.

14

Mixed in with these, though, there are letters of protest. Some in

15

the Resistance say that the verdict is a gross distortion. There are even 16  
copies of fliers describing Evers as a traitor. These fliers have been 17  
posted around the town.

18

The truth of the matter seems hard to work out.

19

Over the days in the archives, however, I open more boxes. A few

20

survivors return to Dordrecht from Auschwitz, a few others emerge

21

from hiding, and as the witness statements mount up, first to tens and 22

then to hundreds, doubt disappears.

23

One of the first to speak is Isidor van Huiden, a Jewish man who

24

had lived just a few doors down from the Heromas on the Dubbel-

25

damseweg. He tells the committee that, in the late afternoon of No-

26

vember 9, 1942, Evers and Lukassen, backed up by four policemen

27

from Rotterdam, burst into his home, screaming and swearing, and

28

began a search. After just ten minutes the family (who had crept into 29

a hiding place) had all been discovered and were lined up under guard.

S30

N31

**63**

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***Bart van Es***

01

Then, while the officers rifled through their papers and other belong-

02

ings, the Van Huidens heard piano music from the adjoining room. It

03

was Evers playing show tunes after concluding the job.

04

The Van Huidens were transported to the holding pen of the Hol-

05

landsche Schouwburg in Amsterdam, where they saw many of their

06

Dordrecht neighbors, who told of violent interrogations in which

07

Evers played a leading role.

08

They would not see those neighbors again.

09

Isidor himself was lucky because, as a member of the Jewish Coun-

10

cil, he still had certain rights. He talked himself and his family out of 11

the Hollandsche Schouwburg with the promise that he would move to

12

the capital and remain at a registered address. The moment that they

13

were at liberty, they found a new and better place to hide.

14

Similar stories come out over the ensuing months of the investiga-

15

tion, and, as I work my way through the boxes, the full arc of Harry

16

Evers's life comes into view.

17

He stares out vividly from various descriptions. A strong, thickset,

18

blond man, a little puffy about the face. In age and social background 19

he is typical of the Jew hunters: unremarkable, modestly educated,

20

fond of a drink. Born out of wedlock to a Catholic mother, Evers was

21

brought up by his grandparents in Tilburg and then drifted through

22

various occupations, including shipbuilding and car maintenance, be-

23

fore joining the Dutch army in the run-up to the War. His physical

24

power and ability to inspire obedience got him promotion to sergeant, 25

but he was denied elevation to the officer class.

26

Although for a time a member of a nationalist party, Evers was not

27

especially political. His main interests were popular music, pornogra-

28

phy, and chasing girls. He conducted himself well during the German

29

invasion and, after defeat in May 1940, he and some other ex-military 30S

men did talk big about forming some kind of resistance. Nothing,

31N

though, came of this half- baked plan.

**64**

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### **the cut out girl**

In August 1940 Evers joined the police force. The army, clearly,

01

was no longer an option. Some Dutch men did sign up for the SS or

02

the Wehrmacht, but he was not really pro- German, even if, like most, 03

he now accepted the new state of affairs. Instead, he got a specialist 04

job in the price control unit, which monitored the black market. It

05

soon became clear that he had a talent for tracking things down.

06

What was it that motivated Evers to transfer to the Political Police

07

two years later in July 1942? He claimed afterward that he did this on 08

the instruction of a friend in the military resistance, but this is im-

09

plausible. There was barely such a thing as military resistance in Dor-

10

drecht at this point and certainly not the fabled “Section K” of which 11

he would boast at his trial. True, Evers kept contact with one of his 12  
old buddies, who would eventually become a resistance man. He was

13

always good at keeping his ear to the ground. But things were going

14

well for the Germans; resistance was absurd. He had just gotten mar-

15

ried and he needed to move out of his boardinghouse. Proper Jew

16

hunting was about to begin, which meant that there was easy money

17

to be gained from the Political Police. A man with experience of the

18

underworld and the black market was just what was needed. So Evers

19

signed up as a member of the Fascist Union, always knowing that he

20

had credit as a Dutch nationalist to fall back on if things turned bad.

21

And once he was in, it was heaven, better than he could have

22

imagined. He knew people who knew things and he had a natural,

23

imposing presence, so it was easy to get to the truth. There were all-

24

night sessions, handfuls of jewels and bank notes that he could simply 25

take. He developed little tics that gave him character, like toying with 26

his handgun as he spoke or playing piano at the end of a raid. He even 27

obtained a piano of his own from the former house of a Jew.

28

It took talent to do things properly. Evers would check concrete

29

floors for cracks that suggested hidden passages and would measure

S30

the distance between the height of a ceiling and the floor above. Power N31

65

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***Bart van Es***

01

over women was a particular pleasure. There was a room next to his

02

office that he used for the rape of the Jewish girls who happened to

03

take his fancy. He liked to refer to his wife as his “cauliflower” and to 04

these women as his “sprouts.”

05

As I read these things I think of Lien in hiding.

06

Evers also caught children. One time he saw a little girl on a bicy-

07

cle and noted to Den Breejen that she looked “like a Jewess,” so they 08

followed her home and found papers alight in the stove that proved

09

that he was right.

10

It is the case of Miepke Viskoper, a girl from Amsterdam, aged

11

seven, that is the closest to Lien’s. She is the subject of witness state-

12

ments 146 to 148.

13

Witness 146 is Johanna Wigman, a barmaid in her midtwenties

14

who had taken the little girl into her care. On the night of November 15

15, 1943, Miepke was sleeping beside Johanna on a mattress. Then, at

16

half past eleven, Johanna heard a break-in downstairs. She just had

17

time to hide the child under the blankets before Evers and Den Bree-

18

jen burst in. The policemen demanded to know if her name was Jo-

19

hanna Wigman and then began their search. All too quickly Miepke

20

was discovered. Den Breejen is recorded in the statement as saying

21

“Here we have the Yid!” But then, as the men continued in search of

22

other evidence, the little girl ran out.

23

Evers and Den Breejen were furious and, for her act of protection,

24

Johanna Wigman was sent to the concentration camp at Vught.

25

Witness 147 is the owner of the adjoining café, Cornelis van

26

Tooren. He himself had a daughter, called Jannetje, of Miep's age.

27

Evers and Den Breejen, he reports, had spent time searching the café

28

before moving on to the neighboring flat. After they left, he waited in 29

their absence, and then at around midnight Miep ran into the bar.

30S

Evers came in right behind her, pointing his revolver, shouting, "It's 31N

the suffocation shed for you" at the little girl.

**66**

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**the cut out girl**

“I’ve only come to say good- bye to Jannetje,” she replied.

01

The worst is witness 148. This is Miepie’s father, a smal - scale con-

02

fectionery manufacturer in the big city, the same as Lien’s. Like Lien, 03

Miepie was an only daughter, and again, just like Lien’s parents, the 04

Viskooopers thought their child would be safe if she hid with non- Jews, 05

so they sent her away. They themselves also went into hiding, but they 06

were caught. At the awful moment of their arrest there was at least the 07

feeling that, for their daughter, theirs had been the right choice.

08

But then, as the couple was held at Westerbork, the Dutch transit

09

camp for Auschwitz, Miepie was brought in to her mother, under guard.

10

11

12

As I read this I think of my own wife and children and imagine

13

that unwanted reunion. I can see the smile of recognition on the face 14

of the child.

15

16

17

The Viskoopers traveled together to Poland. Then, on arrival,

18

Michel Viskoper watched as his wife and daughter were taken from

19

him and driven away on a truck.

20

Michel, Miep's father, was one of just 5,200 Dutch Jews who

21

survived the death camps, but he returned to Holland alone.

22

23

24

I sit motionless in the reading room for a few minutes. After this I

25

copy Miep's case verbatim onto my laptop, typing as quickly as a can.

26

27

28

The wartime career of Harry Evers matches those of many col-

29

laborators recorded in the archives. Once the balance of power altered, S30  
they began to think about changing sides. In the summer of 1943, just N31

**67**

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***Bart van Es***

01

as the transport of Dutch Jews was nearing completion, the Wehr-

02

macht's advance into Russia was stopped. Already in the spring, for-

03

mer Dutch servicemen in nonessential professions had received a

04

summons to forced labor camps in Germany, and by July a quarter of

05

a million workers had been sent. First thousands and then hundreds

06

of thousands went into hiding to avoid this fate. And as the authorities 07  
began to search for the missing men, the mood of the population

08

turned far more strongly against the occupiers. Armed resistance, vir-

09

tually nil at the start of the year, grew rapidly in the last two months 10  
of 1943. Meanwhile the skies darkened with Allied bombers, and

11

Evers, like others, started to worry about what he had done.

12

So from the New Year onward, he began actively to help the resis-

13

tance and took every opportunity to tell them about his bravery as a

14

double agent working for the Germans under instructions from his

15

own side. As time went on, he became ever more helpful. Finally, as

16

Canadian tanks rumbled through the polders, he visited his old friends 17

in their houses and in cafés and made them swear to be true to him at 18  
the point of a knife. Once the war was over, he even took the piano he 19  
had stolen and returned it, badly damaged, to the house of the Jew.

20

For nearly a year he remained at liberty, but then, on February 13,

21

1946, in the tax office near his childhood home in Tilburg, Evers was 22  
placed under arrest. He was carrying a loaded pistol and had kept a

23

supply of grenades. Still, he went quietly enough.

24

In the end, he received an eight- year sentence, reduced to three

25

years and six months on appeal. This was not out of proportion. After 26  
all, Albert Gemmeker, the famous “laughing commandant” of West-

27

erbork, who held a great party to celebrate the transport of the forty-

28

thousandth victim to Auschwitz, served no more than six years. And

29

afterward Evers returned to society, enjoying a second marriage, al-

30S

though this one too ended quickly in divorce. When he died, aged

31N

**68**

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### **the cut out girl**

seventy- three, in the early 1990s, there were still those in Dordrecht 01

who hailed him as a hero and as the victim of an unfair campaign.

02

03

04

Eventually I retie the final bundle of papers. The next

05

morning, Steven gets up early to see me off on the train. It is only as 06

we are walking to the station, the same one used by Lien when she

07

traveled to Dordrecht, that he points to the little medal with ribbons 08

that sits askew on his chest. This, he tells me, was awarded to his pa-

09

ternal grandfather for heroism in the resistance. After he died, nobody 10  
else was going to wear it, so Steven wears it now.

11

The train doors hiss shut and the carriage starts moving. Steven

12

remains on the platform, giving me a smile and a wave. As I move to

13

the upper deck in search of a seat, I begin to question myself about the 14  
work I am doing. Lien asked me about my motivation. There are so

15

many stories like hers, and besides, the bare facts have already been 16  
recorded for the Shoah Foundation archive, which was set up by Ste-

17

ven Spielberg soon after he completed his film *Schindler's List* back in 18  
1994. Is there anything that I could add to that?

19

Around me morning commuters are tapping on their laptops while

20

the suburbs of The Hague rush ever more quickly by. On flawless

21

tracks, the heavy carriage runs almost without a sound. Just as I felt 22  
earlier, when driving into The Hague on those flat and straight mo-

23

torways, the smooth, unbending movement of the train makes me feel

24

distant from the world outside the window. Rail travel in the Nether-

25

lands feels different from that in most other countries because almost 26

nothing of the prewar infrastructure remains. This makes the past

27

less tangible than it is in England, where everything rattles and looks 28

old. Yet this is the same journey that Lien made when she left her

29

parents just over seventy years ago: it runs on the same ground.

S30

N31

**69**

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*Bart van Es*

01

Switching my gaze from the view through the window to the modern

02

interior of the carriage, I ask myself if it might be possible to write 03

something that traces this invisible link between Holland's past and

04

its present. I also wonder about my family and their relationship

05

with Lien.

06

07

08

09

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30S

31N

**70**

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01

02

*Seven*

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

The second page of the red photo album on Lien's table in Am-

12

sterdam is devoted to the early 1940s. “Dordrecht” is written as

13

a header and underlined. There are nine photographs in all. Across

14

the top are two of the same set of children, a girl and a boy standing 15

together but hardly touching: Ali and Kees. The photographer stands

16

high above the pair so that they look upward, expectant, framed by

17

too much space. The version on the left, which looks wintery, is the

18

earliest.

19

It is probably from the time when their mother was still living. Ali, 20

the eldest, is no more than three. She holds a doll with one hand and 21

with the other she steadies her brother, who is concentrating to stay on 22

his feet. In the version on the right, taken a few years later, Kees has 23

24

25

26

27

28

29

S30

N31

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***Bart van Es***

01

already thrust himself forward, smiling a little cheekily at the camera, 02  
cocking his head. Ali stands behind him now, in his shadow, figura-

03

tively as well as literally, one suspects.

04

Like most of the pictures on the page they are quite ordinary and

05

rather inexpertly taken; expressions are hard to read. In the middle

06

there are some passport snaps without names written beneath them:

07

these are Lien's "Auntie" and "Uncle." Uncle is the father of Ali, Kees, 08  
and Marianne. Auntie is Marianne's mother and now also the step-

09

mother of Ali and Kees. She is a little chubby and plain looking— it is 10  
easy to imagine her as a farm laborer's daughter and then, from the

11

age of fourteen, as a maid living in service, which is what she was until 12  
her late twenties when she and her husband met. As a child she was

13

called "fat Jans" by her family, although one could hardly get very fat 14  
on the bread and potatoes that were the staple diet of her early years.

15

He is more intense and wiry, but beyond this the photo gives little

16

away. It makes me think of the neutral expressions on the identity

17

cards that he smuggles for the resistance— one of the many secret ac-

18

tivities he is involved in, which he will almost never talk about, even 19

later in life. For his day job he is an engine fitter for the Electrical 20  
Motors Factory in Dordrecht, an expert at aligning machines so that

21

they work in the best possible way. This means that he travels through-

22

out the country, to mines and to printing presses, for example, adjust-

23

ing and maintaining the engines that were built in Dordt. Such work

24

is excellent cover for a resistance man.

25

The conventional, restrained appearance of the couple actually

26

says a lot about them. They are not given to emotional outbursts and

27

they dislike pretension. They will do a great deal for you, but expres-

28

sions of thanks will be dismissed with an awkward, slightly painful,

29

shrug. Their passions are lived out in the Social Democratic Workers'

30S

Party, the forerunner of the Dutch Labor Party: not revolutionary

31N

but communal, a belief in institutions, in public provision, in the

72

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### **the cut out girl**

already thrust himself forward, smiling a little cheekily at the camera, 01

cocking his head. Ali stands behind him now, in his shadow, figura-

02

tively as well as literally, one suspects.

03

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mother of Ali and Kees. She is a little chubby and plain looking— it is 09

easy to imagine her as a farm laborer's daughter and then, from the

10

age of fourteen, as a maid living in service, which is what she was until 11

her late twenties when she and her husband met. As a child she was

betterment of humanity by giving equal chances to all. The two of

12

called "fat Jans" by her family, although one could hardly get very fat them met at the evening classes that are provided by this organization—

13

on the bread and potatoes that were the staple diet of her early years.

he already a young widower with two children, she an idealistic

14

He is more intense and wiry, but beyond this the photo gives little

warmhearted girl of twenty- eight. There is nothing very romantic

15

away. It makes me think of the neutral expressions on the identity

about them. Auntie likes mainly to talk about housekeeping, children, 16

cards that he smuggles for the resistance— one of the many secret ac-

and politics. She is practically minded and thinks little of the delica-

17

tivities he is involved in, which he will almost never talk about, even cies of  
appearance. “Thin women are for looking at and fat women are

18

later in life. For his day job he is an engine fitter for the Electrical for  
marrying,” her husband once told her and she repeats this with

19

Motors Factory in Dordrecht, an expert at aligning machines so that

satisfaction to her friends. He is rather stern and expects obedience, 20

they work in the best possible way. This means that he travels through-

and if on a rare occasion she exceeds the boundaries that he sets for 21  
out the country, to mines and to printing presses, for example, adjust-  
the household he will order her out of the room. This is not the be-  
22

ing and maintaining the engines that were built in Dordt. Such work  
havior of a model husband. There is an edge to him but there is also  
23

is excellent cover for a resistance man.

an air of authority; he is unfailingly honest, he has principles, and he 24

The conventional, restrained appearance of the couple actually  
gets things done. Thus, although she is a little fearful and would  
25

says a lot about them. They are not given to emotional outbursts and  
rather do without his masculine passions, Jans is proud of her husband 26  
they dislike pretension. They will do a great deal for you, but expres-  
and of the family she is bringing up.

27

sions of thanks will be dismissed with an awkward, slightly painful,

On the left of the page in the album there is a snap of little Mari-

28

shrug. Their passions are lived out in the Social Democratic Workers' Party, the forerunner of the Dutch Labor Party: not revolutionary  
anne, smiling proudly, balanced on a white wooden bench. The pic-

29

Party, the forerunner of the Dutch Labor Party: not revolutionary  
ture is taken outside Mrs. de Bruyne's house, which stands directly

S30

but communal, a belief in institutions, in public provision, in the  
across from number 10 on the other side of the street. Mrs. de Bruyne N31

73

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***Bart van Es***

01

herself is sitting beside the toddler, looking on. In the album she is 02  
labeled “Fau Buyne” because that is how the one- year- old pronounces 03  
“Vrouw Bruyne,” and the name has caught on.

04

05

06

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08

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18

19

20

Fau Buyne, a widow, is a great friend of the family, and often looks

21

after Marianne if Auntie needs to go out. She looks young but she al-

22

ready has a grown-up daughter who lives around the corner. Fau Buyne

23

is part of the great network of friends and neighbors that reaches along 24

and beyond the Bilderdijkstraat, people with the same sorts of jobs and 25

the same small incomes, getting by as best they can.

26

There are two photographs on the page that do not feature family

27

members. One, labeled “Annie Mookhoek,” is similar in style to the

28

others and shows a slim, pretty girl in a checked dress and wearing

29

thick socks and dark shoes. Again, the photographer has placed her,

30S

full length, at the center of the picture, where she stands, posing self-

31N

consciously, with her arms at her sides. There is a tangle of green

74

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### **the cut out girl**

scrubland around her, which has the odd effect of making her float free 01

of the background, almost as if she were rising upward into the sky.

02

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

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11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

The bright sunshine makes the checked pattern of her dress blend

19

with the patchwork of light and shadow. She seems to smile down

20

from a great height. This smiling girl lives a few doors away and if

21

Lien is not with Kees she is bound to be with Annie, playing street

22

games, going off to the swimming pool, or exploring the countryside.

23

The final picture on this page is very different from the others. It

24

is large and yellowed with rounded corners, and features a dark, sad-

25

faced boy perhaps nine years old. It has been folded in half and has a 26

chunk torn away from it at the bottom, its edges creased and eaten

27

into like a parchment that is centuries old.

28

The pose is that of a formal portrait from the nineteenth century,

29

with the boy's head and shoulders carefully framed—the opposite of

S30

the clumsy snaps that cover the rest of the page. “Hansje” is written N31

75

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***Bart van Es***

01

02

03

04

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11

beneath in blue ballpoint pen. The torn chunk leaves a hole where the 12  
boy's heart is, at exactly the point where a Jewish star would be fixed.

13

14

15

The people pictured on this page of the album are Lien's ev-

16

eryday companions as the months pass in Dordrecht. Her crying,

17

which started so suddenly, eases off over the weeks as she settles more 18

and more into the routine of life in the Bilderdijkstraat. Nothing is 19

said about such things in the family. In fact, nobody ever talks about 20

feelings or mothers and fathers; Auntie and Uncle are just steady, de-

21

pendable, and fair. If you fall over and scrape your knee, then Aun-

22

tie will dab it with iodine, give you a kiss, and usher you off back

23

outside.

24

There is always fun to be had with Kees or Annie or with the other

25

children on the street. The games they play are a little bit different 26

from the ones she is used to, but once you know the rules about how

27

many steps to take, or how long you have to cover your eyes before you 28  
start running, or how many marbles you can hold at one time, then

29

they are really just the same.

30S

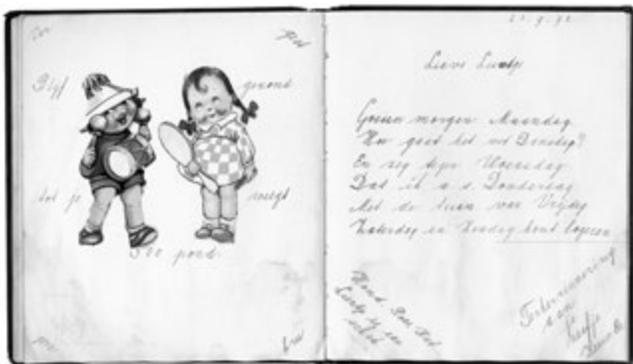
One afternoon in September when they are both in the kitchen,

31N

Lien asks Kees to write in her poesie album. At first she is afraid that 76

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### the cut out girl

maybe he will think it is all silly girl's stuff, but he takes the book from 01  
her hands without saying anything and sits down at the table, for a

02

long time just chewing the top of his pen. When eventually he starts

03

writing his tongue sticks out a little from the corner of his mouth. She 04

is allowed to look only when he has completely finished, and when she 05

does so she finds both pages are filled with Kees's best handwriting, 06

which has little curls at the ends of the letters and sticks perfectly to 07

the lightly drawn pencil lines.

08

09

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

He has spaced his words out so that sometimes you need to read

22

from top to bottom and sometimes from corner to corner:

23

24

*For— get*

25

*Me— not*

26

27

*Dog, cat, rat*

28

29

*Lientje is a*

S30

*Treasure*

N31

77

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***Bart van Es***

01

*Stay— safe*

02

*and— sound*

03

*til — you*

04

*weigh— 500 pounds!*

05

06

*Good morning Monday.*

07

*How is Tuesday?*

08

*And say to Wednesday.*

09

*That next Thursday*

10

*I'll take the Friday train*

11

*For a Saturday and Sunday stay.*

12

13

*To remind you*

14

*of*

15

*your*

16

*cousin*

17

*Kees*

18

19

Almost all the letters are formed perfectly. It is only at the end of 20 the word "Lientje" that the ink blots and thickens a little where Kees 21 first wrote "Lien" and then added the "tje" onto the end of it—"tje"

22

meaning “little one,” used for something or someone you hold dear.

23

Lien sees much less of Ali, who is too old now to play on the street

24

and spends her time instead with her girlfriends, talking about clothes 25

and hair and boys and other things that do not interest Lien at all.

26

When Ali writes in the poesie album she gives Lien a grown-up fu-

27

ture very different from her childish games:

28

29

*Dear Lientje,*

30S

*I wish you:*

31N

**78**

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## **the cut out girl**

*A handsome young man of your own,*

01

*A stunning and beautiful home,*

02

*A mountain of money,*

03

*Each morning all sunny,*

04

*With cows in the field and a horse in the stable,*

05

*A pig in the salt and a ham on the table,*

06

*All this and no fears,*

07

*For one hundred years.*

08

*To remind you of your cousin, Ali*

09

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

Ali's handwriting, like everything else about her, is neat, regular,

24

and grown-up.

25

It is odd to have Ali writing about this world of cows, horses,

26

and stables, which is not at all like the world of terraced houses

27

and factory workers in which they live. Lien does see a lot of farms, 28

though, outside Dordrecht, on expeditions looking for wildlife with

29

Kees or on trips to see Granny and Grandpa in Strijen, twenty

S30

N31

79

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***Bart van Es***

01

minutes on the bus from where they live. Granny and Grandpa

02

Strien (which is what everyone calls Strijen) have a three- room rented 03

cottage in a village where there is no electricity, so at night you use an oil lamp, although mostly you have to go to bed as soon as it gets

05

dark.

06

Lien often visits Strien with Kees and Ali on weekends. Riding

07

together on the bus bumping along the ridge of the dike they feel like

royalty, looking out at the huge flatness of fields on all sides. At

09

Granny and Grandpa's you get to sleep high up on a platform under

10

the sloping roof after climbing a ladder. From there you can peek

11

down over the ledge at the room below you, but almost at once the

12

kerosene lamp is turned off— the flame dying with a soft *pop*— and it

is impossible to see anything at all. Lien has never beheld such dark-

14

ness or such silence. When she stares into it, shapes float in front of

15

her and there is a ringing sound in her ears.

16

In the morning she helps to feed the pig (who will soon be “in salt”

17

in the larder), the rabbits, and the chickens. These all live in pens on 18  
the little strip of land that surrounds the cottage, where your shoes 19  
sink deep into the cold clay. The mouths of the rabbits are like the clay 20  
in their chilly softness as they snuffle the clumps of grass from Lien’s 21  
palm. Built right against the dike, which rears up like a mountain

22

behind it, the cottage looks out onto the dark water of a canal and

23

beyond this onto a sea of fields, stretching until they vanish in the 24  
morning mist.

25

At breakfast Lien is squeezed between Kees and Ali. Granny—

26

who speaks a countryside Dutch that Lien finds hard to follow— holds 27  
a loaf tight against her aproned stomach and butters the end. “Who

28

would like a stick?” she asks. Kees is quickest to raise his hand, so 29  
Granny cuts swiftly toward herself into the loaf and uses the knife to 30S  
flick a chunk of bread in his direction, making it land right in front of 31N

**80**

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### **the cut out girl**

him on the scrubbed wooden table, right- side up. “Who would like a

01

stick?” Granny repeats.

02

In Strien the children roam free around the cottages, the edges of

03

the fields, and on top of the dikes that look out across the river. There 04

are aunts and uncles in the other cottages that are pressed in between 05

the dike and fields and sometimes they eat there. The aunts are kindly 06

and do not mind if you join them. Just like at Granny and Grandpa’s

07

there are long prayers before mealtimes, but with other children

08

around you must not close your eyes too long during the praying be-

09

cause someone will take the nice bits of food from your plate. The

10

farm workers just accept Lien as part of the crowd of children. If any-

11

one asks, she is “one of Pot’s,” because Grandpa’s nickname is Pot.

12

13

14

Strijen is mud country, perfectly flat. The Netherlands are re-

15

ally a vast estuary formed from Alpine rock that has been ground

16

down over millions of years and carried here by the Rhine. As the

17

land flattens, the great river loses power and in the east it drops

18

smooth, rounded gravel. When it slows still farther to the country’s

19

center it deposits sand. Finally, the river becomes tidal and even

20

slower, leaving the silt that forms the clays of the southwest. It is this 21

riverland that has been turned into polders, with the Rhine (now split 22

into separate broad channels that have their own names as rivers) kept 23

back behind dikes and flowing high above the land.

24

Auntie is a child of this perfectly level mud country, with its un-

25

bounded skies spread far below river and sea. Her father and her

26

brothers are itinerant farm workers, earning just enough by moving

27

from farm to farm as unskilled labor: sowing, weeding, harvesting,

28

hauling the potatoes and sugar beet onto horse- drawn wagons so they 29

can be carried to town. When there is no farm work to be had the men

S30

N31

**81**

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

leave home to labor on the barges out in the mudflats, where they

02

gather reeds for roofing and the manufacture of baskets. These polder 03

laborers, with hands like cracked leather, are the lowest order of Dutch 04

society— they own almost nothing, as if ground down like the rock

05

from the Alps, from boulders, to gravel, to sand, to mud.

06

Auntie has left this clay country and come to the city, first as a

07

maid in service and now as the wife of an engine fitter, with his two 08

children to care for, and Lien, as well as a child of her own. She has 09

turned against the religion of her parents— their prayers and their Bi-

10

ble reading, their belief that thunder is the anger of God— and re-

11

placed it with a faith in socialism: the faith that men and women can 12  
be made better through collective effort; that a new world can be built 13  
through education, health care, and public building, things held in  
14

common by all. The German invasion is a setback, but she and her  
15

husband are prepared for a fight.

16

17

18

Lien is now part of the rhythm of her new family. She does

19

not think about the war or politics, except in the vaguest sense as

20

something that governs the movements of an impossibly distant adult

21

world. She does, of course, miss Mamma and Pappa. The intense hurt

22

of those weeks following her birthday has abated, but there is still that 23

deep sense of longing, the wish that seizes her when she least expects 24

it, just wanting Mamma to be there. As the days darken, Lien begins

25

to think of the second of the dates that were in her mind when she

26

arrived in Dordrecht: Mamma's birthday on October 28. She has

27

money to spend on a present and a letter to write. Because they cannot 28

use the public postal service, Lien has to start in good time, so Auntie 29

tells her to sit down at the kitchen table one rainy Thursday afternoon 30S

after school. It is funny to write as if a date that is still nearly a month 31N

in the future is already there:

**82**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 82

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**the cut out girl**

*1 October '42*

01

02

*Darling Mammie,*

03

*Hooray, the happy day we've been looking forward to has finally*

04

*arrived.*

05

*I am going to school now. In September I started going to school.*

06

*I am sending you a little present. Next year a bigger present. And 07*

*now we must do some singing, till your throat is sore.*

08

09

Lien writes out all the words of the Dutch birthday song, so that

10

her letter already gets to two thirds of the way down the first side of 11

the big sheet of lined paper: "Long may she live, long may she live,

12

long may she live in gloooory. In gloooory. . . ." There is now more 13

song on the page than there is news. Finally, the song runs out. "So,"

14

writes Lien, as if she is herself breathless from the singing, "now you 15

must have a sore throat?" Writing to Mamma is not nearly as nice as

16

going to see her would be, and it is difficult to know what to say. A 17  
good part of the letter is now completed, but there is still a side and a 18  
quarter of empty lined paper to be filled with some kind of news.

19

20

*At first it was a bit strange and new at school. I had to get used 21  
to it. After a bit it got better. Luckily I am not behind with my 22  
studies. We are already doing fractions. I am not very good at them, 23  
but it is still going quite well. There is a boy here who is also not a 24  
Jew anymore. And you are not a Jew anymore. And it is nearly a*

25

*quarter of an hour's walk to school. I have a master now, not a lady 26  
teacher. He is called Mr. Heimenberg and he is a great joker. First 27  
he colored a girl's cheeks red with red chalk from the blackboard . . .*

28

29

“And you are not a Jew anymore. And it is nearly a quarter of an

S30

hour's walk to school.” How did she go from the one to the other?

N31

**83**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 83

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

Lien does not think about it; her pen just keeps moving along the pa-

02

per as she thinks half about Mamma and half about whether it will

03

soon be dry enough for playing outside. She also starts thinking about 04

Mr. Heimenberg, the teacher. Caught up in the excitement, she gets

05

confused and starts repeating her words:

06

07

*And then he also chalks her nose red. And then also a*

08

*girl or a boy in Maths has has to point out something and*

09

*then he turns like this with the stick and they cannot get it.*

10

*Finally he gives it to them and someone or other has to point*

11

*it out.*

12

13

Quite what this story is about remains unclear, no matter how

14

many times you read it, but Lien's writing continues unperturbed:

15

16

*For the rest, the children at school and on the street are quite*

17

*kind. And the little girl, Mariannetje, nearly two years old, she is a 18*

*mischievous darling. First she had to go on the potty. She calls it her 19*

*“po.” So I went to get the potty. Then Auntie said, “So*

20

*Mariannetje, come over here and then you can go on your potty.”*

21

*But then she said “No, no popo— fibbering.” What she*

22

*meant was that she didn’t need the potty, she had told*

23

*a fib.*

24

25

Now Lien is nearly at the bottom of the sheet of paper, so that the

26

last bit of her final sentence has to be squeezed into unlined space: 27

28

*I hope you have a lovely day, and we here will also celebrate a*

29

*little bit. I will buy flowers and some nice food. I hope that next 30S*

*year we will be together again. Many kisses from Lientje, who*

31N

*misses you very much.*

**84**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 84

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### **the cut out girl**

Will she really buy flowers and nice food for her mother's birth-

01

day? It feels like the correct and grown-up thing to say, just like the 02

present she is sending feels correct and grown-up: a little tile that has 03

a cartoon on it, drawn in what looks like felt pen.

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

It shows a man who is supposed to be drowning, although, to be

18

honest, his chest is very dry looking in its smart jacket, and his body 19  
sticks out high above the waterline. The shore is right beside him,

20

frustratingly out of reach, but luckily a life buoy is flying through the 21  
sky on its way toward him. “When danger is at its height, rescue is

22

close at hand” is written beneath. Standing in the shop with Auntie it 23  
felt like a fitting present, and also it is not possible to send things that 24  
are bulky when using the secret post. Auntie praises Lien for finishing 25  
her letter and packs it and the tile into an envelope, adding a little note 26  
of her own:

27

28

*Dear Lien's Mother,*

29

*I want just to add a few words to Lientje's letter. It did take her S30  
a bit of effort to get it full this time, but she succeeded in the end!*

N31

**85**

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***Bart van Es***

01

*She is still doing very wel — she goes to school and I get very*

02

*good reports on how she is doing. She is well behaved and quick on 03  
the uptake. She is always cheerful, but now and then she does miss 04  
you and her father very badly.*

05

*Lientje chose the present herself. She would have preferred the*

06

*motto "He who laughs last, laughs best," but they didn't have that 07  
one in the shop.*

08

*As far as clothes are concerned, I am organizing things as seems*

09

*best to me. Everything that gets too small for our Ali fits her*

10

*perfectly. She has clothes enough, but there are a few things she has 11  
grown out of. But anyway, it is all working fine.*

12

*I often say to her that she is a half boy and then she replies,*

13

*“That’s what mother always said.”*

14

*I hope that your day is not too sad, if that is possible, and that 15  
next year we can congratulate you in person, together with your*

16

*husband and your child.*

17

*We shall make it a bit festive here and Lien will certainly think 18  
of you the whole day.*

19

*If it is possible, do send us a letter and write to say if there is 20  
anything special you would like us to do for Lien.*

21

*All best wishes, also from*

22

*Lientje's Uncle Henk.*

23

*Her Auntie, Jans*

24

25

It is not easy to write this message or to get the girl to write to her 26  
far- off mother and it is harder still when the envelope comes back

27

unopened and has to be hidden from Lien's sight.

28

Meanwhile, Auntie continues with the washing, the cleaning, the

29

cooking, and the bringing up of children, trying as best she can. Lien's 30S  
dresses (the Bonneterie gray silk and the clock dress of satin made by 31N  
her mother) need to be passed down the line to other children, they

11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

cannot be kept as mementos, even if they feel to Lien at that instant 01  
like treasures lost.

02

When Lien wants to write to her father for his birthday on De-

03

cember10, Auntie has to tell her that there is no address to write to, 04

their papers have been misplaced. That afternoon it is quiet in the

05

kitchen and Lien sits herself down in a corner. On her finger, she has 06

two little rings that were a gift from her parents, one silver and one 07

gold. She takes them off and starts to roll them up and down along

08

the floorboards, from one hand to the other and back. First one and

09

then the second slips down through a gap near the wall into the dark-

10

ness. Lien does not remember thinking at all about her parents for a

11

very long time after that.

12

13

14

The winter days are darker and colder and Lien spends more

15

time at home, playing with Marianne in the kitchen or chatting with a 16

friend in the adjoining room. Auntie does not often give kisses or cud-

17

dles, or speak of love, but she does give a sense of assurance, and that, 18

more than anything, allows Lien to be a child. There is a clean, dry

19

heat from the stove and there is always a comfortable smell of washing, 20

or ironing, or cooking in the air. When Lien comes home from school

21

there is warm milk and a thick slice of bread with apple syrup on it.

22

There are questions about how her day went and there is news about

23

what little Marianne has done today together with Auntie.

24

Over time, more and more names of friends appear in Lien's poesie

25

album. One contribution, from her classmate Nelly Baks, is a special

26

favorite because of its flowing calligraphy and its strange, rapturous 27

language, an old style of Dutch that has fallen out of use:

28

29

*Dearest Lieneke,*

S30

*Say, what stand'st thou there among the flowers,*

N31

**87**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

*Sweet tender plants and sprightly herbs?*

02

*'Twixt clod and stone whence come thy powers?*

03

*Oh thou who so mine heart disturbs!*

04

05

This verse is from a book that is kept in a glass cabinet in the front 06  
room of Nelly's house. When no one is home Nellie sometimes creeps

07

in there to look at it, and, even though she does not understand all the 08  
words, she has learnt it by heart.

09

Annie Mookhoek, Lien's closest friend, is also an admirer of the

10

poem and she wishes that hers, which is the first in the Dordt section 11  
of the album (dated September 1), had been as romantic as Nelly's.

12

Now that it is winter, Annie Mookhoek is often to be found in the

13

kitchen in the Bilderdijkstraat, also drinking warm milk and eating

14

bread with apple syrup. This wild-eyed girl with flowing hair loves 15  
nothing better than princesses and stories of knights and castles from 16  
the olden days. As she and Lien sit in the children's bedroom next to 17  
the kitchen, the two of them talk of romantic adventures, of outlaws

18

living a life on the run under an evil king, their girlish faces lit up with 19  
the excitement of it all. They imagine worlds together. Then, taken up 20  
by the moment, Lien whispers to Annie that she has a real secret, one 21  
that nobody is allowed to know. Annie offers her ear for her to whis-

22

per. "I am really a Jewess in hiding," Lien breathes. "Jewess." The

23

word is intoxicating. Annie turns, her eyes wide in amazement, look-

24

ing anew at her friend. "Is that really true?" she asks.

25

A few days later, Lien comes home to find Auntie strangely shiv-

26

ery, waiting for her in the kitchen, without either warm milk or bread 27  
with syrup. Lien feels a tight, painful grip on her arm and is led to the 28  
*mooie kamer*. Auntie shuts the door and then turns to put both her 29  
hands on Lien's shoulders, pinching them with the same hard grip.

30S

She bends forward so close that the little girl sees the tiny, thin

31N

**88**

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### **the cut out girl**

spiderweb of red lines on her cheeks. Annie has told her mother, who

01

has passed this on.

02

“You must never, ever, tell that to anyone,” Auntie says slowly,

03

stopping after each word.

04

Lien is sent to bed without any dinner, something that has never

05

happened before. She lies there staring upward at the ceiling with dry 06  
eyes, hearing the scraping of chairs, the clink of cutlery on plates, and 07  
the hubbub of voices through the thin door. Beyond these sounds,

08

nothing at all enters her consciousness at this moment— neither fear, 09  
nor regret, nor any memory of home. Outside, a dark entity presses

10

upon her: some vast, hovering, invisible creature, perceptible only

11

through the beating force of its wings.

12

13

14

There is one other person to whom Lien has confided her

15

secret, but Hansje— the sad- faced boy from the photo album— has not 16  
told anyone else. More often now the two of them spend time to-

17

gether, outside even in the January chill. They play a game called ani-

18

mal graveyard in a spot by the half- built wall in the scrublands, where 19

they will take a dead mouse, a frozen bird, or a softly iridescent but-

20

terfly with wings that crumble to the touch. Hansje and Lien dig the

21

cold, hard earth with a broken slate and build coffins and headstones—

22

cutting the dates of burial into a piece of brick with a nail. Sometimes 23

they cannot find any creatures that need burial, so they find live ones 24

instead and help them on their way. They will crack the shell of a bee-

25

tle or crush the pink- ribbed tube of a worm found hidden under a

26

rock. The ceremonies are just the same for the “helped” as they are for 27

the already dead— soft words mumbled as the body is lowered into the 28

grave. Lien and Hansje, who is also “not a Jew anymore,” have some-

29

thing in common, although they never even whisper what it is.

S30

N31

**89**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 89

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

The winter of 1942– 43 is much milder than the one that preceded

02

it, but there is still frost, icy rain, and the occasional flurry of snow.

03

Lien suffers from what are called winter feet— red- bluish blisters and 04

an itchy tingle around the toes. The cure for this is rather medieval: 05

having to sit, each morning, with your feet in a bowl of your first

06

urine, warm but rapidly cooling as the minutes pass. For the rest—

07

while Polish Jews fight in the Warsaw Uprising against the final liq-

08

uidation of the ghetto and while the German army faces defeat at

09

Stalingrad— all is fairly quiet in Dordrecht. There is enough to eat, 10  
even if choice is more limited, and Lien has no thoughts at all about 11  
the progress of the war.

12

For her life continues as normal. In fact, it becomes more normal

13

over time. She is simply one of the family. As the thin ice cracks on 14  
ponds and ditches, she goes out to look for frog spawn with Kees and

15

fills great jars full of the jelly with its little black spots. They go more 16  
often to Strien and watch the plowing and the sowing. The routine of

17

life in the Bilderdijkstraat is uninterrupted: friends still come to din-

18

ner; the games out on the street continue; and Auntie oversees every-

19

thing with her warm, self- confident care. Lien and Kees are like sister 20  
and brother— during the holidays they spend their days together, up

21

to no good. It is easy learning at school and being friends with other 22

children, and as the days grow longer, Lien spends more and more of

23

her time playing out in the sun.

24

25

26

One afternoon in the spring of 1943 she is out in the back-

27

yard with Mariannetje, who is now quite steady on her feet. They are

28

playing a chasing game, with Lien as the chaser. The closer she gets to 29

the escaping Marianne the more frantic the little girl's steps become, 30S

until finally they are almost paralyzed with delicious, giggling fear.

31N

Lien carries her with wobbly steps to the captive place, lets her run, 90

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**the cut out girl**

then catches her again. Auntie is working in the kitchen with the door 01

open, chopping onions that sizzle at the bottom of the big pan. The

02

doorbell rings, which is unusual, and because Auntie is in the middle 03  
of something Lien is sent from the yard, through the kitchen, and

04

along the corridor to the front of the house to see who it is. Behind 05  
her, the kitchen is all scent, noise, and light.

06

She sees a figure through the little glass window and pulls the

07

front door toward her. There on the doorstep stand two men in police

08

uniform— big and full of power— and before she can even look up to

09

see their faces they charge past her into the house. Although she does 10

not know it, these are Harry Evers and Arie den Breejen. Their heavy

11

steps thump down the corridor, and then Lien hears the smash of the

12

kitchen door.

13

She stands confused momentarily.

14

The next instant, Auntie is there beside her, down at her level.

15

On the floor, below the pegs for the coats, there is an old pair of

16

boots, probably Uncle's. Auntie pushes them toward her.

17

“Put these on, go to Mrs. de Bruyne's, don't come back.”

18

And all at once she is out on the street, her feet so loose in the

19

boots that she almost trips. The Bilderdijkstraat feels like a different 20

place now, or rather it is the same but with time slowed down. The

21

walk across the road to Mrs. de Bruyne's, just a few steps away, feels 22

like a journey even though Lien is moving as quickly as she can. She

23

rings the bell and stands there, only looking forward at the door han-

24

dle, not turning her head. If she had the watch that Mamma had

25

hoped to give her, its hands would be standing still.

26

After what seems like an age, Mrs. de Bruyne opens the door. One

27

glance and just the first word of an unplanned sentence is enough for 28

Lien to be pulled inward and for the door to slam shut. They stand for 29

a moment in silence. There are some stairs at the end of the corridor S30

and Mrs. de Bruyne is staring toward them, transfixed. Lien can tell

N31

**91**

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***Bart van Es***

01

that Fau Buyne, who is so familiar, does not know what to do, even

02

though she is an adult and ought to be in charge. Fau Buyne looks

03

suddenly old. But then she shakes herself from her shoulders, takes

04

Lien by the hand very gently, and leads her into the front room, the

05

*mooie kamer.*

06

“Stay in here, love.” She has a shake in her voice, like an old lady

07

would have.

08

The door clicks shut and there is rapid movement behind it, steps

09

that quickly fade. Lien stands on her own in the center of the room,

10

which is cool and dark, the white curtains almost entirely closed. This 11

side of the street is in shadow, but across the road number 10 is still 12

bathed in sunlight— it is just visible through the window and Lien

13

stands there in the shade looking at the house she has just left. One of 14

the uniformed men steps out of the front door and puts his hand over

15

his eyes to shield them from the sun, briefly scanning the street. Lien 16  
does not move and, oddly, feels no fear. For a long time she just stands 17  
there, watching the men enter and exit, but in the end Lien sits down 18  
on the sofa, from where she studies the photographs on the wall that

19

loom in the near darkness, and listens to the ticking of the clock.

20

*A mooie kamer* is a place of transition: Lien sat in a place like this 21  
half a year ago when she first came to Dordrecht with Mrs. Heroma.

22

And eventually it is again Mrs. Heroma who will come to collect her

23

and bring her to a different house. After that, Lien will go onward to 24  
new addresses and new people. But the house that she will always look 25  
back on as a refuge is 10 Bilderdijkstraat, the home of Jans and Henk 26  
van Es.

27

28

29

30S

31N

**92**

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01

02

*Eight*

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

I had always known that my grandparents sheltered Jewish children

12

during the German occupation of the Netherlands. For many years

13

I had meant to look into this, but all the same, until December 2014 I 14  
knew almost no details about what actually happened at that time.

15

There were no family stories about it. For me there was just the faint 16  
mental image of pale faces looking up from beneath the floorboards,

17

too cartoonish to feel real.

18

My grandfather died when I was seven, and although my grand-

19

mother, Jans, was a significant figure for me until she died when I was 20  
in my early twenties, I had barely talked with her about the war. When 21

I asked her about it she would say, “We were not brave, but you had no 22  
choice if somebody turned up at your door.” With that the conversa-

23

tion ended and so the past receded into the background, seemingly

24

dead because there was no talk to keep it alive.

25

Then, in November 2014, my uncle Kees passed away. He was the

26

senior figure in the family, my father's loved and admired big brother.

27

My most recent contact with him had been through his grandson, so

28

Kees already felt to me in some ways like a figure from a bygone age.

29

His death sparked something inside me. A generation and its stories

S30

N31

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***Bart van Es***

01

was fading. If I was to do something before these people and their

02

memories disappeared forever, it must be now.

03

There was no clear moment of decision, but still, while doing the

04

washing-up one Sunday evening, I asked a question that would end

05

up changing my life. My mother had come round for dinner, as she

06

often does on a Sunday when dad is away. I was pushing food from

07

the plates into the recycling caddy, drinking my tea, when I asked

08

about Lien.

09

Lien. I remembered the name from my childhood: a Jewish girl

10

who had stayed with my grandparents during the war. And after the

11

war she had continued to live with them. But I had no memory of

12

having met her, just a vague sense of an argument in the distant past 13

and of a letter sent by my grandmother many years ago, which had

14

severed contact for good. She was never mentioned by the family, but

15

as far as I knew, she was still living and (in spite of my grandmother's 16 wishes) my mother had kept in touch.

17

"Yes, Lien is over eighty now and she lives in Amsterdam, but I

18

don't think she'll want to see you. It is not a happy story and it is best 19 left alone. Anyway, the historical details have already been recorded.

20

They were put on that Stephen Spielberg archive years ago."

21

But I was insistent and my mother inquired, and after a bit I got an

22

address. On December 7, 2014, I sent the following e-mail in Dutch:

23

24

*Dear Lien,*

25

*I am the son of Henk and Dieuwke van Es and I have for many*

26

*years wanted to make contact. I just received your e-mail address 27  
from Dieuwke and was very happy to hear that you would be*

28

*wil ing to meet me. As it happens I will be in the Netherlands from 29  
19 to 22 December. If it worked out for you I would very much like 30S  
to come and see you on one of those days. Maybe for lunch, or to go 31N  
and eat out somewhere, or coffee? I would like to get to know a*

**94**

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**the cut out girl**

*family member. On top of this I would very much like to know*

01

*about your experiences during the war and also after that with the 02  
Van Es family. As part of my job I write academic books and I*

03

*would like to write something about your story (I understand of*

04

*course that the story is not some straightforward fairy tale). Maybe 05*

*we could explore that idea? If that did turn into something I could 06  
also come to the Netherlands on future occasions as wel .*

07

*At the very least I hope to speak to you at some point soon. My*

08

*apologies for my poor Dutch (I do speak it pretty wel ).*

09

*Many thanks and I hope to see you soon,*

10

*Bart van Es*

11

12

Two hours later I received a reply.

13

14

15

At 11:00 a.m. on Sunday, December 21, I parked my car outside

16

Lien's apartment in Amsterdam, walked to the entrance, and pressed

17

the buzzer reading “de Jong,” which I recognized as my grandmother’s

18

maiden name. By this stage, I had looked up Lien on the Shoah Foun-

19

dation Web site, but as this only featured a still image of her taken in 20

the 1990s plus a few basic facts, I still knew almost nothing about the 21

sort of person I would find. The intercom buzzed and I was invited to 22

climb to the second floor, where she stood waiting on the landing,

23

surrounded by potted plants and posters of modern art.

24

“Let me look at you,” she said, standing back.

25

I was led, with mock formality, along an open walkway with a

26

view of a planted courtyard.

27

“You look more like your mother,” Lien told me. I was struck by

28

the thought that, when she last set eyes on him, my dad would have

29

been close to the age I am now.

S30

Our meeting that day ran on until long after darkness fell. At the

N31

**95**

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***Bart van Es***

01

end, it felt strange to break up our togetherness. In an odd way I felt 02  
older than she, given we'd spoken almost entirely about her life as a 03  
child. We see people at least as much by the stories they tell as by their 04  
outward appearance, and I had gotten to know Lien through the little

05

and the big events in her life before she was nine. Part of her still 06  
felt vulnerable and inexperienced. I promised to return early in the

07

New Year.

08

Traveling back, Holland's motorways looked more modern than

09

ever: the car showrooms lit up like spaceships floating in the black-

10

ness, Audis and BMWs stacked one above the other on great shelves

11

behind glass, their headlights blazing, powered by hidden electric ca-

12

bles, to show their high- tech designs. As I drove on a road that was 13

straight as a beam of light, the black- and- white pictures of Lien's early 14

life returned to me, such as the photo taken in 1938 that shows two

15

girls sitting on an old school bench and, standing behind them, two

16

boys wearing ties and short trousers. Lien wore a bow in her hair, as 17

did her friend.

18

Even more than by the pictures, I was haunted by the mental im-

19

age of Lien's mother planning to tell her daughter about the "secret."

20

There was such self- possession in her parents' conduct, thinking

21

through how best to help Lien onward with the minimum of fuss, to

22

save her even if they could not save themselves. I could see before me 23

that last, composed family meeting, with the aunts and uncles holding 24

their niece for what would prove the final time. And last of all I was 25

struck by her mother's letter to my grandparents: its measured sacri-

26

fice in giving up not simply her daughter but, still more precious, all 27

claim on her daughter's love.

28

Later, having picked up my three children and with my eldest

29

daughter, Josie, sitting beside me, I started to tell her about Lien's 30S

story, but found my voice breaking and had to stop.

31N

Lien's mother had written to my grandparents to say that she

96

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### **the cut out girl**

hoped the eight- year- old girl would “think only of you as her mother 01  
and father and that, in the moments of sadness that will come to her, 02  
you will comfort her as such.” After the war my father grew up with

03

her as a sister. Why, then, at my grandmother’s funeral, was Lien un-

04

mentioned and unseen? How could such a connection break? How

05

could my grandmother have sent her that letter, breaking off contact, 06

signed coldly, “Mrs. van Es”?

07

08

09

Two weeks later I was back with Lien in her apartment and

10

talking now of the time after the raid on my grandparents’ house in

11

the Bilderdijkstraat. She was moved quickly between households,

12

staying in one place for no more than a few days. “The crying became

13

less, each time, in exact proportion to the moves I had made,” she said.

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

26

27

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29

S30

N31

**97**

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01

02

*Nine*

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

A succession of rooms, visited only briefly, sometimes for a night,

12

sometimes for a week. They blur into one another, present only

13

in fleeting memories, such as that of an afternoon spent staring up-

14

ward at the sunshine framing the edges of a blackout blind. Lien

15

makes no decisions, loses self-awareness for hours, but she is not

16

afraid. Everywhere there are new routines to follow: where to wash,

17

when and what to eat, how to eat, where to sleep. On the first night

18

away from the Van Es family she stays with Mrs. de Bruyne's daugh-

19

ter, just a few streets away from the Bilderdijkstraat. When she gets to 20

the camp bed in the upstairs bedroom there is a bag containing her

21

clothes and a few belongings, but no word of what has happened or

22

what is planned. Lien asks no questions. She eats when she is sup-

23

posed to eat and sleeps when she is told it is bedtime. For the rest, 24  
time drifts past without her really noticing it; the people— whether 25  
kind and gentle, nervous, or resentful— meld into one.

26

Lien no longer goes to school and hardly ever sees other children.

27

At first she misses Auntie, Kees, Ali, and Marianne and cries when

28

she thinks of them, but quite soon they— like everything else— lose 29  
focus in her memory. They are shapes at the edge of her field of vision S30  
toward which she will not turn her gaze. Mrs. Heroma, though, is

N31

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***Bart van Es***

01

still a presence. She is spoken of in whispers as a great personage by 02

adults and sometimes she even comes to a front room to collect Lien

03

and take her onward to a new house.

04

At one point Mrs. Heroma takes Lien to her own home, where she

05

lives with her husband the doctor. It is bigger than the other houses 06

she has been in, even though she only sees it very briefly from the

07

outside— pressed, as she was the first time they met, into the folds of 08

Mrs. Heroma's coat. Lien stays in an empty room above the surgery,

09

from where she hears the patients coming and going, the mums chat-

10

ting on the pavement over the tops of their prams.

11

Dr. Heroma is always busy. She hears his bass voice, but not the

12

words he speaks, sounding out, muffled, through the floorboards ev-

13

ery ten minutes as he opens the door to his consulting room and calls 14  
the next patient inside. Occasionally she hears the rattle of his keys as 15  
he closes the front door of the surgery, followed by his quick steps and 16  
the clunk of a car door. The engine trying to start sounds like a kind 17  
of laughter that won't get going: *He, he, he, he— he. He, he, he, he— he.*  
18

Then, at the third attempt, it nearly catches, and on the fourth it does, 19  
almost straightaway turning to a weak and then a strong *pitter- patter*, 20  
*pitter- patter, pitter- patter*. For a short while it stays there while the en-  
21

gine establishes its rhythm, then the pitch of the *pitter- patter* goes 22  
higher and moves off down the street and fades away.

23

Mrs. Heroma is more strict during the time that Lien is staying

24

with her. Lien has to be absolutely still on the sofa upstairs. Elsewhere 25  
in the house there are other people, but she never sees them. On the

26

drying rack that stands in the room in front of her there is laundry, 27  
women's clothing, which does not belong to Mrs. Heroma. Some-

28

times in the night there is movement. The front door opens and then

29

shuts with a tiny click that echoes in the silence. In the darkness Lien 30S  
often lies awake with nothing but blackness in front of her eyes.

31N

She keeps on being moved from one house to another. Whenever

**100**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

Lien feels sleep press in upon her, at night or on some empty after-

01

noon while gazing at floorboards, she fills her mind with pictures and 02

flies high over the buildings to the places where she used to play. She 03

is Goeie Lientje (Good Lien) when she can do this flying and carries

04

out little miracles in a world of familiar faces where the rules are not 05

the same. She rescues animals and people and explains things to ev-

06

everyone without having to think at all about what to say. All the time 07  
there is that flying feeling, a kind of swimming through the air that 08  
she feels even when her feet are on the ground. Strange waves make  
09

her feel unsteady but she knows that all will be well.

10

There is also a Kwaai Lientje (Bad Lien or Angry Lien) who can-

11

not fly and who seems to wade slowly through an invisible tar. Some-

12

times Kwaai Lientje does not move forward at all and just drifts

13

backward on the stream of stickiness, however hard she tries. Kwaai

14

Lientje goes with Hansje to the animal graveyard they have made to-

15

gether. There they take the creatures that are dead or dying and carry 16

them to graves so deep down in the earth that the bottom cannot be

17

seen. As for the animals that are still living, Kwaai Lientje helps

18

them on their way, feeling the crack of their little bones as she holds 19  
them in her grip. Goeie Lientje or Kwaai Lientje, she feels herself

20

shifting from one to the other— from good to bad or angry— as she

21

stares into the blankness while empty hours go by.

22

23

24

At last, the people who determine these things make a decision:

25

Lien must go away from Dordt. So here she stands, dressed and ready,

26

in another upstairs bedroom, waiting for another person to collect her 27

and take her to a new place. The bell rings, but Lien knows not to

28

answer and waits patiently behind the closed door. There are feet on

29

the stairs and then suddenly a voice that is familiar, loud even when S30

she is trying to whisper. It is Auntie. Lien does not rush out to

N31

**101**

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***Bart van Es***

01

embrace her but instead remains timidly where she is standing, one leg 02

curled behind the other, waiting to be hugged. A familiar smell envel-

03

ops her, the soft heaviness of arms pressing downward, and a floating 04

sensation, her feet dangling as she is pulled upward to Auntie's ruddy 05

cheek. It is the first time that somebody has touched her in many

06

weeks.

07

But there is no time for greetings, and anyway, this is not a re-

08

union. Auntie will take her on the back of her bike to a new place

09

where she will be safe. A few words are spoken that do not really reg-

10

ister, about everyone being well back at home in the Bilderdijkstraat, 11

and moments later Lien is sitting sidesaddle on the baggage rack of

12

Auntie's bicycle, looking out in the early morning on the familiar

13

streets of Dordt. It is a Saturday, she thinks, or at least there are no 14

schoolchildren, just a few men who walk with their heads down, step-

15

ping quickly on their way to work. At first it looks as if Auntie is

16

heading to Granny and Grandpa's in Strien, because once they are out

17

of the city there are the same dark, flat, empty fields decked with

18

mist. But riding up on the silent dike road, high above the land, they 19

take the opposite direction, heading southwest.

20

After a while they ride beside the gray expanse of the Oude Maas

21

River. A few barges that sit upon it struggle against the stream toward 22  
Dordrecht, creating small white waves around their bows and a yel-

23

lowish wash behind. The barges are so heavily laden that their decks

24

stand just a foot or so above the water, but they ride above the level of 25  
the land. Lien sits passively looking outward while Auntie peddles

26

without varying her pace. Auntie's legs move rhythmically upward

27

and downward, upward and downward, just like the steam train that

28

took Lien away from her home in The Hague. Spring sunshine clears

29

the fog from the fields that stretch below to one side of them. The

30S

birds are singing. They pass through villages with tall redbrick houses 31N

where there are mothers queuing for bakeries and children playing in

**102**

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**the cut out girl**

the street. Auntie cycles onward. In her mind's eye Lien magically

01

begins to fly above the scene.

02

The journey is broken up when they cross the river on a ferry

03

boat— a proper one like you get in books, with a funnel belching coal 04

smoke that you can taste on your tongue, a deck with ventilation ports, 05

and a real captain in a uniform on the bridge. It is almost like crossing 06

an ocean, feeling the engine thump away below you as you run from

07

one side of the boat to the other and then stand at the bow like a look-

08

out watching the approaching shore. There are two other children on

09

the boat: a bigger girl of ten and her brother, aged eight. Lien fits right 10

in between them and soon they are Nile explorers, watching out for

11

attackers, weapons at the ready. Here, out on the river, the breeze is 12  
stronger— blowing hair around your face and into your mouth. After

13

weeks of solitary existence, in the sunshine Lien suddenly comes alive.

14

But now the sound from the engine changes and all too soon there

15

is a squeak of wood against metal as the ferry bumps against a jetty

16

and the mooring ropes are thrown. Almost at once the gates open and

17

they cycle on, plunged again into the emptiness of the flatland, which 18

is disturbed only by the regular crisscross of ditches and dikes. After 19

the momentary animation of being with the other children, Lien

20

drifts back to her dreamworld, hardly registering where they go. The

21

day is warm, almost summery, and as time passes the air that sur-

22

rounds them becomes heavy with the fragrant damp that rises from

23

the earth. To Lien, who is sitting so uncomfortably with her legs dan-

24

gling, it feels like a long journey, but it is still morning when Auntie 25

finally stops.

26

27

28

29

S30

N31

**103**

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01

02

*Ten*

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

When Lien and Auntie step from the bicycle they are on top of

12

a high dike facing an even broader stretch of water than the

13

one they crossed by ferry. This is the Nieuwe Maas, on the other side 14

of which, a few miles downstream, lies Rotterdam. Lien has no idea

15

where she is or where she is going, but this is the place where—

16

according to the story that they told everyone in Dordrecht— her par-

17

ents are supposed to have died. Three years ago, in 1940, German

18

bombers smashed the heart of the old city, leveling twenty- five thou-

19

sand homes in a single raid. The destruction and the threat that the

20

same would happen to Utrecht if there was no surrender broke the

21

Dutch war effort. Without an air force there was nothing that could

22

be done.

23

When Rotterdam was engulfed by a firestorm on May 14, 1940,

24

the war meant almost nothing to Lien, who was only seven, and even

25

now, she has never seen bombing, or shooting, or even anger from a

26

uniformed man. A square mile of rubble that was once the center of a

27

Renaissance city lies just beyond the horizon. Yet from where Lien

28

stands on the great river she sees only sunshine and newly cut grass.

29

In Rotterdam, though, in the spring of 1943, resistance is growing.

S30

This is the industrial base of the Netherlands, a place of union power, N31

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***Bart van Es***

01

where the now- banned Social Democratic Workers' Party (of which

02

the Heromas and the Van Esses are members) has deep roots. Across

03

the river from the city is a landscape of farms, outhouses, and small 04

villages where it is easier for the resistance to hide. This, therefore, is 05

the logical place to take a Jewish child now that the situation in Dor-

06

drecht has become too dangerous for her to remain.

07

Lien does not remember the moment of arrival in IJsselmonde.

08

Following her departure from the Van Esses and the period of lonely

09

isolation at short- stay addresses in Dordrecht, she has struggled more 10  
and more to engage with the outside world.

11

Once again Lien is passed from one adult to another, without a

12

real explanation or a proper good- bye. It was the same when she was 13  
collected from the Pletterijstraat by Mrs. Heroma just eight months

14

ago. The Lien who is handed over this time, however, is a different

15

creature: no list of funny street names could catch her attention now.

16

You will not see her crying because she misses her parents or the Van 17  
Esses, or reaching out to befriend a fresh set of children as she arrives 18  
at her new home. A curtain of self- protection has descended. Lien

19

thinks little about the past or the future, and even the present is re-

20

duced to just a small number of necessary things. When she later looks 21

back at IJsselmonde, she will see it only in black and white. Almost all 22

that registers in her memory is the cold stone floor and the lack of

23

natural light.

24

25

26

The cottage where she stays is a single- story whitewashed build-

27

ing, rather like a barn, that is half smothered by the dike. There are 28

ten people in this small building: a couple with six children, then Lien 29

and another hideaway, Jo. The parents are teachers and, like Auntie

30S

and Uncle van Es, members of the Social Democratic Workers' Party.

31N

Mieneke, the mother, tells her children to make room for Lien at the

11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

kitchen table and afterward shows her where she can sleep. There is a 01

back room for the girls and the grown-up daughters. It is so full of

02

bedding that you can barely see the floor. Lien should be able to

03

squeeze in on the right, up against the wall, Mienieke tells her, then 04

checks in Lien's bag that she has enough clothes to wear and points

05

out where the chamber pot is kept.

06

Once Lien is hidden inside the dike cottage, unable to return to

07

the daylight, the heat within her turns cold and she barely speaks. The 08

family— who are lively, friendly, and interested in her welfare— comes 09

into the house with flushed cheeks as if from a different world. Lien 10

hardly sees them. She moves from the bedroom to the kitchen, doing

11

a bit of cleaning, peeling potatoes, and washing dishes. She is unused 12  
to housework, and the knife sits awkwardly in her hand as she cuts a

13

still- muddy potato, revealing a thick, clean slab of yellow beneath.

14

She has to tell her fingers, as if they are somebody else's, to cut more 15  
gently so as not to waste the food. Mieneke gives her direction, stand-

16

ing behind her and guiding Lien with her hands.

17

Mieneke is there in the kitchen at mealtimes but she often goes out

18

straight after. It is only to Jo, with whom she is left in the house once 19  
the others have gone, that Lien ever feels close. Jo talks and she lis-

20

tens. He is eighteen and has escaped from a camp in Germany, but he

21

is not Jewish. They are not taking only Jews now, he tells her; all men 22  
who are not in essential professions are being forced to go to work in 23

Germany. If you are under thirty- five you can't get food stamps with-

24

out a right-to-stay permit and if you're caught without one they'll send 25  
you to an Arbeitslager, which is worse than prison. There's no way Jo's 26  
going to work again for the *Moffen*, as he calls them, and, if things 27  
somehow work themselves out, he'll find a way to fight.

28

With his big frame Jo is like a giant cooped up here under the raf-

29

ters, looking almost straight across at the four small, square, strangely S30  
familiar windows below the roofline that let in a little light. Jo has a N31

**107**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

sense of the outside that doesn't need a window to see it. He laughs

02

with the family, asks what they have been doing, has views on farm-

03

ing, teases the girls, and remembers their names.

04

Weeks turn into months in IJsselmonde— light shines more

05

brightly through the square windows, and then as July turns first to

06

August and then to September, it gradually fades. Lien loses track of 07

time amidst the sameness of the days. The house, which never got

08

warm even in the height of summer, grows ever colder with the stove

09

left unlit. There are itchy spots on her legs. She hardly noticed that 10

she was scratching them at first, but as time passes more and more

11

hard purple lumps appear that bleed when they are broken open, leav-

12

ing gashes of black scab. She wants to hide them but they call out with 13

a thumping rhythm. They burn hot and sharp if she pulls her socks up

14

over them, so she walks shivering with her bare feet swollen purple,

15

feeling the eyes of the other girls as she steps.

16

At night Lien sleeps in the crowded room with the others, women

17

and girls turning their weight in the darkness, thickening the air with 18  
their breath. She wraps herself tight under her cover, surrounded by

19

the sense of the other bodies. Her legs, with their heat in the midst 20  
of the coldness, keep her awake. In the morning she stands up when

21

the room stirs around her. It is hardly any brighter than it was during 22  
the night. Inside, she feels a numbness, keeping everything at a dis-

23

tance, not once having a sense of fear.

24

25

26

Then, one evening in the late months of 1943, another moment of

27

crisis arrives, another knock at the door. Lien is doing the washing-up 28  
in the kitchen, but she is told to go and hide. From the bedroom mo-

29

ments later, Lien hears excited talking, and then Mieneke comes in

30S

telling Jo and her they must run because the police are on their way.

31N

It is odd how shoes matter at these moments. When the men came

**108**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

to the Bilderdijkstraat she had to go out in the big boots that stood by 01  
the doorway, but now her feet are so swollen that nothing will fit.

02

Lien feels almost calm, but a charge runs through the rest of the

03

household, and before she knows it the freezing night air and the

04

darkness is upon her and she is being jogged roughly on Jo's shoulder, 05

one of his arms wrapped across her sore legs. He knows where he is

06

going and edges along the sides of barns and outbuildings in a crouch-

07

ing run. Then there is a thump to the ground and a feeling of wetness 08

and the scratching of thorns around them as they lie hidden, Jo's chest 09

quietly heaving against her, in a ditch.

10

There are invisible voices around them and they hear the barking

11

of dogs. Not very far away there are lights on the road. The lights and 12

voices grow stronger, come to a stop very near them, and then begin

13

slightly to fade. Without warning, Jo grips her legs tightly again and 14

pushes them forward through the brambles at half pace. Though it

15

ought to be hurting she feels nothing but elation as she digs her fin-

16

gers into the material of his coat. Jo jerks his head from left to right 17

and then breaks into a second run, this time up the slope of the dike.

18

His feet slip beneath them but he carries on scrabbling with a fero-

19

cious energy until they are for a moment high up on the road where

20

the wind hits them and where she sees the glimmer of the great river

21

below them in the dark. Then down again, sliding as the grass turns

22

to mud at the weight of them. On the slope, they lie still, with their 23

faces against the wet. For an instant, Lien is reminded of the bank she 24

used to climb down to fetch tadpoles with Kees back in Dordrecht

25

and of her feeling of dread for the murky water below.

26

“It’s going well,” whispers Jo encouragingly. After resting a mo-

27

ment he tells her to climb onto his back. Like this they move as fast as 28

possible along the steep slippery surface. It is curfew time, so the oc-

29

casional sound of movement on the path above them must come from

S30

the police. As Jo runs he has to loosen Lien's fingers, which she has N31

**109**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

*Bart van Es*

01

gripped hard to his throat in her eagerness to hold on. After a bit, Jo 02

turns to her in a whisper: they are getting near the village now and

03

they'll need to go back over the dike and then in among the houses.

04

They will have to be deadly quiet.

05

Now that her eyes have adjusted she can see more by the moon-

06

light, though right at this moment it's just Jo's broad and thinly

07

bearded face that she can pick out in the darkness. That and the angle 08

of the slope. She trusts Jo utterly. He is always kind.

09

On reaching the edge of the village they move further up to the

10

top of the dike, with Jo again frantically glancing from left to right.

11

All is clear and he darts up over the road with her, holding tight to her 12

legs so that she notices again how much they hurt. But then, in the

13

excitement, she feels nothing apart from a strange wakeful, happy

14

alertness that makes her see and hear everything more sharply than

15

before. She registers the scrapes and bumps as they move between the

16

buildings: the skin that is grazed off her knee against a wall; a twig 17

that comes out of nowhere and strikes her in the eye. These injuries, 18

though, come with no pain attached. They feel like they are happen-

19

ing to somebody else.

20

The two of them are in the thick of the streets now and as Lien

21

looks upward she sees the outline of housefronts against the lighter

22

gray of the sky. The houses flick by as Jo runs with her. One has a

23

squared top with curved edges. Another is like two staircases coming

24

together with a tower in the middle on top. Then, at the end of the

25

street, she sees what must be a square and beyond that a church stee-

26

ple. And across the darkness in the distance there are two lights mov-

27

ing about.

28

The lights mean danger, and when Jo spots them he crashes over

29

a low wall into a garden, where they lie still for a long time next to 30S

a shed.

31N

They hear nothing except the sounds of the night.

**110**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 110

11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

Eventually they dare to move again and go back over the wall and

01

then left down a cobbled street with smaller buildings, where Jo's foot 02

catches a pebble that goes bouncing across the stones. As they stand

03

for a second in the absolute stillness she watches the steam of his

04

breath.

05

Then, as quickly as it started, it is over. Jo knocks on a door and

06

they wait for agonizing seconds. It opens. There is a quick exchange of 07

whispers and they tumble inside.

08

09

10

Where exactly they go after this is confusing. Every-

11

thing is dark and constricted. A man she can barely see leads them

12

first upstairs and then downstairs, through a corridor, and then up a 13

ladder. There is a movement of hinges, a heavy carpet rolled across the 14

floor. Twists and turns lead them down a narrow passageway to a cup-

15

board, which somehow moves forward to form the entrance to a room.

16

It is the dirtiest place that Lien has ever been in. The large central 17

area makes her think of a tavern, although she has never been in a tav-

18

ern and certainly not in one like this. There are a couple of chairs and 19

sofas against the walls and she can see people moving about. In the

20

center, half a dozen men sit at a table around an oil lamp, playing cards.

21

A few sets of eyes turn toward them as they enter. She walks by herself 22  
now, her bare feet picking up grease from the carpeted floor. The smell 23  
of the place is incredible. She wonders if there is enough air to breathe.

24

But still Lien is without fear and keeps everything at a distance; the 25  
heightened awareness and wakefulness of the night excursion is start-

26

ing to fade. The man who showed the way did not come into the room

27

and has shut up the cupboard behind them. Jo is now the only leader

28

and she waits, without impatience, to be told what to do.

29

Even with Jo, Lien feels no deep connection. As he moves to talk

S30

to the men at the card table she remains staring into the middle

N31

**111**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 111

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

distance, aware of the dirt in the room around her and of the bodies

02

shifting position from time to time on the furniture around the walls.

03

Her one thought is “I ought not to be here,” but this is not a cry of 04  
rebellion, just an observation that keeps running through her head.

05

After a bit, Jo returns and says that she should sleep upstairs where 06  
there are bunk beds. He hunkers down and nervously puts his hand on

07

her shoulder, so that she feels its weight and its warmth. They were

08

pressed together all the while that he carried her, but now for the first 09  
time he is reaching out with affection, tentative, as if fearful to hurt.

10

He talks, in an embarrassed mumble, about how she should “do her

11

business” in the two buckets in the adjoining room. Lien nods as she

12

listens. When she stands beside the buckets a moment later, her bare

13

feet on the yellow wet of the tiles, she is nearly sick with the stench.

14

Then, having followed Jo up a ladder, she finds herself in the bed-

15

room, in which all of the bunks are already occupied. Jo tells her to 16

join the bottom one on the far left. The bedclothes feel damp as she

17

lifts them to step under the covers. An old woman’s face blinks up at 18

her momentarily, says something in a dry- mouthed whisper, then rolls 19

over to face another sleeper who lies against the far wall. Lien has

20

never shared a bed with anyone before and it feels strange to sense the 21

weight of the others pulling her to the center of the mattress as she lies 22

down beside them, fully clothed. She holds one hand to the cold metal 23

of the bed frame and lies as straight as possible, facing outward into 24

the room. Below, where she can still hear him, Jo has joined the circle 25

of card players and is telling them about the adventure of the raid and 26  
their escape. It must now be long past midnight and she has no idea

27

what kind of place it is that she is in. As she lies there, sleep closes in 28  
upon her. When she shuts her eyes it feels like the room is swaying

29

and as she listens to Jo telling their story she can see herself again on 30S  
his back looking up at the outlines of the housefronts, black against 31N  
the moonlit clouds. She loosens her grip on the bed frame and one

**112**

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### **the cut out girl**

foot moves under the blanket toward the old woman, but when it

01

touches she instinctively snaps it back. Nothing here is familiar except 02  
the regular throb of the sores on her legs.

03

04

05

The dirty dark house in IJsselmonde is Lien's home for just

06

a few days. By the time she leaves, Jo has gone off in some other

07

direction.

08

09

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

26

27

28

29

S30

N31

**113**

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01

02

*Eleven*

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

The afternoon has passed almost without our noticing it and as we

12

get to questions about the hideout in IJsselmonde it is already

13

6:30 p.m. Although the events themselves are traumatic, the process of 14

reassembling them has a positive side to it. Lien has long since worked 15

through her experiences, in part with a counselor, and as I sit listening 16

I find myself taken up with the practicalities, so that emotion takes a 17

backseat. It is only as I think back that I am haunted by what has

18

occurred.

19

Lien herself is almost euphoric. "I didn't think I could talk for so

20

long about all of it,” she says as she stands up and begins to clear the 21  
tea things from the table. Only now, as an afterthought, she mentions 22  
that she may have a letter from Jo. I tell her that I would very much 23  
like to see it and a few minutes later Lien returns from the adjoining 24  
room with a single sheet of lined A4 paper, folded to a sixth of its size.

25

The enclosed photos, which Lien kept for a long time, are now lost.

26

While back in Oxford over Christmas I bought a digital recorder

27

to use alongside my notes for our interviews. It is still running, so ev-

28

ery word of our conversation is logged for me to listen to afterward as 29

I write.

S30

Lien unfolds the letter, pointing first to her own handwriting at

N31

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 115

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

the top. In neat individually printed letters Lien, by that point aged 02  
twelve, has written:

03

04

*a letter that Lien must keep*

05

*" " from Jo.*

06

07

As she reads this out loud Lien laughs at herself for having given

08

this firm order to posterity. She continues on to the letter itself, occa-

09

sionally stumbling as she tries to make sense of Jo's diction and spell-

10

ing errors. It is dated March 4, 1946, from Singapore:

11

12

*Dear Lien,*

13

*What a long time ago it is that we heard from each other. At*

14

*about this time two years ago I had to leave unexpectedly and I*

15

*didn't get to see you and we haven't written. When I heard from*

16

*Mieneke that you were in good health and living in Dordrecht, I*

17

*thought now really I must write to Lien. Lien, what a lot has*

18

*happened in this time. Dear Lien, you have never been out of my*

19

*thoughts. Not when I was in Amersfoort and not when I was in*

20

*Germany and also not now when I am so far away from Hol and.*

21

*Lien, if you have one you must send a photo of yourself. I will*

22

*enclose a few of myself with this letter. Lien, now a few questions.*

23

*How are you? Are you still at school, and in what sort of class?*

24

*Lien, if I can do anything for you then you must write to me about 25  
it, if I can do it I will do anything to help you. You will have heard 26  
from Mieneke . . .*

27

28

When she gets to the name Mieneke for the second time Lien

29

stops.

30S

“I don’t know who Mieneke is. Maybe the woman in IJsselmonde?

31N

I think it is the woman in IJsselmonde, but I don’t know.”

**116**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

The certainty only gradually grows. Then Lien continues:

01

02

*You will have heard from Mieneke that I am serving in the*

03

*Marines now, which is working out wel . I was in England for*

04

*three weeks, in America for six months, for the last two months*

05

*now I've been in Malacca, and right at this moment I'm on the ship 06*

*New Amsterdam . And the ship is currently in the harbor in*

07

*Singapore— you'll have to look it up in an atlas! Any moment now 08*

*we may depart for Java. Lien, I don't know what other news to*

09

*give you. Pass on my warmest wishes to all our old friends, and also 10*

*to your adoptive parents, and if you are writing to Mieneke, then 11*

*do give her my best. Lien, take from me the uttermost heartfelt*

12

*wishes. From your friend who will never forget you,*

13

*Jo Kleijne*

14

15

*P. S. Dear Lien, I don't know your address exactly. Now*

16

*I will enclose this letter in a letter to Mienke, I think hope that 17*

*Mienke will quickly send this letter on to you and that you will 18*

*very soon write back to me. Once again, all the very best from your 19*

*friend. Jo.*

20

21

At the bottom of the page, he writes his military ID number in

22

block capitals:

23

24

CORPORAL OF THE MARINES, J. W. L. KLEIJNE.

25

NL 4502759.

26

27

“He has written his address at the bottom,” Lien says in a voice

28

that is full of cheerful reminiscence.

29

“And do you still know if you wrote back, and what you wrote?”

S30

I ask.

N31

**117**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 117

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

All at once the mood of the conversation changes. Lien’s reply is

02

thoughtful but not filled with any deep sense of regret.

03

“I have never . . . I have never done anything,” she says. “I never

04

wrote, I have never . . . I have never looked into anything. I never kept 05  
contact. No.”

06

She sighs.

07

“It’s . . .”

08

There is a pause.

09

“And, for the rest, you never heard anything of him?”

10

“No, no. It stops then, doesn’t it?”

11

“Yes.”

12

“It’s, you know . . . I was in a different phase of my life then. The 13  
connection wasn’t there.”

14

There is a long silence. Then the recording picks up the clicks

15

from my camera as I take images of the letter from Jo.

16

“It’s rather beautiful, the way he underlines his words for empha-

17

sis,” I say, as I begin reading it for the first time myself.

18

“Jo Kleijne,” she says and smiles, still reminiscing. “I do still have a 19  
letter written by a friend of my mother, but that is . . . I don’t know if 20  
you want that?”

21

“I want everything, I mean, if it can . . .”

22

Lien is smiling broadly now—“You want everything!” she laughs.

23

And after a bit more searching, she is holding the letter sent by

24

Aunt Ellie for her birthday in September 1942.

25

“Aunt Ellie— I don’t have much of a picture of her. Shall I read it

26

out loud?”

27

Lien reads the letter to me, which we had missed before— the one

28

about wanting to come and visit and about how Lien will now have a

29

whole new set of uncles and aunts— and then, as Lien ponders, a few

30S

more details of the resistance hideout in IJsselmonde come to the fore.

31N

But of the journey onward from there she still remembers nothing.

**118**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 118

11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

“I believe it was with Took,” she says, “but I do not know.” Her

01

emphasis is on the word “believe,” making this an act of faith rather 02

than remembrance. So while the trip from The Hague to Dordrecht

03

remains so vivid, this one, nearly a year and a half later, is a blank.

04

I am again reminded of what Lien said when we first talked to-

05

gether about her wartime memories. Without families you don't get

06

stories. After all those months in the half- light, Lien did not really see 07

other people, even if they were there, because she had no connection

08

with them. As a result of her isolation, she stopped seeing the world.

09

“It was being that was just *being*,” she tells me, “and where, and 10

how, and with whom, that was all uncertain. Not concerning yourself

11

with the past or the future, it brings a perspective with it. The in-

12

volvement [Lien uses the English word] . . . the involvement was on a 13

very low heat, if that makes sense to you. I believe, when I say it like 14

that, I have got it right. Can you understand?”

15

The metaphor of low heat strikes home to me and I will use it

16

more than once as I describe this phase of Lien's life. As I hear her 17

speak about her feelings, both in IJsselmonde and afterward, I begin

18

to understand her better. I have never felt so strongly how a person is 19

the product of the life they have led.

20

21

22

23

24

25

26

27

28

29

S30

N31

**119**

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01

02

*Twelve*

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

In the next few days I travel across Holland to visit archives and the 12 other places of Lien's youth. At the NIOD (the National Institute

13

for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies), amid the studious mur-

14

mur of academics and doctoral students, in the gray light of the court-

15

yard garden I hold in my hand an index card that records my

16

grandfather's imprisonment at Vught. He was sent there after the raid 17

that Lien remembers. It is an innocuous piece of yellow paper, with

18

his name (which, like his birthday, is the same as my father's) typed in 19

uneven letters at the top.

20

Vught was the only SS concentration camp to be built in the Neth-

21

erlands, constructed by the forced labor of its own prisoners in 1943.

22

Behind its moat and barbed-wire fences stood the prison gallows,

23

used for random executions in which at least five hundred died. Oth-

24

ers, packed too tightly in their cells, died simply of suffocation; there 25

were constant dog attacks on the inmates; and there were clogs with

26

spikes inside to cut the prisoners' feet. The camp was also used for the 27

transit of over a thousand Jewish children. With the yellow index card 28

between my fingers I wonder if my grandfather watched them and if

29

he thought of Lien.

S30

Other documents at the NIOD also connect with Lien's story,

N31

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***Bart van Es***

01

such as a printed letter on office stationery sent by a Dordrecht physi-

02

cian in 1941. In it Dr. Cahen explains to his patients that his medical 03

diploma, hard- earned nearly thirty years ago, is now invalid and that 04

he must ask them to switch their loyalty to another practitioner who is 05

not a Jew. He suggests Jan Heroma, Took's husband, whom he calls "a

06

man with a golden heart.” If they join his practice, he explains, then 07

Jan Heroma will transfer any earnings back to Dr. Cahen, so as to

08

help him through this difficult time. The patients may know him al-

09

ready, the letter tells us, this man with a golden heart, because he is 10

famous as the hero who tended the wounded under fire in the battle

11

for Dordrecht, which raged a year ago when the Germans first came.

12

Finally, in the archives there is also confirmation of the fate of

13

Lien’s parents, something of which, of course, she already knew. A

14

brief police report documents their arrest on October 9, 1942, at ten in 15

the evening. The note of their capture, written out neatly in longhand, 16

is dwarfed by the account of a minor bicycle collision, which takes up 17

the bulk of the same page. It is striking to see how the police reporter, 18

who went to the trouble of visiting the hospital to check on the condi-

19

tion of an injured bicyclist, could record the capture and deportation 20  
of a Jewish couple without apparent concern.

21

Having left their registered address, Charles and Catharine trav-

22

eled to Leiden to go into hiding, where it seems they were betrayed. I 23

imagine them— he at thirty- five, she just twenty- eight— hand in 24

hand, facing their captors, who were led by a Dutch policeman, Ulrich 25

Koenrad Hoffman who was the same age as Charles.

26

Koenrad Hoffman was in some ways the opposite of the Dordrecht

27

policeman Harry Evers. A committed NSB man, Hoffman made no

28

denials when he faced his trial in 1949. As is clear from the files put 29

together for his prosecution, he was a sickly and nervous fascist, end-

30S

lessly busy over details like reporting on schoolteachers who expressed 31N

anti- German views. Koenrad collected the anonymous letters that

11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

were sent to him, addressed to “Stinky Hoffman, Gestapo,” and for-

01

warded these, demanding action, to the chief of police. His corre-

02

spondence was always headed with the logo of the sword and swastika

03

and signed with the Dutch fascist salute, “HOU SEE!” Prone to at-

04

tacks of anxiety, he fussed over ineffective measures, like the installa-

05

tion of bugging devices in cells. But he was punctilious in carrying out 06

his duties, which included the “clearing” of a Jewish orphanage that

07

housed 150 boys and girls. After the verdict at his postwar trial he

08

complained about his “very harsh” five- and-a- quarter- year sentence, 09

telling the judge that, as an empowered officer, he was guilty “in no 10  
legal sense.” Hoffman told the court that, in retrospect, he had a few 11  
moral scruples about his actions, but these were “on very minor points.”

12

Lien’s mother, Catharine, was murdered at Auschwitz exactly a

13

month after her arrest by Hoffman. She died alongside her own mother, 14

which is of some comfort to Lien. Charles was killed a few months

15

later, on February 6, 1943.

16

17

18

On January 7, 2015, after several days of working in libraries and

19

archives, I am on my way to IJsselmonde, the place where Lien lay

20

hidden with Mienieke and her family for around eight months. I am

21

going because I hope to locate the house that she stayed in and also to 22

retrace the route that she and Jo Kleijne took from there to get to the 23  
resistance hideout after the raid.

24

Once remote, IJsselmonde is today held in a knot of motorways

25

and train lines running to Rotterdam and its enormous harbor, which

26

stretches out along the Maas estuary to the sea. The scale of the de-

27

velopment that has swallowed the village since the war is difficult to 28

imagine. By 1962, the Europort, which lies to its west, had become

29

the world's largest harbor, a position that it held until 2011. It is still S30

by far the biggest port in Europe, well over twice the size of its nearest N31

**123**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 123

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

rival, and it delivers around a ton of material for every citizen of the 02

European Union each year.

03

I have borrowed a little white Peugeot 108 from my aunt and un-

04

cle, with whom I have been staying. By midafternoon I am driving

05

alongside the Waalhaven, stunned by the expanse of docks, storage

06

depots, and processing plants that stretches to my left. For twenty

07

miles there has been a regular succession of container stacks and oil 08

tanks. I have passed a string of refineries, each a mangrove of metal 09

tubing, and between them have glimpsed the dull iron walls of the

10

ships. With its constant flow of containers, which sit around me on

11

trucks, the port of Rotterdam feeds the Continent like some enor-

12

mous mouth.

13

For anyone unfamiliar with the route, the journey to IJsselmonde

14

demands a lot of concentration because the motorway wants to lead

15

you onward, either to the docks or to distant cities where the trucks 16

can distribute their loads. Hemmed in by lorries, I manage only just to 17

take the right exit, which takes me, through a corkscrew of round-

18

abouts, to the old village, which now stands in the shadow of a con-

19

crete flyover that carries twelve lanes of traffic to a double- arched 20

bridge. The village itself, though, is surprisingly untouched and tran-

21

quil. It is made up of pretty gabled houses, some with dates on them: 22

1889, 1905, 1929. By the time I pull the little Peugeot into the car

23

park on the outskirts of the old center it is 3:30 p.m. and the sun is 24

already low on the skyline, which is dominated by the bridge and fly-

25

over to the west.

26

Lien has almost no memory of the exterior of the house where she

27

hid in IJsselmonde. Although she lived here for over half a year, she 28  
saw the building from the outside only once, on the day she came.

29

She does know that it stood on the outskirts of the village, was rather 30S  
farmlike, and was built against the dike.

31N

From the car park I climb up to the New Maas River, which is

**124**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 124

11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

busy with trade. Great flat barges plow their way through the water,

01

laden with coal and iron ore. On the opposite bank, three hundred

02

yards away, there are four matching office blocks, each a sculpted tri-

03

angle of glass, like a slice of cake on its side.

04

In search of a building that might match Lien's description, I walk

05

along the top of the dike toward the flyover and soon its humming

06

concrete hangs high above me, like the ceiling of a cathedral. The fat 07

pillars that stretch up on all sides carry a quarter of a million vehicles 08

each day. In other countries a place like this would be threatening, but 09

here everything is clean and well maintained. There is a set of neat

10

recycling bins, and in the distance, still under the concrete, I can see a 11

dog walker. Then a girl cycles past me in a bright blue Gore- Tex jacket 12

while checking her phone. Village life continues, almost untroubled

13

by the industrial sprawl.

14

For about two hours I scan the surroundings, mostly walking

15

through the postwar housing developments that now abut the old

16

buildings, but sometimes still finding patches of rural land. It is on one 17

of these, toward dusk, that I see something that fits with Lien's mem-

18

ory: a white single- story house that stands a little beyond the eastern 19

edge. It has a barn door at one end with four little square windows

20

looking out from what is now a converted loft. A hedge of brambles

21

and bushes shields it from the roadside and it is built against the dike.

22

This all fits with how I envisaged the farmhouse and, as darkness

23

falls around me, I can imagine Lien and Jo clambering up the heavy

24

slope on which I stand. Through the bushes I peer into the black win-

25

dows and take some photos. Then I move upward again toward the

26

river, looking down on the roof tiles from above. I can see how Lien

27

and Jo would move on from here toward the center, keeping to the

28

dike edge near the river before crossing back again and heading in-

29

land. With growing certainty I begin to trace a possible route.

S30

But then, twenty minutes later, on the south side of the village I

N31

**125**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 125

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

see a house that leans against a second, lower dike that might qualify 02

almost as easily. It is also single story and it is also surrounded by a 03

hedge. Taking another set of pictures, this time with glowing street-

04

lights in the foreground, my faith in my imagination begins to ebb.

05

With whose memory am I connecting? Lien's or my own?

06

A year later, when I show Lien the account I have written of her

07

escape from IJsselmonde, she will be troubled by it, not because it is 08

untruthful but because— unlike all the earlier parts of her childhood 09

experience— there are so many blanks that she cannot fill. She re-

10

members Jo carrying her in the darkness, she remembers the dike, she

11

remembers moving among the houses; there was the resistance hide-

12

out, it was very dirty and it made her think of a drinking den. Upstairs 13

there were beds and she lay in one with other people. There was a

14

terrible smell. But how big it was, how long they walked to get there, 15

whether they ran? None of this is clear. To her it seems somehow too

16

active in my description. She was a spectator who barely registered

17

what was going on.

18

“You have written it as it could have been,” Lien tells me. “I can

19

live with it,” she eventually says.

20

It is fully dark now and my phone is out of battery so I can take no

21

more pictures. A little downhearted, I make my way back to the car,

22

which now stands in empty space. As I sit at the wheel planning my

23

journey, the warm red and white of the dials on the dashboard is oddly 24

comforting. After a bit, the heater clears the condensation from the

25

windows and the interior begins to warm up. Without my phone’s Sat

26

Nav I worry a bit about the route to my aunt and uncle’s house in Ben-

27

nekom, in the center of the country. All the same, I drive up the ramp 28

to join the motorway, edging my way in among the lorries, and head

29

toward the bridge. The traffic is almost stationary. It will be a long 30S  
time before I reach any junctions at which I need to make decisions, so 31N  
I turn on Dutch radio for the first time today.

**126**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 126

11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

Two men are in conversation, the program's host and a guest. It

01

takes me a little while to work out the subject, which is the culture of 02

satirical cartoons in France. They mention what seems to be a maga-

03

zine based in Paris. It is called *Charlie Hebdo*.

04

“This was an editorial meeting . . . generally cartoonists work at

05

home.”

06

“Did you know the cartoonists?”

07

“Not personally, but I was familiar with their work.”

08

Something significant has happened. There is mention of depic-

09

tions of the prophet Mohammed and of the possible consequences for

10

free speech.

11

At seven o'clock there is a news summary. Eleven people have been

12

gunned down in the offices of a satirical weekly, which has a tradition 13

of mocking religion, including Islam. A car has been hijacked and a

14

policeman (himself a Muslim) has been shot dead on the street. The

15

perpetrators—

who brandished guns and said they had enacted

16

vengeance— are still on the run. It emerges that they left an identity 17  
card behind them and that they are terrorists linked to a branch of

18

al-Qaeda based in Yemen. Huge crowds are gathering in public places

19

around Europe. Tens of thousands stand in silence and carry home-

20

made placards all bearing the same slogan: *Je suis Charlie*.

21

As I inch forward with the little car in the red of the taillights,

22

news anchors discuss the situation. They canvass the opinion of pun-

23

ditions and hold conversations with reporters on the ground. Few further 24

details emerge in the course of the evening so the talk becomes more

25

historical in its perspective and, at eight thirty, there is an interview 26

with the former mayor of Amsterdam, Job Cohen. He describes his

27

reaction, twelve years ago, to the murder of the Dutch filmmaker

28

Theo van Gogh.

29

Van Gogh (a descendent of the famous painter's family) was an

S30

award- winning film director and free- speech activist who made a

N31

**127**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 127

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

point of pushing all possible boundaries. He made graphic jokes about 02

the Holocaust, for example, and called Jesus “the rotten fish of Naza-

03

reth.” Then, in 2004, he made the film *Submission*, whose title played 04

on one possible translation of the Arabic word for Islam. It showed the 05

bodies of Muslim women who had been violently abused by their hus-

06

bands and families, and on those bodies Van Gogh painted Koranic

07

verses pertaining to the treatment of wives. The film was shown on

08

national television by the VPRO, by origin a Protestant Christian

09

broadcaster, and three months later, while cycling to his office at nine 10

in the morning, Van Gogh was shot eight times and then had his

11

throat cut in the street. His murderer, a Muslim extremist who also

12

wounded two bystanders, left a message of vengeance addressed to the

13

film's author, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, pinned to Van Gogh's chest with a

14

knife.

15

The radio plays a section of the speech that Job Cohen delivered as

16

mayor that evening to a crowd very similar to those in Paris and else-

17

where now. In it he speaks of “the Dam, the symbol of our freedom,”

18

and of how progress is to be made “through discussion, through the

19

pen, and— as a last resort— through the courts, but not by taking the 20

law into our own hands.” His words are tolerant and inclusive, and

21

they are cheered by the crowd.

22

Yet even in November 2004, they were idealistic. The norms

23

around freedom of expression that Cohen called upon at that moment

24

were far from universally shared.

25

At one time the Netherlands really was a country where even the

26

prime minister cycled to work in the morning unprotected. But then,

27

on May 6, 2002, came the assassination of Pim Fortuyn. He was, like

28

Van Gogh, a kind of extremist: a peculiarly Dutch combination of the

29

left and the far right. Fortuyn was an openly gay man who was against 30S  
political correctness, against immigration, and above all, against Is-

31N

lam, which he called “backward” and incompatible with modern life.

**128**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 128

11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

As a candidate for a localist movement, he achieved 37.4 percent of

01

the vote in Rotterdam. After this he set up his own political party: the 02

List Pim Fortuyn. Then, riding high in the polls, on the eve of the

03

general election, as he left the national media center at Hilversum,

04

Fortuyn was shot five times in the back of the head. As it happens, his 05

murderer was not a jihadi but instead a fanatical opponent of factory 06

farming who considered Fortuyn's views on such subjects as Islam and

07

immigration a threat to societal norms. But this detail (like the shoot-

08

ing of the Muslim policeman in Paris) is easily lost.

09

Gradually the traffic clears and I follow the signs for Utrecht. The

10

interview with the former mayor of Amsterdam closes and the radio

11

shifts to a panel discussion in which the phrase "Islamic fascism" re-

12

curs. Tomorrow there will be new developments in Paris: a siege at a

13

kosher supermarket that ends in more killings, this time directly tar-

14

geting Jews. As I pick up speed in the darkness I am struck again by

15

the obvious overlap between the present epoch and the last one: ab-

16

surd conspiracy theories, economic recession, and a loss of faith in

17

moderate politicians, who seem to many people to be irrelevant and

18

corrupt. The little car pulls past container lorries that carry goods into 19

Europe: fridges, televisions, furniture, plastic shoes. From the look of 20

these roads nothing is left of the old Europe, but its ghost remains.

21

22

23

24

25

26

27

28

29

S30

N31

**129**

11/23/17 12:47 AM

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 130

11/23/17 12:47 AM

01

02

*Thirteen*

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

It is warm in the church. Bright light comes in from the arched win-

12

dows and the circle of stained glass above the pulpit shines yellow

13

and blue. There is a clean, mothball smell from the people around her, 14

all in their Sunday best, standing and sitting in unison, half singing 15  
the same words.

16

17

*Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom*

18

*come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven.*

19

20

Lien says the words with the others. Occasionally, when she is a

21

little too quick or too slow, she catches the sound of her own voice, 22

which feels unfamiliar in this space. It is nice here with so many peo-

23

ple around you, making the same movements and saying the same

24

things.

25

Her legs do not hurt now. Though the memory is fading, she can

26

still picture the top of the doctor's head, with just a thin down of hair 27  
upon it, as he bent, dabbing her with something sharp, when she first 28  
came here a few months ago. It was very clean in the surgery. On the  
29

wall there was a diagram of a person opened up so that you could see  
S30  
their insides.

N31

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 131

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

The visiting preacher is climbing the stairs now to go up to the

02

pulpit. He has come from Arnhem this morning on his bicycle to

03

speak. But first it is the turn of the lay reader:

04

05

*And Jesus said unto him, I must work the works of him that sent*

06

*me . . .*

07

08

His voice is deep and the words have the rhythm of a poem.

09

10

*the night cometh, when no man can work . . .*

11

12

They are doing poems now at school, including the psalms, which

13

they learn by heart.

14

15

*he spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed 16*

*the eyes of the blind man with the clay . . .*

17

18

Will they have mashed potatoes again like they did last Sunday?

19

She did not like them. They tasted of soap.

20

21

*but the Jews did not believe concerning him, that he had been blind, 22  
and received his sight . . .*

23

24

Now that the reading is over the preacher looks down at them

25

from the pulpit, fixing her interest with his silence and his serious 26

face. Beside her, Mother van Laar shifts her position, tilting her head 27

up farther, hands locked together, all attention for what will come.

28

“Jesus spits,” the preacher says. “He spits on the dry earth and

29

he makes mud of that earth and he puts that mud into the eyes of a

30S

blind man.”

31N

He makes you think about it and she can imagine the scene— the

132

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 132

11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

dust of the desert and the crowd of people wearing rough cloaks and

01

the white disk of the sun burning down. She likes the images of the

02

sermons. It is the same when she reads from the Bible to the family

03

after dinner. She enjoys the sense of togetherness and the singsong

04

rhythm of each line.

05

Lien has always been a dreamer and at night the pleasures and

06

frustrations of the day come back to her, made strange by her imagi-

07

nation as she lies there beneath the stiff, laundered sheets. In school 08

she is not allowed to run at playtime. This is because she has been

09

unwell and needs rest. When she is dreaming, Lien kicks out at this

10

rule with impatience, wanting to move, but she still floats there, un-

11

able to catch up. As she sleeps, she does the sums and the spelling

12

tests that she is so good at and tries to connect with the girl who is 13

sitting on the school bench next to her, but that doesn't quite work.

14

Then comes the part of the dream that is fearful. She can feel it

15

happening but she is unable to make it stop. Walking down the school

16

corridors with their high ceilings, through the bustle of other chil-

17

dren, the urge becomes stronger with each step. She needs to pee. Fi-

18

nally, when she is safe in the cubicle, she lets go. There is a warm

19

wetness, which is pleasant at first. But now it grows cold.

20

21

22

Heavy with drowsiness, she calls out.

23

It is completely dark around her and then suddenly very bright as

24

she steps dizzily, eyes scrunched, away from the bed.

25

There is a fuss around her. Sheets are pulled free from their cor-

26

ners and then bundled onto the floor. Arms up, her nightdress is

27

lifted, trailing on her skin as it goes. For a second she is tented, and 28

then, straight after, there is the scent of soap and the touch of a flan-

29

nel, wetted, cold, at the sink. She awakens in full to self- awareness, S30

standing naked in the light. While Mother van Laar is efficient and

N31

133

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 133

11/23/17 12:47 AM



*Bart van Es*

01

says nothing to blame her, there is still the pain of embarrassment.

02

There is no blame, but also no word of comfort or gentleness of touch.

03

Ten minutes later she is in bed again, clean in the absolute black-

04

ness, and scared now of sleep.

05

06

07

On the photo in Lien's album she stands with the Van Laar

08

family in their garden among wintery flowerbeds that are marked out

09

with white painted stones. The house behind them, number 33 Alge-

10

meer, is new, attractive, and semidetached. It stands on the edge of

11

Bennekom, a village in the center of the Netherlands, and looks out

12

over a field and, beyond this, a wood. The gathering in the picture is 13

rather formal: all five people (the fifth, behind Lien, is unknown to 14 me) stand with their arms at their sides in the same pose, as if ready 15 for inspection.

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

26

27

28

29

30S

31N

**134**

11/23/17 12:47 AM

## **the cut out girl**

Father van Laar and his son, Jaap, on the left, look neat with their

01

neckties, close- shorn haircuts, and gleaming shoes. In the middle of 02

the picture stands Mother van Laar who, from the look of it, is their 03

leader, with her high collar, tightly buttoned jacket, and firm, assured 04

smile. All of the family face the camera. It is only Lien who looks

05

downward and a little to the side. Her short- sleeve dress appears too 06

light for the weather and it is blown by a wind that nobody else in the 07

picture seems to feel.

08

09

10

The Reformed ( *Hervormde*) Protestant Church, which

11

the Van Laars in the photograph look dressed to attend, stands half a 12

mile away at the center of the village: a solid redbrick building that 13

was begun in the eleventh century, with a square tower and smallish

14

clear windows near to the ground. Its walls were long ago stripped of 15

their statues and frescoes and now resound to plain sermons that are

16

delivered to an audience of the elect. Theirs is the Calvinist denomi-

17

nation that has its origins in the Synod of Dordt. It is the great na-

18

tional institution that once buried Baruch Spinoza in splendor and

19

then demolished his grave for nonpayment of fees. Practical and

20

worldly, the Reformed Church has played its part in giving the Dutch

21

their national character: direct, house proud, and determined to offer 22

a respectable exterior to the outside world.

23

With some notable exceptions, the Reformed Church has not been

24

quick to come to the aid of its Jewish neighbors. While its elders, of course, disapprove of the occupation and are loyal to the House of Or-

26

ange, they also have a dislike of grandstanding, activism, and of mak-

27

ing a fuss. Law and order are the mainstay of their civic values and that belief sits uneasily with any resistance to Nazi plans.

29

Back in July 1942 there had been a plan to read out a clear

S30

N31

**135**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 135

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

statement of disapproval in all Christian churches about the mass de-

02

portation of Jews. A joint text, agreed with the Catholics, was even

03

prepared. In the end, however, the elders at the Reformed Church

04

synod had retreated, persuaded by a promise that, if no objection was 05

made in public, Protestant Jews would be spared. Rather than ex-

06

pressing outrage, the synod had instead issued a declaration describ-

07

ing the “bitter trials” that God set for the “folk of Israel” who stood 08

out against conversion to the Christian truth.

09

There had been a real choice here. When the Catholics went ahead

10

and read out the original statement of opposition, over two hundred

11

Jewish members of their congregation were arrested as a consequence

12

and sent straight to the camps, where, among others, the philosopher-

13

nun Edith Stein met her death. Even in the face of this action, the

14

Catholic archbishop had chosen to stick to his position, hereafter di-

15

verting thousands of guilders of collection money to the resistance

16

cause. The Reformed Protestant state church, in contrast, still refused 17

to speak out.

18

Looking back, the retreat of the Protestant synod in July 1942

19

stands out as a defining moment in the history of the Netherlands.

20

Seyss- Inquart, the Reichskommissar in charge of the country, had

21

been genuinely worried about the prospect of church opposition, be-

22

cause in occupied Norway protest from the Lutherans had galvanized

23

resistance on a significant scale. If a collective church statement had 24

been issued, more Dutch families might well have sheltered their fel-

25

low citizens, they might well have sabotaged the running of the rail-

26

ways to Poland, and they might well have been less cooperative as

27

policemen in arresting and imprisoning Jews. H. C. Touw, the Re-

28

formed Church's great historian, would be unsparing in his verdict on 29

the synod. Their conduct was "deeply shaming" and "unprincipled."

30S

There was "a fear of being burned by cold water." In summation, "we

31N

must speak of enormous collective guilt."

**136**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 136

11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

By the time that Lien was brought to the village of Bennekom in

01

late 1943, things had changed for the Reformed Protestant Church,

02

which now backed active resistance and told its members to protect

03

their fellow citizens, even at personal cost. It was this alteration in the 04  
national picture, of which she herself knew nothing, that brought her 05  
to this rural and therefore safer part of the Netherlands.

06

07

08

The Lien who stands in a thin white dress on the right of

09

the photograph is an altered creature. In the house that stands behind 10  
her she is more a housemaid than a daughter, even though she must

11

say “ ‘Mother” and “Father” to Mr. and Mrs. van Laar. Every morning

12

it is her job to clear out and then light the wood- burning stove in the 13  
kitchen and then to clean and polish the shoes. Straight back from

14

school she sees to the furniture, holding a cloth in each hand so as not 15  
to leave marks. The blue Delft plates on display in the cupboard in the 16

front room need to be lifted, one after the other, while the surface

17

below them is first dusted and then wiped. Lien finds this difficult—

18

she is unpracticed and also unwilling— so it takes a very long time.

19

They are opposites, she and Mother van Laar. Even their pictures

20

in the photo album could hardly be more different. Lien looks dis-

21

tracted, waiflike with her curls, and already a beauty— she has dark 22

and perfect features that bespeak another world. In contrast, Mother

23

van Laar has a direct countenance and a boyish side parting in her

24

flat, close- cut hair. She is not easily pleased with Lien's efforts and, to 25

the girl's hot fury, is dismissive about them when neighbors ask. As

26

Lien sits at the kitchen table she overhears comments about her slow-

27

ness. They make her fingers tremble while she cuts and stacks the ra-

28

tion stamps, another of her jobs. Once at a low heat while in hiding in 29

IJsselmonde, there is a fire now within her only just under control.

S30

While Lien cuts, Mother van Laar holds forth about Sunday's sermon

N31

**137**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 137

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

and recommends a method for keeping net curtains white. Each time

02

she ends a sentence, to Lien's irritation, she rests her teeth on her bot-

03

tom lip.

04

Heading upstairs to her bedroom, the girl leaves a pile of bent cou-

05

pons on the table, improperly stacked. In her mind she is already half 06  
in the adventure of the book she is reading. It is called *Patriots and* 07  
*Liegemen* and forms part of a series that sits on the shelves in the living 08  
room, the gold and red of their spines all perfectly aligned. Lien loves 09  
them. Three cheers for the liegemen! True to God and the Prince of

10

Orange! Right at this moment young Maurits is stowed in the luggage

11

rack of a stagecoach that is rattling along the cobbles to Paris, and 12

beneath him, swigging wine from a bottle, is Marshal Soult. If Soult

13

discovers the boy he will surely cut his heart out. But Maurits is brave 14

and must find his way to the hidden French plans.

15

Lien's spare hours are absorbed into this world of schooners, sword

16

fighters, and moonlit escapes over castle walls. The Patriots are the vil-

17

lains (and so not really patriots at all). They are in league with the 18

French invaders and take their orders directly from Napoleon himself.

19

The emperor has put his weak younger brother Lodewick on the

20

Dutch throne and he has designs on Holland's riches, its freedom, and 21

its church. Meanwhile, the Liegemen fight him by bringing help from

22

England, crossing the Channel under cover of fog and night. Beneath

23

their cloaks there are daggers and silvery pistols and noble beating

24

hearts. Lien sits in bed, half under the covers, at one with a princess 25

imprisoned in a tower, or with a hero who climbs to reach her, know-

26

ing that any minute the rope may snap.

27

28

29

From the winter of 1943 to the spring of 1944, Lien works to

30S

the rhythms of the Van Laar household: lighting the morning fire,

31N

polishing, performing the kitchen tasks, and reading aloud from the

**138**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

Bible at night. She takes pleasure in stories and in her success at school, 01

where she stands out as clever, but all the same, resentment slowly

02

builds within her. She dislikes the rules, the criticism, and the clean-

03

ing, and the way that the Van Laar boy, Jaap, tells tales on her, for 04

example if she ever tries to run in the playground at school, which is 05

not allowed because of her health. The Van Laars, from her perspec-

06

tive, are concerned only with outside appearances, while she herself

07

lives so passionately within.

08

The earth is warming, yet even here in the countryside, food is

09

becoming harder to find, and for this reason, a new task is added to

10

Lien's duties. It is called "carrying from the farm." The carrying is 11

really "begging," and the girl, with her prettiness and her thinness, 12

does this task exceptionally well. There are walks along hedgerows,

13

through woods, and over heaths to farmyards where she will stand at

14

the open door of a barn. "Do you have any eggs or milk for mother?"

15

she must ask. Almost always she comes back with something, such as

16

a brown paper package with bacon inside it, a clutch of spring onions, 17

or a thin yellow triangle of cheese.

18

In this way Lien ranges through the landscape of Gelderland, a

19

fairy- tale figure with a basket in her hand. This is a different kind of 20

Holland from the square fields, canals, windmills, and poplars of the 21

west. Here the birches clasp their roots to dips and ridges, the dappled 22  
floor beneath their branches covered with blueberry bushes that have

23

tiny dark leaves. Mixed in with the patches of wood there is heather, 24  
which shines pale purple amidst the white of dry grass. The farms are 25

small and ancient, low wooden barns with mossy thatch that shelter a

26

few goats and chickens and a cow. In some of the clearings there are

27

holiday chalets and campsites where German soldiers hang out their

28

washing or sit at tables, smoking and playing cards.

29

One time, as Lien walks along a sandy track with broad, bright

S30

fields on either side of it, a horse and cart comes up behind her and N31

**139**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 139

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

slowly overtakes. The back of the cart is open and carries half a dozen 02

boyish soldiers, propped up on sacks, sunning themselves. As she re-

03

cedes, they notice her and wave and she waves back. And then they

04

stop and call to her, all smiling, to claim her as a prize. A young man 05

with a face full of freckles jumps down with his bare feet in the sand 06

and in one easy movement he squats and lifts her onto the hot wooden

07

boards above him in the sun.

08

It feels high up there. “*Sprechen Sie Deutsch?*” the young men ask.

09

She shakes her head and looks a little to the side. To win a smile they 10

offer words in their language for her to practice and search their pock-

11

ets for gifts, and so she eats the *knäckebrot* and imitation chocolate that 12

they place, with laughter and entreaties, into her hand. The boys show 13

Lien photos of their loved ones. They talk to each other in German

14

while they fix her with sparkling eyes. In this way they ride for maybe 15  
half an hour through the fields and woodlands, with Lien a captive

16

and a princess at the same time. Then, when they reach the edge of

17

the village, she points to where her house is, and the soldiers lift

18

her down.

19

Lien, as she walks on without turning her head, does not reflect on

20

her encounter with the soldiers. Like everything else, it just happens.

21

She does not think about the war or about friends or enemies. Nor

22

does she ever think about her parents or indeed about anyone else con-

23

nected to her who might still be out there in the great wide world.

24

25

26

May 1944 becomes June and the early heat that promised summer

27

is replaced by rain. Four hundred miles away in Normandy an Allied

28

landing is successful, but this barely registers with Lien. The main

29

event is that the Van Laar family is off on a short holiday, which

30S

means that she must stay with the neighbors at number 31. It is quite 31N

a change.

**140**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

Corrie de Bond, the girl next door, is a few years older— a chatty,

01

motherly type with a strong country accent and rosy cheeks. She en-

02

velops Lien with teenage gossip and advice. Though Corrie still wears 03  
a Peter Pan collar she is almost a woman and, to Lien's nervous excite-

04

ment, she delivers home truths about Mother van Laar. Corrie's par-

05

ents, Toon and Jansje, are a jolly couple. Jansje is tiny, always smiling, 06

and round- faced— an adult, but shorter than Lien, with a very quiet 07

and soft- toned voice. Illness when she was young has made her fragile, 08

so she spends a lot of time resting in bed. This makes Corrie a kind of 09

chief in the family: cleaning the kitchen, helping with dinner, and

10

sometimes even scolding her father if he is late home. There are al-

11

ways people moving in and out of the household, and it is Corrie who

12

tells them the rules.

13

A few days into Lien's visit, Corrie's father comes in even later

14

than usual. Though a giant, towering more than two feet above them,

15

he bends meekly, with a smile of contrition, when his daughter points 16  
to the clock on the wall. Instead of a jacket and tie, he wears paint-

17

spattered suspenders and an open-necked shirt. For a moment he

18

stands there waiting in silence with a smile playing on his features and 19  
his hands behind his back, and then, with a wink, he reveals a sack of 20  
potatoes, edged with heavy soil, and puts them in triumph on the ta-

21

ble, where they thunder to a point of rest. His little wife is delighted, 22  
but before anything can be said, the youngest, Maartje, runs in, trail-

23

ing a doll, desperate to be lifted up high. Corrie warns her father to be 24  
careful. So, gently, allowing just the checked bow in Maartje's hair to 25  
touch the plaster, he lifts her against the ceiling, which is only a little 26  
higher than the top of his own bald head. After, they sit together eat-

27

ing, with giggles and conversation instead of prayers. Lien is quiet but 28  
she enjoys the togetherness and the pudding that they have at the end.

29

That night, lying alongside the older girl, she whispers that she

S30

would rather live here with Corrie and Maartje because she would fit

N31

**141**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

in right between them, the little sister to one and the big sister to the 02

other. But as Corrie tells her with adult wisdom, it would be too dan-

03

gerous to change. And so, three days later, Lien moves back to her

04

familiar bedroom at number 33 with the Van Laars.

05

06

07

It is unfair to make the Van Laars the villains. They

08

have been brave to take in a hideaway and they have ideals and stan-

09

dards of their own. It is not easy to take another person into a family.

10

No doubt Mother van Laar wants to teach Lien to do better, and the

11

child, with her dreamy distance from others and her sometimes sulky

12

demeanor, is not a model of the modest, homely, God- fearing girl that 13  
she admires.

14

Still, the nightly prayers about being truly grateful feel to Lien like 15

an accusation and, as the nights darken in September, her angry con-

16

viction that the values around her are crooked ripens to an open secret 17

that can be read in her every gaze. Tension lies coiled in the household 18

and unsatisfied stomachs and rain do nothing to lift the mood. At

19

table she scowls at Jaap as he reports, with all the detail that he can 20

muster, that he saw her playing hopscotch in the playground at school.

21

After dinner, as Lien reads aloud as always from the Bible, there is an 22  
edge to her voice.

23

The rain has stopped momentarily, so the parents decide on a walk

24

before curfew and Jaap goes out to play. Lien hovers in the kitchen,

25

uncertain. Maybe she could go and talk to Corrie, now that the dishes 26  
are done? Then a wicked idea steals upon her, and, almost before she

27

is aware of it, she is in the hall. Here, under the stairs, is the doorway 28  
that leads to the cellar. She is still hungry. There is enough time.

29

She turns the handle and sees the wooden steps and clicks on the

30S

light. Her ears are singing with the rushing thump of her own heart.

31N

It is now or never. Bending in, she hovers at the open hatch. There are **142**

11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

sugar cubes, she knows it for certain, in the yellow enamel container 01  
on the top shelf. Quickly, she backs down the stairway onto the brick 02  
floor, watching the gray square above her grow smaller as she goes. It 03  
is there on the highest shelf, just as she expected: the yellow tin. With 04  
stretched fingers, Lien tips it toward her, catching the weight with her 05  
thumbs. There is a slight rattle from the lumps inside.

06

“What are you doing?” says the voice of Mother van Laar.

07

It cuts through the girl like an electric charge.

08

She looks up into the grayness above her head, an animal trapped,

09

and her blush spreads sharp as a knife. And then the heat that has

10

been for so long inside her, like a peat fire burning beneath the grass, 11

bursts out into the light.

12

“You’re a rotten woman,” she mumbles, too soft to be confident but

13

loud enough to be heard.

14

There is a long silence and then a reply.

15

“These are your Jewish tricks,” says Mother van Laar.

16

17

18

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S30

N31

**143**

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01

02

*Fourteen*

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

Bennekom, the place where Lien lived in hiding with the Van

12

Laars, is my mother's home village. This is the place I know best

13

in the Netherlands and it is in Bennekom that I have, for the most

14

part, been staying with my aunt and uncle since I began these weeks

15

of research. It is a coincidence that Lien should have spent years in 16

this familiar location, because her connection is with my father's fam-

17

ily and not at all with my mother's.

18

Lien stops talking, but, like last time, the recorder on the table

19

continues to run. It is Sunday at 1:00 p.m. and I am back at her Am-

20

sterdam apartment. This has been our first session of interviewing in 21

over a week.

22

She moves the photo album with the pictures of the Van Laars off

23

the table and sets out the plates and cutlery for lunch. We continue to 24  
talk as we eat.

25

The metaphor of a fire that burns beneath the surface, like the

26

earlier image of a low heat when she was hidden at the farm in IJssel-

27

monde, is important to Lien and she returns to it now as we discuss

28

her feelings. Resentment had been building for months and once it

29

burst out into the open it was impossible to contain. There would be

S30

N31

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***Bart van Es***

01

fierce rows with the Van Laars, with all- out shouting, and Lien her-

02

self would say terrible things.

03

“I think I was very unkind to them,” says Lien gently, “and they

04

also to me.”

05

In families, she observes, a pattern is often established where every-

06

one’s behavior is fixed in advance. You know what one person will do

07

and what the other will say long before anything actual y happens.

08

With her and the Van Laars it became a pattern of unkindness. There

09

was no respect, no validation, they did not say nice things to each other.

10

“But,” Lien adds, speaking slowly, “I think it was also very decent

11

of them, I think it was exceptionally moral, that, with the difficult 12  
behavior I had (and I certainly had that), they did not give me up.”

13

“Give me up”— the phrase means several things.

14

I ask Lien if she felt angry.

15

She pauses before answering.

16

“I think my main feeling was of having lost anything to hold on to.

17

There were no borders. . . . There were no fences. . . . The biggest 18  
feeling, the most important feeling, was that I was free- falling and 19  
that nobody could hold me. You need somebody who can draw a line

20

that you must not cross and I did not have that.”

21

Lien explains that later, in her professional life as a social worker, it 22  
was because of this experience that she could identify so strongly with 23

children who had a problem with authority. They also had no sense of

24

a line that could not be crossed, and because of this, there was nothing 25

that stopped them from entering the criminal world. She thinks, given 26

the wildness and sense of abandonment that entered her, she could

27

have gone that way herself.

28

29

30S

Before resuming our interviews Lien and I take a short

31N

walk in the Vondelpark, which lies just a few minutes from her front

**146**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

door. In spite of her age, Lien is quick on her feet and, as we cross the 01

road, she chivvies me to pick up my pace.

02

The paths in the park are thronged with speeding bicyclists and

03

crowds of other walkers. In the winter sunshine, people are sitting

04

outside the park's restaurants and teahouses, drinking coffee or sip-

05

ping from tall thin glasses of beer. From the three boys on the path

06

ahead of us comes a strong whiff of marijuana. It makes me think of

07

the 1970s when this park was famous the world over as a "magic cen-

08

ter," with thousands of hippies singing beneath the trees and by the

09

lakes, spending their nights here in sleeping bags, celebrating peace 10

and love. Apparently only 10 percent of the hippies actually came

11

from Amsterdam, the bulk of the numbers making the trip from else-

12

where in Holland and from France, Germany, and the United States.

13

Then as now, the city was a haven of toleration that drew those who

14

wished to experiment, even if only for the length of a minibreak. It is 15

all the more haunting to think that during the war this place was a

16

German military camp, surrounded by barbed wire, with concrete

17

bunkers plumbed deep into the ground.

18

19

20

Back in the flat we brew tea. It is a bit of an effort to return

21

to work after our outing and for a while my questions feel vague and

22

forced. I try to get a picture of Lien's life that autumn, but little color 23

comes through. In spite of the quarrels and the tension, things contin-

24

ued as normal. She still did the cleaning, they ate their awkward din-

25

ners together, and she continued to flourish at school. In the evening, 26  
she always read out loud from the Bible, and while this might seem,

27

for a Jewish girl, an imposition, for her it remained a pleasure.

28

“I have always been one for stories. That’s why the church was

29

a joy to me. Learning psalms, hearing sermons, talking about the

S30

lesson— it gave such a sense of togetherness. It was the same as when N31

**147**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

I was a girl in the Pletterijstraat, when they would say during a story, 02

‘she just sits there and stares.’ I was totally in that world.”

03

I remind Lien of the way that she entertained my aunt, little Mar-

04

ianne, in the Van Es family and her eyes light up.

05

“Yes, that’s true,” she says and then, in an instant, the balance of

06

the conversation changes, the stiffness is gone, and Lien begins to tell 07

me about Sunday, September 17, 1944.

08

09

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30S

31N

**148**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 148

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01

02

*Fifteen*

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

Lien stands on a road at the edge of a wheat field and watches

12

them: half circles, some in bright colors— blue, red, yellow,

13

green— drifting down.

14

Parachutes, right here in the sunlight now that there is a break in

15

the clouds!

16

There are children around her pointing. These are the English sol-

17

diers landing. She scans the uncountable silhouettes. And above them

18

are planes in their hundreds that move as if they are locked together, 19  
sliding like a stencil across the sky.

20

It makes her laugh to see them, like the way you laugh at an acci-

21

dent when you know it is serious but you cannot make a serious face.

22

It is silly how many there are. Thousands and thousands. It cannot

23

be real.

24

Her neck hurts with watching. She follows one parachute from the

25

moment it hatches. First comes a little mushroom of cloth and then the 26

strings and then a lump that is really a man. They tumble downward,

27

the lump going first and the mushroom racing after, getting bigger as 28

it goes. It fills up and then opens and slows right down. You can't see 29

them landing. They just vanish in the distance behind the trees. When S30

N31

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

one is gone she looks up for another to follow. They pour from the

02

backs of the planes, one after another, like dominoes on a run.

03

Sometimes it is not soldiers but packages that hang from the guy

04

ropes. Adults who join the group tell her about the difference: some

05

carry jeeps and some carry cannons. And then later there are planes

06

that are towed by others. These are gliders that cannot fly by them-

07

selves. She watches as the rope is cut and the pulling plane moves

08

away from the towed one, which noses downward so quickly that it

09

looks like a crash.

10

These really are the English! Everyone keeps saying the same

11

thing!

12

So many keep coming that it ought to be boring except that the

13

excitement around her grows bigger all the time. A tall man explains

14

things to a boy who hops up and down beside him, repeating strange

15

words like “Allies,” “Dakotas,” and “flak.” She watches out for the

16

colors— blue, red, yellow, green.

17

Then suddenly there is a thump behind them and the crowd turns

18

to see fire spread in the sky and then, after this, a worm of black

19

smoke that boils up from the ground. It is all at a distance, so it feels 20  
pretend.

21

After a while a group of men races past on bicycles without tires,

22

the metal rims cutting into the sand. They are wearing orange ban-

23

ners and, around her, people begin a wild rendition of the song “Long 24  
Live the Queen.”

25

In the distance there are rattles and rhythmic bangs.

26

Then, right above them, frozen it seems for a moment, there are

27

two planes so close that she can see the rivets on their gray- striped 28

bellies as well as their hanging bombs. The propellers are just shiny 29

circles of air. In a few seconds the planes have vanished but noise from 30S

their engines sings on for a very long time.

31N

**150**

11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

01

02

By the time that she gets home to Algemeer there is a

03

siren wailing, filling the street with long, low, pitiful howls. As soon 04

as she opens the front door she hears the voice of Mother van Laar

05

calling, asking who it is, which is not what usually happens. When she 06

answers, Lien is ordered to come straight into the cellar, where the

07

whole family is squeezed in. Mother van Laar, her face all glossy, says 08

with a frantic edge that two children have been killed on the Dieden-

09

weg, hit by a bomb. Father van Laar sits on a crate beside her, his hair 10

standing sideways in a tuft. "The English are coming," says Jaap, as if 11

this is news to Lien. Then, after a minute, the electricity cuts out.

12

13

14

Three miles away, on the large, flat expanse of heather and grass

15

that is the Ginkelse Heide, British paratroopers are moving toward

16

Arnhem. They are part of Operation Market Garden, the plan to de-

17

feat Germany by cutting straight through Holland to the industrial

18

heartland of the Ruhr. Altogether there are ten thousand of them and

19

they need to move quickly across enemy territory to capture and then

20

hold the final bridge of a sequence, which stretches, eight miles in the 21

distance, across the Rhine.

22

23

24

In the morning it is clear that school has been canceled because

25

there are children playing in the street. Freed by an odd kind of holi-

26

day spirit, Lien goes out to join them and finds that boys are collect-

27

ing trophies. One has a whole collection spread out before him on the 28

grass. Lien edges in to join the group that has fanned out around him 29

and hears that the various bits of green canvas with straps and buckles S30

N31

**151**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

are parachute cords. The boy also has cartridge cases: small, shiny,

02

copper- colored tubes. She is allowed to hold one and stares into the 03

blackness of the inside. "Smell the top of it," he instructs her, and 04

without thinking about it, she takes a deep lungful of sulfurous air.

05

She coughs and her eyes sparkle, a response that he clearly enjoys. The 06  
boy has chosen her now for special attention and he hands her, with  
07

reverence, the painted fin of a British bomb. Their fingers touch as  
08

she takes it with a shy smile.

09

There is a romance to those early days after the landings. Often

10

there is rapid fire in the distance or even the whistle of a bullet nearby.

11

The trophy collections of the boys in the street get bigger and girls are 12

to be seen in colorful nylon dresses that have been made by their

13

mothers out of parachute cloth. Lien would like one herself.

14

After a while, though, the announcement comes that school is re-

15

starting and the mood around her alters. The weather, which had

16

been bright momentarily, turns to fog and then rain. War still contin-

17

ues in the sky above them and on the ground beyond the horizon,

18

with low- flying planes, the rumble of artillery, and the occasional 19

smell of oily smoke in the air. Sometimes there is news of a bomb that 20

has hit a house. Within the bounds of the village itself, however, ev-

21

erything seems almost as it was.

22

Then Bennekom gradually fills with people: first a few families

23

with stacks of luggage, who settle into houses and barns in the neigh-

24

borhood, but after this, hundreds at a time, refugees who stop for only 25

a few hours before they move on. One morning on the way to school

26

she sees a long, motley procession of bewildered faces, exhausted peo-

27

ple standing still in the road so that no one can pass. There are walk-

28

ers, horse- drawn wagons, and bicyclists, all awkwardly loaded, waiting 29  
to head out of the village. The wagons have white flags at their cor-

30S

ners that hang down, heavy, against the rakes and broom handles that

31N

make do for poles. In front of her an old gentleman has a built-up

152

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 152

11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

wheelbarrow with planks sticking out of it on which a lot of packing

01

cases have been hammered in place. Beside him stands a girl who is

02

pushing a bicycle. Lien turns to see what is hanging from the handle-

03

bars and is shocked to find that they are rabbits, a whole set of them, 04

dead, tied there with string by their legs. Above, feeling close, there is 05

a constant drone of Allied bombers, but you cannot see them because

06

of the clouds.

07

That afternoon, when Lien gets home to Algemeer, she is told that

08

she must pack her things.

09

10

11

Between September 17 and October 20, 1944, the fate of the

12

village of Bennekom hung in the balance. The landings nearby on the

13

Ginkelse Heide were at the utmost edge of Operation Market Garden

14

and British paratroopers had come down there, more than sixty miles

15

into enemy territory, expecting reinforcement from Allied tanks that

16

were intended to race to their rescue across six bridges connected by a 17

single road. Those bridges all needed to be captured by separate land-

18

ings of airborne forces. It was the seizure of these bridges and the

19

rapid movement of tanks along the road between them that would

20

create a narrow corridor from the old front line to the German

21

frontier.

22

Day one had been fairly successful. In spite of heavy resistance, a

23

small detachment had sped westward to Arnhem and had secured the

24

northern end of the sixth and final bridge of the sequence, from which 25

Germany could be reached. But enormous problems were already ap-

26

parent: their jeeps had failed to land safely, bad weather had delayed 27

Polish reinforcements, and Allied radios did not work. The worst,

28

however, was still to come.

29

Frederick Browning, the Airborne Corps' overall commander,

S30

could have spotted the two SS Panzer divisions that defended

N31

**153**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 153

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

Arnhem, but in the rush to get the operation going, signs of their

02

presence had been ignored. These were full, battle-hardened, armored 03

combat divisions with thousands of soldiers. They had tanks, long-

04

range guns, and far more ammunition than the lightly armed para-

05

troopers. Even so, the small British detachment held out for nine days.

06

In the end, however, on September 25, with no prospect of relief from 07  
the Allied ground army (whose crossings were delayed at Son and at  
08

Nijmegen) they were forced to concede defeat. By that point, fifteen  
09

hundred paratroopers lay dead in and around Arnhem and over six  
10

thousand more had been captured, many with very serious wounds.  
11

Their struggle would be remembered as “a bridge too far.”

12

For the bulk of September, Bennekom lay outside the immediate

13

zone of conflict, and as the situation worsened, it took in refugees

14

from neighboring towns. In the wake of the eventual liberation of Ni-

15

jmegen, however, the front lines shifted and Allied forces were now

16

less than five miles away from the village. Allied artillery strikes were 17

hitting the edges of Bennekom, as were German V-1s when these

18

misfired. By mid- October, SS units were moving through the streets

19

requisitioning houses, and on the twentieth the German authorities

20

ordered the inhabitants to evacuate, at the latest by midday on the

21

twenty- second. Bennekom was becoming a military zone. Lien, who

22

had once lain hidden in a rural backwater, now stood at a pivot for the 23

entire war.

24

25

26

On Sunday morning, October 22, at 33 Algemeer there is tense

27

order. An old pram blocks the hallway, its shape barely visible under a 28

covering blanket that has been tied on with rope. In the kitchen,

29

Mother van Laar is filling a suitcase with jars of food. Upstairs, the 30S  
house has a strange echo and is lighter than usual because the curtains 31N  
have been taken down. Lien's little package of things is added to the 154  
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### **the cut out girl**

jumble of objects on the landing, which Father van Laar ties up in

01

another blanket and then carries to the front room. Lien is told to sit 02

beside it with Jaap and so they wait there in silence, staring at the 03

empty shelves while thuds and scrapes echo through the half- empty

04

rooms of the house.

05

After what feels like a long time they head outside into a light

06

drizzle, the sky bright in spite of the cloud cover. Lien is wearing three 07

dresses so that they will not need to be carried and she can feel the 08

fabric cutting into the skin on the underside of her arms. They shut

09

the door but do not lock it because German soldiers will, it is likely, 10  
come to live here in a few hours.

11

All along the street there are similar groups emerging from door-

12

ways, calling to each other, testing the weight of the bags they will 13  
carry. The men (there are not many) stand together for a moment,

14

then movement begins and they all take their place in a kind of line.

15

Suitcases are dropped, awkward objects are left on the roadway, but

16

fairly quickly a rhythm is established and they make their way up the 17  
street that normally takes her to school. In the village center there are 18

some wagons with white flags at their corners and here the line of

19

people is split into smaller groups.

20

For a while everything is familiar: the bakery, the greengrocer's,

21

the butcher's shop. Then the village peters out into more widely spaced 22  
houses and finally they are in woodland and unknown fields. It is

23

important to stay close to the wagons, because if they do not, there is 24  
a danger that they will be attacked by planes. So they clump together 25  
with a few dozen neighbors, who, like them, are mostly silent as they 26  
walk. Father van Laar keeps Jaap close beside him. Lien has her eyes

27

fixed on the rubber wheels of the cart that leads the procession and

28

watches as wet leaves are picked up by its tires. Sometimes the leaves 29  
stick on and are carried all the way over and sometimes they just drop.

S30

It is slow progress, with a lot of breaks. At one point they pass a

N31

**155**

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***Bart van Es***

01

dead horse on the roadside, its hooves pointing upward, the body cov-

02

ered with a shivering carpet of flies. It is interesting to look at and she 03

stands there for a moment before the moving mass explodes into a

04

buzz of flight.

05

The walk is not hard, though Lien feels sticky under her layers of

06

clothing. It is midafternoon by the time they approach their destina-

07

tion, the town of Ede, a place she has never been. The first thing that 08

she sees, before they reach any buildings, is a bomb crater at the edge 09

of the road. She and Jaap, allies for a moment, step away from the

10

group to stare at it. The crater is an almost perfect circle, like a kitchen 11

bowl cut into the sand, and Lien wonders what it would feel like to be 12

down there inside it, looking up at the high, heaped sides.

13

Among the first of the buildings, they see rubble, great hills of

14

tangled metal, brick, and concrete thrown up alongside houses that

15

look perfectly fine. On the one in front of them it is just a corner that 16

is missing: the room up there is cut open, with a door, a bed, and half 17

a ceiling surrounded by gray sky. A mess of wall and window lies be-

18

side them in the street.

19

Now that they have reached the town their group is merging with

20

others. The road ahead is blocked, people are saying, because the Ger-

21

mans are conducting a search. So they stand and wait in the gray af-

22

ternoon light. At first people arch their necks to see what is happening, 23

but as time passes they begin to stare in nervous agitation at the

24

ground. Men in uniform are walking slowly along the line of families, 25

stopping now and then to ask questions or to shout orders that no one 26

fully understands. Ten steps ahead, a young man holds out a bundle of 27 papers, but in spite of this, he is pulled all of a sudden by his collar to 28 the side of the road. Father van Laar clutches a cardboard folder and 29 mumbles to his wife. The soldiers' helmets are close now. The helmets 30S have small white shields on them with two lightning bolts side by side.

31N

And then the soldiers are right next to them and taking papers

**156**

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### **the cut out girl**

from Father van Laar, who keeps repeating, "I am essential labor,"

01

which to Lien is just meaningless sound. Meanwhile, the young man

02

who was pulled aside a moment earlier is being marched up the line of 03

people by a soldier who is shouting and pointing a gun. Everywhere

04

now, from all the soldiers, there is shouting. But although Lien's heart 05

beats quickly, she does not shiver and she continues to look around.

06

The world that she sees is strange and distant, almost a kind of play.

07

She feels that she could be flying now, like the Good Lientje of her

08

dreams.

09

10

11

If Lien could fly above the road on which she is waiting with so

12

many others then she would see Ede spread out below her, a fortress

13

town. The trees have been felled to give clean lines of fire, and young 14

men, like the boy who was pulled out of line ahead of her, are now

15

digging trenches at the point of a gun. The town has been gouged by

16

Allied airstrikes, and everywhere, pointing upward, there are the long 17

steel barrels of Flak anti-aircraft guns. Strung along the roads that

18

lead to Ede there are the bodies of forty resistance fighters, left as a 19  
warning, with signs that read terrorist pinned to their chests. And

20

in the woods there are hundreds of tanks and tens of thousands of

21

soldiers: the might of the two SS Panzer divisions, with more arriving 22  
all the time.

23

For the winter of 1944– 45, which is known to the Dutch as the

24

Hunger Winter, the front lines of Europe lay frozen. In the east

25

the Russian army had entered Poland but stopped short of Warsaw. In

26

the south the Allies faced the Apennine Mountains, impassable until

27

March. And in the west a huge counterattack, the Battle of the Bulge, 28

would leave the Americans entrenched in the snow- covered forests of 29

the Ardennes. North of this, the Netherlands lies divided. In the wake S30

of Operation Market Garden, British and Canadian tanks have moved

N31

157

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***Bart van Es***

01

up to the Waal and Rhine, freeing Middelburg, Breda, Nijmegen, and

02

's-Hertogenbosch. But the big cities— Amsterdam, The Hague, Rot-

03

terdam, Dordrecht, Utrecht, and the shell of Arnhem— remain under

04

German rule.

05

06

07

In Amsterdam in January 2015 it is dark outside and it has be-

08

gun to rain. Lien and I face each other across her table in the light of 09

a single lamp. Her memories are not as clear as I have made them. She 10  
remembers scraps— the landings, the sirens, crouching down in the

11

cellar, the girls in their dresses of parachute cloth, the dead bodies of 12  
soldiers in the streets of Ede— but some of the rest I must patch to-

13

gether from other sources, such as history books and diaries, and the 14  
witness accounts that I will get from other people whom I have yet to 15  
meet. The gaps in Lien's memory are getting bigger as her contact

16

with others grew less. Of the journey to Ede, which is still so vividly 17  
recounted by hundreds of others (who tell, for example, of the bomb

18

crater or the dead horse with flies on it), she can picture nothing at all.

19

Lien gets up to fetch us something to eat. When she opens the

20

fridge the light that it casts is harsh on her face amidst all the dark-

21

ness. I move around unprompted, at home here already, and switch on

22

a few lamps. The silence that we share is now the silence of friendship, 23  
comfortable though also sad. It feels as though we too, like the Lien of 24  
wartime, have been on a journey. We stretch our aching limbs.

25

Somehow the meal has the character of a roadside stop. Tomorrow

26

I will visit Algemeer to see what the house is like and I will walk from 27  
there to the church. Lien nods. The Van Laars' house is still vivid to 28  
her: a point of light, though not of happiness. We stand, the remains 29  
of our dinner spread out on the table.

30S

Outside, I rush to the car through the rainstorm and then sit for a

31N

moment, wiping my glasses, as the engine warms up. After a moment

**158**

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**the cut out girl**

I reverse and pull out onto the highway while I listen to nothing but 01

the engine, the swish of the wipers, and the rain on the windows and

02

the roof. A little way into the journey, out on the empty flatlands, I 03

stop for fuel. As I stand there filling the tank, I am struck by the pet-

04

rol station's unusual beauty: its clean lines of illuminated color against 05

the dark of the night. Inside I browse the backlit fridges for a moment 06

before paying with my card. Then I am on the road again, following

07

the signs for Ede, the town where I was born.

08

09

10

11

12

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S30

N31

**159**

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01

02

*Sixteen*

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

In Bennekom the next morning, I wake up to an empty house. My

12

aunt and uncle, Jan Willem and Sabrina, must have left for work

13

hours earlier. Even their dogs are missing. A note on the kitchen

14

worktop tells me that the neighbor will collect them at eight, which

15

means that they must have left more than an hour ago. I sit with the

16

newspaper, eating breakfast. At the far end of the sunlit room a large 17  
window stretches up to the ceiling, which follows the triangular pitch 18  
of the roof. It frames a cluster of pines across the lawn.

19

The house, a spacious low- rise, was built by my maternal grand-

20

parents immediately after the war and embodies their faith in the

21

modern: clean- lined and inspired by the American architecture of

22

Frank Lloyd Wright, it sits on a wooded hill just outside the village. A 23

privileged child, I spent my summers here in the 1970s and '80s, en-

24

joying the huge garden and the swimming pool with my brother and

25

my cousins. The place feels different now, after hearing Lien's story 26

last night.

27

The newspaper that I am reading is the *NRC* for January 14, 2015.

28

Its front cover shows a long line of people in Paris, the Arc de Tri-

29

omphe right behind them, queuing for copies of the magazine *Charlie S30*

*Hebdo*. From a circulation of less than a hundred thousand, it has run N31

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***Bart van Es***

01

to five million copies for its first edition since the attacks. Inside the 02

paper there are photographs of the Empire State Building and the

03

National Gallery in London, both lit up in the colors of the French

04

flag, and under the banner Terror in Europe, the shooting in Paris

05

is described as an “act of war.” Articles and opinion pieces set out the 06

threat to Jewish life in many countries, with synagogues closed as a

07

precaution in case of attack. There is talk of mass emigration. More

08

than seven thousand Jews left France for Israel just last year, one of the 09 reports in the newspaper tells me, and numbers are on the rise.

10

Lien's history and these recent terror attacks sit so strangely along-

11

side the familiar house that surrounds me: the parquet flooring, the

12

stylish modern and antique furniture, and the huge speakers of the

13

Quad stereo system on which classical music was always playing when

14

I was a child. On the wall by the door there is a little pencil sketch of 15 a duck in a pond with some reeds around it, perhaps four inches across.

16

A few nights ago I learned that this picture was given to my uncle's

17

great- aunt by her Jewish neighbors just before they were transported 18 to the east. Like almost all of the 107,000 Dutch Jews who went

19

through the transit camp at Westerbork, the neighbors never came

20

back. That is why the little sketch is now in my family's possession.

21

As I look at the picture I am reminded again of Lien's first obser-

22

vation about stories and families. This square of pencil lines is not 23

even a scrap of information— without the family story it could end up 24

in a junk shop if there was nobody left to tell. I reflect that, for me, 25

Bennekom has never really had history: it always felt modern and had

26

associations only with a happy youth. It feels different now.

27

28

29

Before visiting the Van Laar's old house at Algemeer, I decide

30S

to go for a run. Soon I am jogging through woodland and then into

31N

winter stubble, heading toward the level crossing over the railway line.

**the cut out girl**

I had not planned this, but it strikes me, while I scan the horizon, that 01

it is through these fields that Lien remembers being carried on a

02

wagon by German soldiers. And then, as I cut into the Ginkelse

03

Heide, I am on the broad expanse of yellow grass and purple heather

04

where British soldiers landed in September 1944.

05

It feels somehow orchestrated, this encounter with history, and

06

that sense grows as, looping back, I see the familiar hillocks that are 07

prehistoric burial mounds. There are lots of them, earth lozenges, ob-

08

scured now through tree growth, almost at one with the undulations

09

of the land. Brown tourist signs mark out the different phases: Neo-

10

lithic into Bronze Age, hunter- gatherers replaced by farmers who

11

scraped out a living on the fertile sandbanks of the Rhine. Bennekom, 12

just like The Hague and Dordecht, can be seen as a birthplace for the 13

Netherlands. It was one of the earliest regions to be cleared, drained, 14

and put to use. And then, when the Romans came, these lands stood

15

at the edge of an empire, overlooked by watchtowers and forts. And

16

then, in the winter of 1944, it was once again a front line.

17

Ten minutes later I reach a little heath that has what as children we 18

called the climbing tree on it, where I spot two familiar dogs. The

19

neighbor who picked them up at eight this morning has taken the pair

20

for a walk. Although he has not always lived here, he has spent time in 21

Bennekom, on and off, since he was a boy, so we vaguely know each

22

other, and as I reach him, I come to a stop. We exchange the usual

23

questions, and after a bit he asks what brings me to Holland.

24

Even now I find this an awkward question to answer. The right

25

reply is too lengthy, too intimate and serious. Also, I'm still uneasy 26

about what I'm really doing, not clear if I have a plan. Still, I can't help 27

answering, and when I do so, I find, as elsewhere, that the story opens 28

an exchange. Like almost everyone of his age here, the neighbor re-

29

members the time of the landings. He describes how, in the weeks that S30

followed September 17, he and other boys collected spent ammunition,

N31

**163**

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***Bart van Es***

01

scraps of uniform, and military equipment, which they found around

02

the woods. What he also recalls— one of those details that sticks with 03

me— is the carcass of a cow that he and his friends came across, right 04

here in these woods, butchered by British soldiers, all hollowed out

05

and reduced to leather and bone.

06

07

08

It is two o'clock by the time I set out on my uncle's bicycle to visit 09

the house of the Van Laars, and in less than five minutes I reach Al-

10

gemeer, a leafy residential street that extends right up into the woods.

11

Sizable properties, mostly freestanding, are set back from the tree-

12

lined pavement, surrounded by clipped hedges. Further in toward the

13

village center the houses become a bit smaller. Number 33 is an ex-

14

tended semidetached with a pretty front garden and a neat brick drive.

15

I park my bicycle against a lamppost and head straight to the door.

16

A woman of around my own age answers. Practiced now at these

17

introductions, I begin to tell her about Lien and her time here, but I 18

have not got far with my explanation when she interrupts, smiling, to 19

ask if I mean at the time of Mrs. Van Laar?

20

“Yes,” I say. “Do you have a personal connection?”

21

“Not directly, but we found a little book of hers when we extended

22

the cellar— we still have it somewhere.”

23

A moment later I am seated in a pleasant open- plan sitting room

24

and kitchen, which has fitted wooden floors, uncurtained windows,

25

and walls that are decorated with modern art. Even the wood- burning 26  
stove (which makes me think of Lien and her morning duties) is new.

27

The woman, whose name is Marianne, comes to sit with me while

28

her teenage son searches for the little book, which is soon discovered 29  
and brought downstairs in a small Plexiglas box of the kind that might 30S  
once have contained a pack of playing cards.

31N

**164**

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### **the cut out girl**

“We kept it because it felt important,” Marianne explains, “be-

01

cause it was linked to the war.”

02

It is rather exciting. Lifting the lid with the air of an expert, I am 03  
reminded of the National Archives in The Hague. There is a frisson

04

because the book dates from exactly the time when Lien was here, and

05

it looks impressively timeworn, mouse- eaten and spotted with damp.

06

On inspection, it is a housekeeping notebook full of shopping ex-

07

penses, like gherkins bought at thirty- five cents. This makes my pose 08

as an expert a bit comical. It reminds me of Jane Austen's heroine

09

Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, who builds a plot in her 10

imagination from the discovery of some old laundry lists. The book

11

really does list the household washing— the sheets, the vests, the

12

tablecloths— with precise dates for each wash. All the same, it has a 13

kind of magic to it. You can see the daily staples (mustard, for exam-

14

ple) and the moments of celebration (where cakes and lemonade, but

15

never alcohol, are bought in at great expense).

16

After the little book, there is a tour of the house, including the

17

cellar. The original wooden steps are still there, as is the old shelving, 18

which is now stacked with little-used kitchen items, such as an electric 19

deep fryer still in its box. I think of Lien here, stealing sugar lumps.

20

Upstairs, Marianne points out the period features, like the doors with 21

their top panels of frosted glass. There are football boots drying on a 22

sheet of newspaper by the radiator on the landing. How strange that,

23

seventy years ago, this was a house under occupation, full of the sol-

24

diers of the SS.

25

As I stand thanking Marianne, already on her doorstep, she men-

26

tions her neighbor.

27

“He was born right after the war ended, you should speak to him,”

28

she suggests.

29

I’m reluctant. Knocking unannounced is never easy and here there

S30

N31

**165**

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***Bart van Es***

01

is not even a direct link. All the same, because Marianne still stands 02

there looking, I cross the drive to a blue door that has a ribbed win-

03

dow in it with a sticker stating that cold- callers are unwelcome. I press 04

the bell and inside I hear the barking of dogs. The face of a woman

05

appears, blurred by the glass. As I struggle to explain who I am, two 06

Alsations come to the high steel side gate beside me and I see a stocky 07

man in his late sixties striding behind.

08

My Dutch feels awkwardly formal. “I’m sorry, your neighbor Mar-

09

ianne suggested I call on you. I’m looking into the life of my aunt, who 10  
lived in hiding at number thirty- three as a child. . . .”

11

But before I can say anything else, he interrupts me. The expres-

12

sion on his face has utterly changed.

13

“Lientje!” he says. “She is the reason that I was born.”

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

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23

24

25

26

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29

30S

31N

**166**

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01

02

*Seventeen*

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

Moments later I am in another living room as someone searches

12

for a book. A large television is on low volume and there is the

13

warm smell of oven french fries. The floor is strewn with children's

14

toys. "I'm sorry, the grandkids have been here all morning," says the 15

man, whose name is Wout de Bond. Thus far he has explained very

16

little, but he has said one thing that comes as a revelation. During the 17

war Lien spent time in this house.

18

This news disorients me. Lien herself has no recall of the neigh-

19

bors. Right now Wout is too busy to offer further explanation; he has 20

his back to me and is rummaging through a chest of drawers. Occa-

21

sionally he pulls out documents and photographs, which are placed on

22

a growing pile. I sit a little awkwardly, full of questions. When could 23

Lien have been here? Why does she not remember it? And how could

24

this man have been born because of her?

25

Eventually, the book that Wout was looking for is found and

26

handed over, but he has other things that he wants to show me, so he

27

heads out to the kitchen, calling to his wife with a question about a 28

red folder, which he thought was in the drawers.

29

I am left alone, seated on the sofa. The book that he has left with

S30

me is called *Bennekom: Jewish Refuge* and it has been opened to page N31

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***Bart van Es***

01

142. There I see a picture that is familiar to me, of Lien aged about 02 twelve. Beside it is a small paragraph of text:

03

04

*At Algemeer 33 with Gijs van Laar there was a Jewish girl, Lientje, 05 in hiding. Lientje belonged to the family and was a total part of it.*

06

*She attended the Reformed School. She survived the war.*

07

08

There is nothing else.

09

I turn back a page and see that the previous entry is devoted to 31

10

Algemeer, the house where I am now. Here there is much more text as

11

well as two photographs. One shows a three- year- old girl with a

12

checked bow in her hair; it is labeled “Maartje.” The other is of a

13

woman in her twenties who is called Hester Rubens. Both were Jew-

14

ish and they lived here during the war. “There were many more people

15

in hiding at Number 31,” the book tells me, “but their identities are 16  
unknown.”

17

As with the earlier news that Lien stayed with the neighbors, this

18

information comes as a shock. So there were other Jews in hiding

19

right where Lien lived on Algemeer. When she met Maartje or Hester

20

Rubens, as Lien must have done if she stayed here in this house, she

21

could have had no idea of who they really were. The notion that

22

Bennekom was a Jewish refuge comes as a total surprise to me. I

23

have spent a lifetime visiting this village, and even now, though I have 24

talked to my mother and her family about the work that I am doing,

25

no one has ever mentioned this past.

26

Still waiting for Wout's return, I scan page 140, which is devoted

27

to the house across the street. Here too, I learn, there were Jews hid-

28

den. A man and a woman, not a couple, lived concealed in an attic

29

space, which could be accessed only through a ladder that ran behind

30S

the false wall of a bedroom on the second floor.

31N

Skipping back a few pages, I start the entry at the beginning and

**168**

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## **the cut out girl**

read about Bertha Ruurds, a local woman who often visited Algemeer

01

during the war and who even lived for a while on this street. Through 02

small tokens, Bertha signaled her loyalty to the resistance. She planted 03

orange marigolds in her front garden, sold portraits and little tiles that 04

featured the royal family, and distributed copies of the Protestant un-

05

derground newspaper, *Trouw*. In this way, she became a point of con-

06

tact, a distributor of information, always quick to help. Only after the 07

war had ended and the relevant files were gone through was it discov-

08

ered that Bertha was, in reality, an informer, employed by the Political 09

Police. It was thanks to her that, on September 4, 1943, officers raided 10

32 Algemeer, right across the street from the Van Laars. The home-

11

owner went to prison and Salomon Micheels and Wilhelmina Lab-

12

zowski, discovered hiding in the attic, were sent straight to Auschwitz 13  
as “punishment cases,” both dead before the end of the month.

14

Two hideout addresses within a few yards of where Lien lived. An-

15

other six on the adjoining street. My sense of the one village in the 16  
Netherlands that I thought I knew has suddenly changed.

17

It was, it turns out, not just Algemeer that had secrets. At least 166

18

Jews spent time in hiding in Bennekom, a village of just five thou-

19

sand, and more than 80 percent of them survived. This is the opposite 20  
of the national picture. So why here, a place in which, in 1940, there 21  
were virtually no Jews?

22

The answer is really twofold. It is the achievement of remarkable

23

people, but it is also the product of history, of connections, and of 24  
land. Bennekom is a place of hills, woods, and simple farmyards,

25

which, in terms of landscape, makes it un-Dutch. In the 1930s, the

26

place was known as a holiday resort to Jewish visitors from the cities, 27

and when the war came, it was a natural location to seek out. There

28

was room here for disappearance, and its rental villas, campsites, ho-

29

tels, and leisure clubs were points of contact through which rescuers S30

might be found.

N31

**169**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

Help itself, of course, came not from land but from people. For

02

example, from Piet and Anna Schoorl. This couple, who enjoyed

03

sports and motorbiking, owned a food- testing laboratory in the center 04  
of the village. In July 1942, Piet got a call from an old acquaintance, 05  
a businessman from Rotterdam named Leo van Leeuwen. A few  
06

years earlier, before the war started, Leo and his family had come to 07  
the village for a vacation, and he and Piet had played tennis together 08  
at the local country club. They were hardly close, but Leo was des-  
09

perate. He and his family had just received their summons for trans-  
10

port to Poland, and so with no other options available, he asked if  
11

Piet and Anna might be willing to help them by saving the life of  
12

their little girl.

13

It was the decision of a moment. Piet, who was away on business in  
14

the big city, could not even consult his wife. She later described the 15  
sudden arrival of a stranger at her doorstep, who brought “a pretty

16

little blond girl with a tear on her cheek.” Anna knew nothing of the 17  
situation, had in fact never knowingly met a Jewish person, but she

18

could imagine what had happened. So little Eline, aged just three,

19

was tucked into bed next to the Schoorl’s own daughter, who was four, 20  
and hidden from view.

21

And once contact was established, the connection deepened.

22

Eline’s elder brother, Karel, also came over, and some time later so too 23  
did their parents, Leo himself and his wife, Pauline. Then, on top of 24

this, as the crisis deepened, Leo’s cousin and his family joined the

25

group. The pressure on Piet and Anna was almost unbearable, but in

26

spite of this, they decided that it was possible to do more. So they

27

rigged up the laboratory in the village as a safe house, and through

28

Piet's business connections, put out the call that sanctuary might be 29

found. Families and unaccompanied children now made their way to

30S

Bennekom, often to stay only for a while beneath the laboratory before 31N

being brought, with the help of the village doctor, Wim Kan, to a

**170**

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### **the cut out girl**

permanent address. In this way over fifty people owed their lives to

01

the Schoorls.

02

And then there was a raid. Police from the big city had heard,

03

through their interrogations, about what the Schoorls were doing and

04

they descended on the house. Amazingly, the hiding place proved ef-

05

fective and no one was discovered, but Piet was arrested soon after-

06

ward and spent seven months detained by the SS. By this time a whole

07

network was active: food suppliers, couriers, and locations throughout 08

the village to keep the hideaways safe. Piet kept his secrets and, when 09

released in May 1944, simply resumed his work.

10

Finally, after the failed Allied landings, while the SS patrolled the 11

streets and requisitioned the houses, the Schoorls one by one cycled a 12

dozen Jewish children— white- faced from their months in hiding— to 13

safety in a wood keeper's shed on the Keijenbergseweg. From there

14

they were collected a day later, concealed on a wagon among bales of

15

straw. The children survived, as did all the others who relied on the 16

Schoorls.

17

18

19

One might think that Piet and Anna would today be remembered

20

through a street name or a statue, that their names would be famous,

21

but this is not the case. After the war, Piet's business, which was ill 22

equipped for the modern food industry, went under. He got a job at

23

the agricultural college, which to him was a comedown in life. In his 24

declining years he was plagued by depression. When he died in 1980,

25

Anna applied for a war pension, but her request was declined.

26

As I read about Anna's disappointment, I am struck by the con-

27

trast with the case of the widow of Wim Henneicke, the head of the

28

Search Division of the *Hausraterfassung*, the Jew- hunting operation 29

that sent around nine thousand to their deaths. In the final stages of S30

the war, Henneicke was shot by the resistance, and afterward, in

N31

*Bart van Es*

01

compensation, his wife was granted a pension of two hundred guilders

02

a month.

03

04

05

Wout returns, having found the red folder, and as we look

06

through it he tells me about his father and mother and the work that

07

they did during the war. Right underneath me, he explains, below the

08

sofa where I am sitting, there is a wooden panel that is lined up with 09

the grooves of the floorboards and therefore difficult to spot. To get to 10

it you would need to move the furniture and then lift the carpet. And 11

then, once opened, this trap door leads to a dug- out space beneath the 12  
house. It looks empty and innocuous. To a searching policeman it is

13

supposed to look like space for ventilation, preventing damp. But if

14

you crawl flat in the darkness on your stomach, this shallow passage

15

will take you to a wall of sand and behind that to a room with furni-

16

ture and electric light, where a Jewish family lived in hiding during 17

the war.

18

To me, seated on Wout's sofa with the TV still on in the back-

19

ground, the world suddenly seems different. To think that this secret 20

life existed, unmentioned, right below Lien's feet. I look again at the 21

book and see that, alongside Lien's entry for 33 Algemeer, there is

22

mention of another woman, Bets Engers, who also hid with the Van

23

Laars. Who was Bets Engers? Lien remembers nothing of her. Was

24

this before her arrival? If so, how long did she stay? On my phone I

25

look back at the photograph of the Van Laar family, remembering

26

now that there was another figure standing with the group. There she

27

is, a curly-haired young woman, to one side, directly behind Lien. Is 28

this Bets? Wout does not know. Memory is selective and not always

29

reliable. So many facts are irretrievably lost.

30S

Wout and I talk for a while about his parents, looking over old

31N

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

photographs as we speak. He writes down a series of e-mail addresses, 01

listing people in the local history society who might be able to help me 02

with my research. Then, with the light outside already fading, I ask

03

what he meant when he said that he was born because of Lien. This

04

part of the story is still unclear.

05

“Oh,” he smiles, “it’s best to hear about that from my sister. She

06

lives in Ede now.”

07

Together we look at a picture of a teenage girl with a Peter Pan

08

collar who holds out a doll- like baby in a christening gown. Printed 09

with ruffled edges, it looks staged and formal. The girl’s smile,

10

though, is real enough.

11

“That’s Corrie with me just after the war,” Wout tells me.

12

In neat printed letters he writes down her full name, telephone

13

number, and address and attaches his card, which bears the head of an 14

Alsatian.

15

“Keep in touch,” he says.

16

17

18

Back on the bike, I head through the woods to my aunt and un-

19

cle’s house, riding alongside the big trunk road that was, during the 20

war, still just a forest track. It was somewhere along here that the

21

Schoorls hid the group of Jewish children in a wood keeper’s shed.

22

This morning I was running through the landing fields of the Al-

23

lied Airborne and then, straight after, past burial mounds that date

24

from more than four thousand years back. These woods are no longer

25

simply a childhood playground. Even the trees are not quite what I

26

thought.

27

During the war there was one small pine very close to here on the

28

edge of the village in the grounds of the Keltenwoud hotel. It looked 29

no different from the others, but all the same, on a regular schedule, it S30

N31

**173**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

was uprooted by its owner and replaced. Below the ground, that tree

02

fitted into a wooden, boxlike, structure, which formed the entrance to 03

a secret room.

04

It took until 1995 for Leo Durlacher, by then in his seventies, to

05

write its description. He and his family spent time hidden in a shed at 06

the back of the hotel. A warning system, which was driven by a sew-

07

ing machine motor, told them when police were on their way. If the

08

alarm was raised, the four would then run to the tree that was a really 09

a secret entrance, then seal themselves into the darkness below ground.

10

Breathing by means of a hand pump connected to the surface, they

11

would listen in silence as heavy boots moved around above their heads.

12

13

14

When I get in, I call Wout's sister, Corrie. She would be happy to

15

talk she says, and adds, only half joking, that I had better hurry: she is 16

well into her eighties, after all.

17

They all feel rushed, these meetings— Marianne at number 33,

18

Wout at number 31, and now this with his sister, whose home, it turns 19  
out, is right behind the office where my uncle works.

20

I suggest ten the next morning.

21

“That,” says Corrie, “should be quick enough.”

22

23

24

25

26

27

28

29

30S

31N

174

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

01

02

*Eighteen*

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

The next morning, having got a lift into Ede from my uncle, I

12

walk up to a substantial complex made up of new, well- built re-

13

tirement flats with balconies and large wheelchair- accessible lifts. Af-

14

ter crossing the car park I come to a courtyard of patterned brick

15

paving and huge flowerpots, from which pansies shine in the January

16

sun. Several groups of residents are sitting outside at metal tables in 17

their hats and coats, chatting. Signs show me the way to the gardens, 18

to the medical center, and to a stylish communal eatery called the

19

Grand Café. This place is a snapshot of well-being in the Nether-

20

lands, which comes near the top of global league tables when it comes 21

to quality of life in old age.

22

Corrie's flat itself is warm and crowded with an assortment of ob-

23

jects. She is tall, like her father was, and despite her warning that I 24

had better come quickly, she looks in good health. It is not difficult to 25

match her with the young woman who held up her brother nearly sev-

26

enty years ago. There are pictures of children and grandchildren

27

around the apartment, and right behind her as she sits is a large pho-

28

tograph of her late husband, who worked at the cement factory for

29

most of his life. As she pours out condensed, sweetish coffee milk I

S30

N31

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***Bart van Es***

01

realize that Corrie reminds me of someone. It is my grandmother, Ma

02

van Es.

03

I show Corrie a current picture of Lien, as well as some other

04

photographs.

05

“She became a beautiful woman,” she says with a kind of pride.

06

“Lientje had it hard there,” Corrie continues, “they only had her

07

for the cleaning. It was no kind of life.”

08

Corrie’s verdict on Mrs. van Laar is not favorable: “She was one

09

only for outside appearances and she did nothing if it could be done by

10

somebody else.”

11

Lien, in her memory, was very thin, warmhearted, and put upon—

12

always working, always criticized, and hardly ever allowed out.

13

“What she really wanted was to live with us. I remember her saying

14

so very often as we lay in bed at night when she stayed with us, and we 15

all wanted the same thing, but we had to keep on good terms with the

16

Van Laars, so it was too dangerous and could not be done.”

17

Corrie tells me of the time when Lien came to lodge with them for

18

over a week while the Van Laars went off on holiday.

19

“Two chatty girls in one bedroom, you can imagine how that was,”

20

she laughs.

21

And yet Lien remembers nothing of this.

22

Corrie’s was a happy youth in 1930s Bennekom, with a lot of

23

strong uncles who would carry her about on their shoulders and play

24

with her.

25

“I was like a ball to them— so thrown about!”

26

We look at a photograph of Corrie’s parents with her as a baby.

27

The three of them sit together in a vegetable garden with beanstalks

28

growing tall behind them on neat, interlocking canes. Her father’s

29

long legs stretch right up to the camera. He wears suspenders and a

30S

somewhat scruffy open- necked shirt. Her mother, in a flowery dress, 31N

is holding her daughter’s hand, squinting a little in the bright sun.

**176**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

Toon de Bond worked as a housepainter. His wife, Jansje, was frail

01

in contrast, having contracted tuberculosis in her youth. After the

02

birth of their daughter, the two of them were told by the doctors that 03  
they should have no more children, that Jansje was not well enough to 04  
cope with pregnancy a second time. This was a great loss for the cou-  
05  
ple and also, as she grew up, for Corrie, for whom a little brother or 06  
sister was always a dream.

07

Then the war came. In 1939, Toon enlisted in the army and his

08

wife and child moved to Rotterdam for a spell. Corrie still recalls the 09  
bombing of that city. She remembers being huddled in a barge on the

10

great river, with sheets of flaming bitumen hissing into the water

11

around her, as they escaped the docks.

12

She and her mother came back to Bennekom straight after the na-

13

tional surrender. A few weeks later, Toon returned unannounced, ap-

14

pearing one afternoon in the garden, in uniform, his head shaved

15

bare. He had walked from Germany following his release as a prisoner

16

of war. The first thing they did as a family was to go to town to buy 17

him a hat.

18

It was over two years later that the first hideaways came to Alge-

19

meer. Nothing was said to Corrie, but she remembers people in the

20

house. She thought they stood too close to the windows, and one time

21

she saw them running downstairs from the bedroom, through the

22

kitchen, and into the woods. It was some time after this that her fa-

23

ther began digging and laying cables underneath the house.

24

And then Maartje was there. A girl of three. She was rescued, they

25

heard, by the maid in a big household, who snatched her to safety

26

when the rest of the family was already lined up, under arrest. In

27

Maartje's photo, she still has the round cherub face of a baby, framed 28

by a triangle of black curls. The checked bow in her hair sits right up 29

above her in the style of Minnie Mouse. Her puffed- sleeve dress is

S30

also like Minnie's, and she has dark, rather sad- looking eyes.

N31

**177**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

The De Bonds loved her from the first instant. Toon carried her

02

around on his shoulders and Jansje sang the little girl to sleep at night.

03

This was the sister Corrie had always wanted. The family recorded

04

her as Maartje de Bond at the register office, so it was safe for her to 05  
run around outside.

06

During the evacuation they all lived together in a chicken hutch in

07

Ede, cold and hungry. They made sure, though, that Maartje had

08

enough to eat. Then, after the liberation, the family returned to a

09

smashed-up house in Bennekom, but it did not really matter. They had

10

a summer of rebuilding and playing.

11

And then, all of a sudden, a woman came. It was Maartje's mother,

12

who had survived the war.

13

Of course, they should have been happy. They gave Maartje, whose

14

real name was Sari Simons, a little silver bracelet when she left.

15

The De Bonds went to see her once, in Leiden. There were still no

16

trams running so the journey took a very long time. Corrie hardly

17

recognized her. The curls of Maartje's hair were done in pigtails that 18

Corrie thought went too tight against the girl's head.

19

And then, for her birthday, they bought a bicycle, which Toon

20

brought all the way to Leiden, even though there were no trams or

21

trains.

22

But when he got there, Maartje and her mother were no longer

23

living at the same address. They had gone to Israel, the neighbors

24

said.

25

From her chair in the apartment, Corrie looks at me. “Without a

26

word of good- bye. I can’t understand that, can you?” she says, her

27

voice constricted.

28

I am silent. Looking around the apartment I can see now why she

29

reminds me of my grandmother. There is the same mixture of orna-

30S

ments and practical furniture, kept nicely clean, that I remember from 31N

Dordt. They even look similar: robust and maternal, with strong

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

voices and ruddy cheeks. Their histories— rural upbringings followed 01

by life as working- class mothers to large families— are much the same.

02

And there is also, at this moment, a familiar edge of sadness when it 03  
comes to the past.

04

Can I understand it? A woman, whose husband and parents have

05

been murdered in the gas chambers, returning to find her child hid-

06

den in a strange little country village, wanting to leave the Nether-

07

lands as soon as possible, without a trace. Yes, I can.

08

But then I have been listening for a long time now to Lien.

09

After Maartje's sudden departure, Toon and Jansje wrote letters

10

and made enquiries to find out what happened to her, but no answer

11

came back. The red folder that Wout found for me upstairs at the

12

house on Algemeer is a record of those efforts and the years of silence 13  
that followed in their wake.

14

Finally, long after Jansje had passed away, a letter arrived one

15

Christmas. It was sent from Jerusalem and dated December 18, 1983:

16

17

*Dear Mr. De-Bond,*

18

*I am very sorry it took me so long to answer your letter. I simply 19  
didn't know where to begin, at first I tried to write in Dutch, but 20  
now I feel that goes better in English. I hope your friend can read it, 21  
although it is in handwriting. . . .*

22

23

Maartje tells Mr. de Bond that she works in a pharmaceuticals

24

laboratory, has a religious life with her husband, and has five

25

children— four boys, aged between twelve and seventeen, and a girl of 26  
eight.

27

28

*I have a photograph. I think it is from you, your late wife, and*

29

*daughter. I remember almost nothing of those years, but I remember I S30  
had always a good time. I don't remember that I ever had been*

N31

**179**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

*hungry, or afraid, and that is thanks to you. I remember I had many 02*

*beautiful toys, like dolls, and I still have with me the bracelet of 03*

*“dubpletjes” you gave me when my mother took me home. . . .*

04

05

There is an account of her mother's remarriage, of new brothers

06

and sisters, and of the Yad Vashem memorial ceremony, which, it is

07

hoped, Mr. de Bond might attend. They would be honored to have

08

him as their guest. This is the least that they could offer, after all he 09

has done. Then the letter closes:

10

11

*Strange we came to Israel very lonely, but thank to god we are*

12

*now a large family. Maybe that is some of a reaction of what*

13

*happened.*

14

*I hope that you understand something of my English and receive*

15

*this in good health. I hope to hear your news from you as soon as 16*

*possible.*

17

*Best regards from Haim, and with hope we meet soon. With a*

18

*lot of affection.*

19

*Yours*

20

*Maartje*

21

22

Corrie feels awkward about this letter. Though the invitation is

23

warmly given, it came too late for her father to visit and she herself is 24

barely mentioned. There is just a brief question that recalls her

25

existence:

26

27

*Have you one daughter or more?*

28

29

The question is kindly meant, but Maartje cannot know how hard

30S

it is to answer or the sadness that it brings.

31N

We sit in silence for a moment and then I ask what Wout meant

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

when he told me that he was born because of Lien. Corrie smiles a

01

little weakly. Well, perhaps it was more because of Maartje than be-

02

cause of Lien, but in their absence, the two girls grew together in the 03

minds of the De Bonds. The life that these hideaways had brought to

04

them was missing. Each girl had been imagined as a daughter or a

05

sister, only to vanish without so much as a farewell. They could not

06

have known it, but these cut out girls left holes behind. It was because 07  
of this that, though the doctors told them it was dangerous, Toon and 08  
Jansje took the risk of trying for another child.

09

I look again at the photo of Corrie holding her baby brother. She

10

looks elated.

11

“My mother spent nine months in bed, pretty much, she was that

12

sick,” Corrie tells me, “but then we had Wout.”

13

14

15

After leaving Corrie’s place I stop off at my uncle’s office, a

16

solo legal practice that stands around the corner from the end of her 17

street. The plan is to have lunch with him before heading off to Am-

18

sterdam to see Lien. The building— a low- rise 1970s construction

19

with long strip windows and interior divisions of curved glass— was

20

once a small public library. Inside there is antique furniture, a grand-

21

father clock, and a heavy oak table, which contrasts with the bright

22

simplicity of the walls. The place is not big, but it is spacious, and as I 23

take the tour with Jan Willem, I am struck by the Dutchness of its

24

layout. Natural light slants down across textured plaster to mark out a 25

desk, a painting, or a chair. It makes me think of Vermeer. Engraved

26

on the glass divisions there are texts excerpted from the country's

27

Constitution, which tell me that “all those who find themselves in the 28

Netherlands will be treated equally in equal circumstances” and that

29

“discrimination on the grounds of religion, belief, political opinion, S30

race or sex or on any other grounds whatsoever shall not be

N31

**181**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

permitted.” In style and substance, the office is a quiet expression of 02  
the country’s ideals.

03

That is a selective vision, though, and as we sit having lunch to-

04

gether, Jan Willem and I discuss the curious split personality of the 05

Dutch state. On the one hand, at least from the early nineteenth cen-

06

ture, when the Constitution was written, the Dutch were able to

07

picture themselves as an ideal community: classless, peaceful, pros-

08

perous, and governed by equal rights. In 1864, the romantic poet W. J.

09

Hofdijk vaunted the nation's mission to become "the most virtuous

10

people on the earth." Yet while equality reigned at home, abroad the

11

country remained a ruthless colonial power, deriving more than half

12

of its tax income from the exploitation of Indonesia, the Dutch Antil-

13

les, and Surinam.

14

The sense of entitlement to those colonial possessions was still ev-

15

ident in the years immediately after the Second World War, when the

16

Dutch government's primary focus was not on internal matters but on

17

Indonesia, which had been lost to the Japanese. Though Holland had

18

been reduced to rubble at home, it raised an army for the reconquest of 19

its oil wells, mines, and plantations, using surplus military hardware 20

bought from the Canadians. The Dutch Marines were sent into ac-

21

tion. Jo Kleijne, the young man who carried Lien to the resistance

22

hideout in IJsselmonde and who afterward wrote to her from Singa-

23

pore, was a part of this force.

24

Tanks that had once faced the Germans now rolled into Java, and

25

this strange mirror image of Holland's recent history extended still

26

further when on the island of Celebes suspects were taken out of

27

prison cells, lined up in town squares, and killed by firing squads. The 28

young Dutch commander Raymond Westerling warned his soldiers

29

that their mission would require them to "walk up to their ankles in

30S

blood." On February 1, 1947, Dutch troops began what was called the

31N

cleansing of villages by selecting 364 unarmed men more or less at

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**the cut out girl**

random, shooting them, removing their watches and jewelry, and

01

dumping their bodies into a mass grave. Their villages were then

02

burned to the ground.

03

Jan Willem cites these facts from memory. In postwar Holland,

04

however, they were never mentioned and not a single soldier ever faced 05

trial. For the country to recover from such actions, which saw the

06

deaths of least four thousand civilians, would require an act of collec-

07

tive amnesia, which left many stories like that of Jo Kleijne untold.

08

09

10

A little over an hour later, having borrowed Jan Willem's

11

car again, I am back in Amsterdam with Lien. I tell her about my

12

discoveries in Bennekom, especially about the village's wider resis-

13

tance network and the fact that there were people in hiding right next 14

door and also across the street from where she lived. To my surprise, 15

what excites Lien most is not the unexpected news about the neigh-

16

bors, but rather the confirmation of her own memories when it comes

17

to her time with the Van Laars.

18

"It makes a big difference that she confirms that I had it hard

19

there. I have always worried that the problems came only from me or

20

that I was being unjust.”

21

While we clear the table I fret a little about the kind of book that

22

might grow out of our work together. There are so many books al-

23

ready out there about the war. Lien smiles and tells me that repetition 24

is no bad thing. “There are also so many songs about love.”

25

26

27

28

29

S30

N31

**183**

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01

02

*Nineteen*

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

In other places Lien recalls front rooms, but of the house in Ede,

12

where she hid from October 1944, she only remembers a flight of

13

stairs. They are steep and carpeted and there is a glass door at the foot 14

of them, which shuts you off from the rest of the house. It is possible 15

to stand there undetected while listening and looking out. If need be, 16

she can race up to a bedroom, her footfall deadened, leaving no one

17

aware of her presence.

18

The atmosphere in this house is nicer than it was in Bennekom,

19

even though there is little food and she is stuck inside all day. There is 20

almost a holiday atmosphere. The family is camping, sort of, and

21

making do with less cleaning and fewer rules. Father van Laar's

22

brother, Uncle Evert, who is the man of the house here, helps with

23

that feeling. He keeps everyone jolly even when things are hard.

24

Mother smiles and blushes when she hears his jokes.

25

“What's the difference between the Germans and a bucket of

26

shit?” he asks loudly, his red face beaming.

27

“I don’t know and I don’t want to know,” she answers but still stays

28

to listen.

29

“The bucket! The only difference is the bucket!” comes his thun-

S30

dering reply.

N31

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***Bart van Es***

01

He is fearless. You feel his presence in a room. Father van Laar is

02

almost like a boy when he is with him. They have games, like playing

03

catch with a teacup or flicking each other with the wet ends of towels.

04

Jaap, who is less annoying here than he was in Algemeer, is included

05

in their battles. He giggles when he is bundled struggling to the floor.

06

“We have ways of making you talk!” says Uncle Evert as he tickles

07

his ribs.

08

She is Uncle Evert’s favorite. When they are all huddled around

09

the stove, which is lit for just an hour every evening, he takes her on 10

his lap and calls her his little friend. They play dominoes together.

11

Uncle Evert gets furious if he loses, but this is only a joke.

12

“You have painted extra spots onto yours,” he tells her, bringing

13

the suspect piece right up to his nose.

14

He even starts to lick the domino to see if the paint will come off.

15

It is all a bit childish, but still quite fun.

16

17

18

He has a warm way of touching people. For her it is squeezes

19

and tickles. She laughs so much that she loses her breath.

20

In the evenings there is talk among the adults and dominoes for

21

the children, but for most of the day nothing much happens. She gets

22

up, changes into her day clothes (snatching a moment alone in the

23

bedroom), then she heads down to breakfast, which is usually two

24

slices of dry bread. After this she simply drifts around the house.

25

Upstairs, a little away from the window, is a good spot for reading,

26

with a pillow wedged between the wall and the bed. There are not

27

many books, but the ones that she loves she can read over and over

28

without getting bored. Their words become a rhythm and Lien enters

29

completely into the adventure: the companionship and beauty of a

30S

world. Days drift by from gray dawn to the darkness that comes by

31N

midafternoon.

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### **the cut out girl**

When everyone is away, the house has its own sound to it, unheard

01

until you listen. There is the tick of the alarm clock on the washstand, 02

the murmur of pipes, and the light scrabbling of birds' feet above her 03

head on the tiles of the roof. In the stillness she sometimes picks up 04

the sounds of her own body and is embarrassed even though there is

05

no one to hear.

06

Today she is not alone in the house because Uncle Evert is moving

07

things about in the kitchen. There is the scrape of furniture, the

08

stacking of metal on metal, and the creak of his weight on the floor-

09

boards. Once she is absorbed in her book these sounds vanish com-

10

pletely. She only hears them again when they change.

11

The glass pane in the door at the foot of the stairs gives a faint

12

rattle. The latchbolt clicks back into its slot. Then, beneath the carpet, 13

the wood sighs a little with each step. A moment later, the door to the 14

bedroom, which was already half open, swings wider, and the face of

15

Uncle Evert appears.

16

“Still reading, my little friend the bookworm?” he smiles.

17

Walking in, he seats himself on the bed and gestures to his lap.

18

This, she knows immediately, is not quite normal, but she moves with-

19

out thinking. As she settles, his body arches toward hers. He says

20

something about her liking this and how this makes her a naughty girl.

21

She is flustered and confused.

22

Lien has no words for what Uncle Evert is doing. No ideas even.

23

She is shivering in a cold sweat. It is tickling but different. His hands 24

do not stop. She is not sure, even, if she has said no to him. Her body 25

is rigid but he unlocks her legs. Then his fingers are inside her, inside 26

her underwear, and it hurts and there is blood.

27

Afterward he says that she wanted it herself.

28

Now the fear grows within her each time that the house empties.

29

Once the last has left, she must go with him to the space beyond the

S30

door at the foot of the stairs. There, after the glass clicks shut behind N31

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***Bart van Es***

01

them, she must stand, her dress up, half naked, while he unbuckles his 02

belt. It hurts so much as he pushes his penis inside her. Sometimes

03

there is blood on her legs.

04

“You wanted this yourself,” he always tells her, and eventually she

05

almost believes him. The rapes are a secret, hard and poisonous, that 06  
she swaddles within.

07

Evert van Laar has an unseen power. It is a mystery how it works.

08

How is it that the house is empty so often? Why is her place now al-

09

ways on his lap? He is a jovial bully, expert at bending others to his 10

will. With the women of the house he is flirtatious, full of cheeky

11

suggestions, while with his nephew and brother there is a charming,

12

cajoling menace. He deals out thumps that are friendly but just a little 13

too hard. Lien is right in the middle, between the boys and the women, 14

courted as a princess, and then tumbled like a pet.

15

16

17

Gray days, weeks, and months blur into each other. Lien sees al-

18

most nothing and grows familiar only with the space beyond the door

19

at the foot of the stairs. Meanwhile, twenty miles away in Nijmegen

20

an army of half a million men stands waiting. When the spring comes,

21

one thousand heavy guns will fire into enemy territory around the

22

clock. Smoke will clothe the rivers in preparation. Already now, thou-

23

sands of bombers swarm and darken the land beneath them. They

24

will rain down half a million tons of ordnance in these last few months 25  
of the war.

26

27

28

Amid all this there is still the edge of carnival in the

29

evenings at the house in Ede: a restless, random celebration that Uncle 30S

Evert drives. He insists that they all have pancakes (even though there 31N  
are no eggs, milk, or butter), and somehow they get them: gritty and

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### **the cut out girl**

paper thin. At the table he sits triumphant. Lien, as his little friend, 01  
must have some, so he slides a sharp- edged wafer onto her plate.

02

Cold, hungry days pass, but then one day, unannounced, it is over:

03

April 17. First there is gunfire, then silence, and then, in the distance, 04  
the crazy rumble of cheering and what sounds like a marching band.

05

From the top- floor window, through which she has never looked till

06

now, Lien gazes down on small groups of men and women who are

07

emerging, full of caution, from their doors. Right below her, down on 08  
the pavement, a woman starts shouting— a drawn- out, high- pitched, 09

uncontrolled squeal. The woman stands and bellows up at the build-

10

ings, an orange flag held up with both hands.

11

Now everyone rushes out, Lien with them, and crowds jostle her as

12

she steps onto the pavement for the first time in half a year. It is diz-

13

zying to feel the sun and the sky again. In the cloudy brightness ev-

14

erything is overwhelming: the letters of a shop sign, the flecks of

15

gravel on a pathway, the dark leaves of a hedge. Her ears ring with the 16

sound of a moving, shouting, crying multitude, and in her mouth she

17

can taste the fresh air.

18

Lien runs with a group of children, leaping over rubble, finding her

19

balance on crumbling walls. In an alley they come across the body of a 20

German soldier. It lies facedown on the cobbles, one arm pointing up-

21

ward, the helmet still attached with a strap. For a while they just stare 22

down at it in wonder— frightened, not sure if it might suddenly move—

23

but then a girl steps forward and softly kicks the side of the head. With 24

shrieks they back off in horror, but then they edge back. Now a boy and 25

then others dare to give the body a kick. When she has a go, Lien is

26

surprised by how heavy the dead soldier feels against her foot.

27

Out on the main road it is almost a frenzy. Men sing loudly into

28

the warm, gray afternoon air. Then the line of troops comes through.

29

They are from Canada, the Allied soldiers, it seems. Lien sees them in S30

snatches through the limbs of the thronging crowd. She watches as

N31

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***Bart van Es***

01

girls climb to sit on the tanks, their skirts flying up. The air is thick 02  
with smoke and diesel. Finally, as Lien walks back from the high

03

street, she locks eyes with a woman who stands on the pavement, her

04

head newly shaven with spots of bright red.

05

And all through this, though she is part of the madness of the cel-

06

ebration, though she runs and joins in with everything, Lien has not

07

understood it. The liberation has no meaning. It is a party, people are 08  
cheering, and that is all.

09

10

11

It was May 5, 1945, when the Canadian general Charles Foulkes

12

and the German commander in chief Johannes Blaskowitz reached

13

agreement on the capitulation of German forces in the Netherlands.

14

The surrender was signed in Wageningen, just three miles from Ben-

15

nekom. Adolf Hitler had already shot himself at the end of April, and 16

on May 8 the war in Europe was officially over when Allied victory

17

was declared. After a few days of celebration, however, the mood in

18

the Netherlands was at best one of grim resignation about the work of 19

rebuilding that lay ahead. Nineteen thousand civilians had been killed 20

during the combat, eight thousand non- Jews had died in prison camps, 21

and a further twenty- five thousand had starved to death. Calorie con-

22

sumption per person had more than halved in the last year of the con-

23

flict; 8 percent of the landmass lay under water, having been flooded 24

by the German army in the course of its retreat; and systematic loot-

25

ing meant that economic destruction was greater in the Netherlands

26

than in any other occupied country in the West.

27

This national devastation does do something to explain the poor

28

treatment of the nation's surviving Jews. Sixteen thousand of them

29

emerged from hiding, and in the east a further five thousand were left 30S

alive in the camps. Other countries, such as France and Belgium, al-

31N

ready liberated for the most part in 1944, were much quicker to send

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**the cut out girl**

aid and transport to help the return of survivors. The Dutch, with a

01

repatriation force that consisted of two hired motorbikes and four

02

small lorries, could do almost nothing. Most of their citizens had to 03  
struggle home by themselves.

04

With nearly half a million Dutch men stuck beyond the borders

05

(most in German labor camps) and another third of a million internal

06

refugees, the government that returned from exile in London would

07

always, even with the best intentions, have struggled to provide suffi-

08

cient help for the surviving Jews.

09

There were, however, no signs of best intentions. Not even a state-

10

ment, let alone any special arrangement, was made. When the issue

11

came up, Dutch ministers insisted that Jews should expect to be

12

treated the same as others. They saw no contradiction between this

13

and the substantial orders that they placed for hymnals, prayer books, 14

Bibles, and even Communion chalices, which would be waiting to

15

give spiritual comfort to the refugees.

16

The vast majority of Jewish survivors who made it back to the

17

Netherlands found arrival a traumatic experience. When they reached

18

the borders they were met by a large though disorganized defense

19

force, made up of men wearing clogs and unmatched uniforms, be-

20

cause the government was frightened of an influx of foreigners, above 21

all communists, who might destabilize the state.

22

Dirk de Loos described afterward how he arrived on a bus with

23

other Jews from Dachau that was stopped at the border, where, in

24

spite of the Jews' authentic Dutch accents, the authorities were unim-

25

pressed by their lack of papers and placed them under arrest. They

26

were dusted with DDT powder and then sent to an internment camp

27

in Nijmegen, a place from which, after ten days, Dirk managed to es-

28

cape. When he reached his home in Leiden, however, he was rear-

29

rested and sent back by the Dutch police, who were, as ever, all too

S30

quick to follow orders from above.

N31

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*Bart van Es*

01

Dirk's experience was not unusual. In Westerbork, the transit camp

02

from which more than one hundred thousand had been transported to

03

Auschwitz, over five hundred remaining Jews who had been destined

04

for extermination were kept prisoner for months after the war had

05

ended. They were held there alongside ten thousand newly arrested

06

Dutch fascists, the very people who had wanted to send them to their

07

deaths. When they were eventually released, the situation barely im-

08

proved. Jewish property had been robbed, there were new people living 09

in their old houses, and in some cases there were even tax demands to 10

cover the years they had spent in the camps.

11

To an extent, such experiences could be blamed on the chaos of the  
12  
immediate postwar situation, but in those first months after the liber-  
13  
ation there were also signs that anti- Semitism in the Dutch popula-  
14  
tion played a part. At one time Holland had stood out as a haven of  
15  
toleration. Yosef Kaplan, the historian of Jewish life in the Nether-  
16  
lands, could find no significant incident of anti- Semitic persecution 17  
during the entire history of the Dutch Republic, stretching from 1581  
18  
to 1795. During the nineteenth century, however, a new stereotype of  
19  
the grubby, heavily accented, Jewish swindler did emerge in the na-  
20  
tional culture, an image fueled by immigration from the east. Partly  
21  
also thanks to the rise of the rise of international Zionism, the notion 22

surfaced that Jews were not entirely Dutch. Then, in the wake of the

23

Nazi takeover in Germany, thirty- five thousand foreign Jews escaped 24

to the Netherlands, to which the government responded by restricting

25

immigration and putting people in camps. There was widespread talk

26

of Jewish communists, of Jewish moneymen, and of how Jews might

27

bring down the tone of a good restaurant or a good club.

28

Though the fascist vote in the Netherlands never got beyond 4

29

percent, there had been something there for the wartime Nazi propa-

30S

gandists to work on, and this was evident in 1945. The nationalism of 31N

some resistance newssheets was far from tolerant. *Het Parool*, for 192

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**the cut out girl**

example, warned Jews not to draw attention to themselves after the

01

liberation, and it also criticized Dutch Jews for leaving their posts in 02

the face of the German threat. Another sheet, *The Patriot*, wrote of 03

the need for Jews to be grateful given that the Dutch resistance had

04

saved them when “quite possibly better people had died.” There were

05

Jew jokes in popular magazines. On the letters pages of various news-

06

papers readers complained that now that the war was finished, the

07

Jews were again on the rise. One government office even decided not

08

to reemploy Jewish workers on the grounds that the feeling against

09

them in business was so negative that such people could not possibly

10

be effective in their jobs. Meanwhile, the minister of justice wrote to 11

the Jewish religious union (which had just been excluded from the

12

National Church Council on grounds of their diminished numbers)

13

asking if they could please make an effort to help reintegrate the more 14  
than one hundred twenty thousand detained Dutch collaborators,

15

who were rapidly being released. In the media the fact of the Holo-

16

caust was briefly acknowledged, but it was then passed over as too

17

horrible to contemplate at length. Unsurprisingly, Jewish emigration

18

from the Netherlands in the postwar decade ran at far higher levels

19

than it did in Belgium and France.

20

21

22

In Ede in April 1945, Lien has no great sense of the war having

23

ended. She simply awaits the decisions of others. It is an enormous

24

relief, though, to escape from Uncle Evert once the family sets off for 25

Bennekom after a few days. The old road is now full of dirty green

26

trucks, which roll toward them full of soldiers who signal V for victory 27

with their fingers. When they get to number 33 they find it undam-

28

aged. While the De Bonds' house next door has been ransacked, the

29

floorboards torn open, in theirs the jars of pickles are still lined up, S30

just as before, on the cellar shelves. Mother van Laar is soon directing N31

**193**

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***Bart van Es***

01

the cleaning and Lien is put to work again with cloths and dusters,

02

and as she shines the wood of the front- room cupboard, life reasserts 03

its familiar grain.

04

Nowhere are questions asked or answered: not at home, not in

05

church, and not at school. Not a word is spoken of what happened to

06

her parents, neither now nor in the months ahead, but somewhere,

07

somehow, the permanence of their absence is lodged in her conscious-

08

ness. The whole world of Mamma and Pappa and grandmothers and

09

grandfathers and aunts and uncles and cousins and friends in The

10

Hague has vanished and there is no turning back, not even in her mind.

11

Lien is reestablished in her little bedroom, with its pane of glass

12

above the door. On Sundays there is preaching and Bible study, and

13

each evening after dinner she reads aloud once more about the acts of 14  
the Apostles and the struggles of the Old Testament kings. She re-

15

turns to school, where the teachers notice she is behind with her stud-

16

ies. She gets extra math and history, which she works through in the

17

late afternoon, half under the covers, sitting up in bed. Outside she 18

hears Maartje in next- door's garden. Lien goes to the De Bonds now

19

more often, is somewhat freer, and has Corrie as a kind of friend. A

20

month passes and down the street toward the village a few planks of

21

wood are laid out as men begin to repair the damaged houses. Their

22

cement mixer stands there unused in readiness, its mouth caked with

23

a rim of brittle rock.

24

In Bennekom, life continues in its old regular pattern and it is al-

25

ready early summer when Lien hears the sound of a motorbike out in

26

the street. Working up in her room she does not even think about it,

27

but she does notice a moment later when the bell rings and Mother

28

van Laar answers the door.

29

“Lientje,” she calls, “it’s for you.” Her voice is neutral and Mother 30S

van Laar has already retreated to the kitchen, with the door shut be-

31N

hind her, by the time that Lien comes out of her room.

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### **the cut out girl**

It is only when Lien reaches the lower stairs that she sees who it is 01

from the shoes and the trousers. Her heart stops, because it is Evert 02

van Laar. There is no one to call on, even supposing she dared, and

03

her whole body feels suddenly frozen and passive. Stepping forward,

04

Uncle Evert looks up at her, eyes aglitter, and he gestures, through the 05

open door, at the road and at the bike.

06

If you close your eyes then maybe it is not happening. She grips her

07

fingers on the steel of the handlebars and feels the heat radiating from 08

the engine against her bare legs. Once they reach the woods the

09

ground is uneven and the seat hammers against her, the motor whin-

10

ing as he drives at speed. She strives to make herself numb to it, but 11

the numbness that she felt a moment earlier will not come.

12

Deep in the undergrowth there is an old jeep, wedged into bushes,

13

overhung with a canopy of trees. He drives straight to it. He has

14

planned this, she can tell. He pushes the motorbike up against a stack 15  
of abandoned tires. She, still seated, squeezing her eyes closed, picks 16  
up the tang of engine oil that has mixed with wet fungus and leaves.

17

When her eyes flick open for a moment she sees the jeep's windscreen, 18  
which is slicked with a mossy sheen. There is a step just behind the

19

wheel arch and Uncle Evert speaks slowly. He says to her, "You wanted 20  
this yourself."

21

Again there are no questions asked or answered, and after this his

22

visits on the motorbike turn into a regular fixture, like school or like 23  
church. Uncle Evert and Lien have a "special friendship," according to 24  
Mother and Father van Laar. They don't seem to find it odd that he

25

comes to collect her, or if they do, then it is an oddness that they attri-

26

bute to Lien herself.

27

The season runs from summer to autumn and she turns twelve.

28

Without their thick green cover the woods are brighter. It is cold and 29  
wet underfoot. The old jeep, which they always visit, begins to rust like S30  
the leaves that surround it. Its headlamps are now milky gray with fog.

N31

**195**

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***Bart van Es***

01

Lien's sense of herself grows smaller with the fading seasonal light.

02

Ever more silent, she is fearful, like an animal that has been hurt.

03

04

05

And then, in late September, there is suddenly a very differ-

06

ent caller for her. From the top of the stairs Lien looks down, almost 07  
unbelieving. Mrs. Heroma has come back!

08

The moment Took Heroma sees her, she steps forward un-

09

prompted, past Mother van Laar, into the house. From the foot of the

10

stairs she stretches out to touch the girl's shoulders.

11

“Lientje, I am so happy to see you!” she says.

12

An hour later the two of them sit on a bench in the watery sun-

13

shine, looking out over the heath. They are going to do some serious

14

talking and Lien should say what she herself thinks is best.

15

First, there are questions about her health and her school studies.

16

Each time she answers there is a pause as Mrs. Heroma writes things

17

down in her book. Sometimes she sits still for a moment, thinking,

18

pen in hand. Then, after all the questions have finished, Mrs. Her-

19

oma places the notebook beside her, looks out at the tree line, and

20

turns with a thoughtful expression to Lien.

21

The Van Laars, Mrs. Heroma says, have looked after Lien for a

22

long while now. It is not a big family and there is a spare bedroom and 23

Jaap must be almost like a brother by now. Of course brothers can be

24

annoying and we all have arguments sometimes, but Bennekom is a

25

nice village and the Van Laars would like her to stay. She could earn 26

her keep as a maid doing chores for the household. She could carry on 27

with her schooling, which seems to be going well. What does Lien

28

think about that?

29

The girl stares down through the slats of the bench at the ground

30S

beneath them.

31N

What does Lien think?

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### **the cut out girl**

She is not used to being asked this. Lien keeps her eyes fixed on

01

the thin strip of soil and yellow grass.

02

“I don’t want to stay here,” she says, almost to herself.

03

“Then what would you like instead?”

04

The answer comes to her only at this instant.

05

“I want to go to the Van Esses,” Lien answers with firmness and

06

looks up, her eyes squinting against the low afternoon sun.

07

Now that the words have been spoken Lien can see it: the house in

08

the Bilderdijkstraat with Kees, who is her friend, and Ali and Mari-

09

anne and Auntie’s kitchen. It is the only place that she can imagine

10

where she could once again be a child.

11

These things cannot, of course, be sorted out quickly. Mrs. Her-

12

oma must go back to Dordrecht to see how matters can be arranged.

13

There is a long week of waiting during which the Bilderdijkstraat

14

grows in her mind. She thinks of going swimming with Annie Mook-

15

hoek as she used to, or of seeing Fau Buyne, the neighbor across the

16

street. As the days pass, the presence of that world grows more and

17

more urgent. She fears the arrival of Uncle Evert in a way that she has 18  
not feared it for a very long time.

19

And then at last it is Saturday and Mrs. Heroma is coming. Lien

20

cannot eat her breakfast, and when the bell rings it sends a current to 21  
her heart. Mrs. Heroma stands there on the doorstep, locked in con-

22

versation with Mother van Laar. She smiles and waves at Lien but she

23

does not talk to her, and after this she moves to the front room to

24

speak in private with the adults while Lien must go back upstairs. Up 25  
in her bedroom, her stomach burns with waiting, but at last she is

26

called down. “Right, now Lientje and I will go for a walk,” says Mrs.

27

Heroma briskly, and she takes her hand.

28

Then they are walking down the street and Mrs. Heroma is

29

talking. It takes Lien a little while to connect with her words. The

S30

Van Esses are well and they send Lien their warmest wishes. Things

N31

**197**

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***Bart van Es***

01

are very busy for them at the moment because Auntie is having a new

02

baby and the family have just moved to a new house. Uncle Henk has

03

a different job now. He is in charge of housing for the whole city. This 04

is a very important job and lots of people need his help. Also, he is still 05

not very well because of what happened to him in prison, where he

06

was sent for fighting the Germans during the war. Also Dordrecht is

07

not a good place to be right now because of the damage from the

08

bombing. There are no bridges and the people are still hungry and

09

there is often no heating. Quite often the electricity does not work.

10

And all of this means that it is not possible for Lien to come to live 11

with the Van Esses right now.

12

This makes no sense to her, and as Lien tries to understand it her

13

breathing stops. Took Heroma shoots out a hand in comfort but it is

14

already too late. In Lien's mind a chasm has opened and she stares out 15

blankly in panic, her mouth contorted. It is as if she is falling to the 16

center of the earth.

17

Took Heroma is truly frightened.

18

“Lientje, I will ask again,” she says, but Lien for a long time can

19

hear nothing, so overwhelmed is she by shock and grief.

20

21

22

Back in the apartment in Amsterdam it is now just after

23

seven. On the recording, Lien stumbles a little as she speaks of this 24

moment, but her struggle comes not so much from emotion as from a

25

desire to get things right.

26

“The news came that they did not want me. . . . She came back and

27

she told me it couldn’t happen, that it wasn’t allowed. . . . And I was 28

dazed by it.”

29

There is a very long pause.

30S

“I could not believe it. I had so totally counted on it, had set all my 31N  
will upon it, I had seen it as the only way out.”

**198**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 198

11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

In the silence I ask myself what could have made my grandparents

01

give their answer. After Lien left, the family had sheltered two other 02

Jewish children and they had gone back to their families. Perhaps my

03

grandparents felt that something like this should be done for Lien?

04

They were themselves under enormous pressure and they had already

05

done so much. It is also true that at this distance I cannot know what 06

exactly was asked of them or what exact answer was given. When

07

Took asked for a second time they said yes and they did so with

08

grace.

09

All the same, that first answer damaged something precious. It

10

damaged the confident sense of belonging that had been, perhaps, my

11

grandparents' greatest gift to Lien.

12

13

14

Not long afterward Lien stands for the last time on the door-

15

step of number 33 Algemeer. Out on the road a spluttering car awaits

16

her, with Mr. and Mrs. Heroma inside. It is an awkward farewell.

17

When she has said her quiet thank you and begins moving, the girl

18

is handed something, a unsealed white envelope that has four photo-

19

graphs inside.

20

“To remember us by,” says Mother van Laar.

21

While the car idles, Lien looks briefly through the uneven little

22

stack.

23

The first is of herself. It is a studio photograph taken in Ede a few 24  
months earlier and it shows a pretty young woman with a beautiful

25

curving staircase spiraling upward behind her. In white kneesocks

26

and a dark sailor- suit dress, Lien looks straight at the camera, a half 27

smile on her lips and a girlish checked bow in her hair. The image on 28

the picture is not real, though.

29

If you look down at the floor you can see the edge of the photogra-

S30

pher's backcloth. The marble and wrought- iron stairway is just an

N31

**199**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 199

11/23/17 12:47 AM



***Bart van Es***

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22

illusion that can be replaced by something different simply by pulling 23

a cord.

24

The second photograph is the one of her with the Van Laars in

25

front of the house, which was taken almost two years ago, when she

26

first came to Bennekom. She looks much younger in the photograph

27

than she does now.

28

And then there are two passport snaps, one of Father and one of

29

Mother van Laar. They both gaze over the photographer's left

30S

shoulder.

31N

**200**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 200

11/23/17 12:47 AM



**the cut out girl**

01

02

03

04

05

06

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08

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10

11

With his high Brylcreemed hair and five-o'clock shadow, Father

12

van Laar appears uncomfortable in his tight, formal clothing. His

13

wife, looking plain, rests her teeth on her lower lip.

14

They do not seem happy.

15

Now that Lien is leaving there is almost something pitiful about

16

these people, averting their eyes as instructed and doing their best to conform.

18

19

20

For Lien the backdrop is about to change from country to city

21

and from old- style religion to new socialist ideals. It is a long journey, 22

but Mr. Heroma, who is driving, makes an adventure of it. Each mis-

23

leading road sign or broken ferry is a challenge. On the map he shows 24

her the route they are taking and he includes her in the discussion

25

when the way is suddenly blocked. Sheltered in the little car with rain 26

spotting the windscreen she and the Heromas stop in a lay-by at

27

lunchtime to eat corned beef sandwiches. Then they are on the road

28

again. There is little traffic as they cross the country, mainly just 29

struggling cyclists. Outside, through the mist, Lien sees the stumps of S30

N31

**201**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 201

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

bridges, which, Mr. Heroma tells her, were cut up for steel and trans-

02

ported to Germany in the final months of the war.

03

It is dusk by the time they get to Dordrecht. Her first glimpse of

04

the Van Esses' new house in the Fredrikstraat will always stay fixed in 05

her mind. There are so many people crowded around the door. They

06

either want help with their housing or they are journalists asking for 07

comments from Uncle Henk. Mrs. Heroma, with her usual self-

08

assurance, cuts right through the crowd. Then, there in the hallway,

09

in the warm light, stands Ma, round and ruddy, looking tired but well.

10

As Lien steps through the front door into the trusted smell of cook-

11

ing, laundry, cigarette smoke, and people, Auntie surrounds her with

12

softness. "Lientje," she says, "you are home!"

13

Then the whole house pours out its embrace to her. She is petted

14

and praised. "Lien!" "Liennepien!" "Lien is here!" Kees stands a head 15  
taller, embarrassed and wide-eyed, while Marianne crumples with

16

momentary shyness into her big sister, Ali, before turning quite boldly 17  
to ask, "Where are you going to sleep?" Even Uncle comes toward her,

18

lean and intense with rolled-up sleeves and a loosened tie. "We are all 19  
so pleased to have you," he says, fixing her with his gaze.

20

The house, though only a little bigger than the Van Laars', is more

21

than twice the size of the one in the Bilderdijkstraat. There is a sun-

22

porch, closed off with heavy curtains, a steep, curling staircase, and a 23

balcony on the first floor that looks out into the street. Auntie works 24

away in the galley kitchen while Uncle Henk returns at once to his

25

discussion, surrounded by men and papers, in the high-ceilinged front 26

room. It is all so different and yet familiar. Neighbors drop round to 27  
gossip while children of all ages run about.

28

At dinner Ali ladles out pea soup as Auntie follows after, holding

29

a chopping board with sliced sausage on it. Using her knife, she flicks 30S  
a few pieces into each bowl. It is obvious that there is still not much 31N  
food to go round, but on reaching Lien, Auntie asks if she would like **202**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 202

11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

some sausage and when Lien nods she is given twice as much as any-

01

one else. Then there is pudding, a rarity, provided specially with Lien 02  
in mind.

03

After dinner Lien goes outside into the sharp- aired darkness

04

where there are children playing. She does not join them. Instead, she 05  
only walks a little, keeping the house in her sight. The Bilderdijk-

06

straat, the street where she first arrived in Dordrecht over three years 07  
ago, is less than ten minutes walk away but it already lies beyond her 08  
imagination. She will not see her old best friend Annie Mookhoek

09

again.

10

Tomorrow there will be a new school and new neighbors. It is

11

strange, this half connection with Dordrecht, part familiar and part

12

new. She feels a little dizzy with it, just as if she were very tired.

13

Back inside, the house is winding down for the evening. The elec-

14

tricity has stopped working, which happens often in Dordrecht at the

15

moment, and there are only a few points of light. In the halo of an oil 16  
lamp Uncle is bent over a pile of papers. From Auntie, who sits knit-

17

ting beside him, there is the old word for good night, “*Trusten*,” which 18  
was once so strange to Lien but is comforting now.

19

Ali goes upstairs ahead of her, shielding a candle, and steps into

20

the room that they now share. It looks cozy in the weak yellow of the 21  
flame. Double doors lead out to the balcony and three beds stand close 22  
together.

23

“That’s yours,” says Ali, pointing to the farthest, “though we can

24

swap if you like.”

25

But Lien is quite happy. Placed on her blanket there is a small pile

26

of the things that she left behind two and half years ago: some books, 27  
pens and pencils, a cuddly toy. Long forgotten, they feel like new gifts 28  
to her now. All the same, each item sparks a memory when she touches

29

it, like a brief fire. And then she sees it: her poesie album, with the S30

forget-me-nots of its cover blue- gray in the faint light. Lien stands and N31

**203**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 203

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

holds it for a moment and then places the little book, unopened, on

02

her bedside shelf.

03

04

05

In Amsterdam in 2015 the digital recorder has run uninterrupted

06

for nearly two hours.

07

“Shall we eat something?” asks Lien.

08

I nod and shift from my seat. It is already quite late.

09

In the kitchen steam soon rises in the light of the oven hood as

10

Lien sets to work, and twenty minutes later we are seated at the table 11  
again, this time with plates of food. There is a pitcher of water with 12  
slices of lemon in it, coated in silver bubbles of air, and as we sit under 13  
the lamplight I feel just as I do with my parents or with my aunts and 14  
uncles, comfortable and entirely at home. It is strange, though, be-

15

cause our talk at this moment is not of family connection but of its

16

opposite, of the break between Lien and the Van Esses that came in

17

the early 1980s.

18

After we have cleared the dishes, Lien proposes that we watch the

19

recording of her testimony to the Shoah Foundation. We watch on her

20

computer, sitting at her desk. Lien clicks the icon and a second later 21

we see her twenty years ago in her house in Eindhoven, seated in the

22

red chair that now stands in her front room.

23

Although younger, the woman on the screen looks less vibrant

24

than Lien as I know her. There is a heaviness about her and a tired

25

look in her eyes. She addresses the camera in a flat, cautious, mat-

26

ter-of-fact tone. Starting with her name and then the names of her

27

parents, she answers the interviewer's questions and in this way the

28

narrative plays out over the course of an hour. But there are no stories, 29

there is no family, there is no life.

30S

Lien, as she sits beside me, quarrels a little with her former self.

31N

She interrupts with small adjustments and even laughs at what she

**204**

11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

feels are moments of excessive grandness. She is like a child making

01

comments from the back of the class.

02

The DVD stops and we are left looking at the frozen image of the

03

last frame of the interview. It is past midnight and the room and the 04

city outside it are quiet.

05

“I had better get going,” I say. “Tomorrow I want to go to Dor-

06

recht again.”

07

08

09

In the darkness a few minutes later I feel an intense clarity

10

of vision. Never before, it seems to me, have I understood someone so 11  
completely, from their earliest memories, through the small, intimate 12  
details of an inner life. Lien, as she returned, aged twelve, to my

13

grandparents in the Frederikstraat, is real to me. I feel I know her

14

better than I know myself.

15

But then I also know that this is an illusion, the kind of illusion

16

that only a story can bring. How could I, brought up as I was in a

17

world of privilege and stability, understand the experience of a young 18

girl during World War II? How could I understand what it feels like

19

to live as a child in utter isolation, to lose all sense of myself? How 20

deep can any sense of another person's experience really go?

21

Then, as I drive the little car through the night air toward Benne-

22

kom, I am suddenly struck by a perplexing and nonsensical moment of

23

recognition. It hits me as a tremor, exactly like the shock I once felt 24

when I lost my young son in a crowded space. I see my own step-

25

daughter (though I've never called her that), Josie, at the age of twelve, 26

from the inside— fractious, cut out, and difficult— at the same instant 27

that I see the badly damaged twelve- year- old Lien.

28

This is not rational, their situations were quite different, but

29

flashes of the past— in which Josie was free- falling, furious, desperate,  
S30

and without boundaries— come at me like blows to the head.

N31

**205**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 205

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

02

03

As I hold my course on the motorway I see Josie, aged sixteen, on

04

the gravel of our driveway, leaving the house, it seemed for good.

05

Then I remember the series of dismal rooms that she lived in, with

06

dirty communal kitchens and windows that looked out onto brick

07

walls.

08

Self-justification rises inside me: she wanted to leave, said she

09

hated the family, was impossible to control. Surely I was not unrea-

10

sonable? I was not unkind. Each time at a new address, I constructed

11

the same bits of shelving for her and watched as the same few photos

12

(one of her best friend from childhood in Cambridge) came out of a

13

cardboard box. We transferred money monthly. We met in restau-

14

rants. I left the occasional unanswered phone message or text.

15

But the truth is that I did not want her home and did not under-

16

stand her. The truth is that there were moments when I wanted her

17

out of my life.

18

In those terrible days when our daughter seemed lost to us, my

19

wife, Anne Marie, would sleep fitfully with a phone beside her pillow.

20

Sometimes she would head out in the dead of night. Every day she

21

would ring our daughter, even if the call went unanswered. It was im-

22

portant, Anne Marie said, that Josie knew she was loved. I, on the

23

other hand, did not call her myself and often did not see or hear from 24  
her for months on end.

25

And then I think of the fact that my grandmother sent Lien a letter

26

that cut her out of the family and that after this the two of them never 27  
set eyes on each other again. Could I have sent Josie such a letter?

28

When I think of how we sat together in a car on this same motorway

29

only weeks ago that seems impossible to imagine. We felt so close then,  
30S

the family enclosed together, soothed by the buzz of the road. I re-

31N

member that on that journey I tried to tell Josie the beginning of Lien's 206

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 206

11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

story and that my throat froze and I could not speak. Is it possible that 01  
the two of us could have lost each other? I have to admit that it is.

02

03

04

The house in Bennekom is silent when I reach it. The dogs pad

05

over softly, touching their tongues to my outstretched hand. In bed I 06

lie awake for several hours and at 3:00 a.m. I reach for my phone. I

07

send Josie a text message. "I love you" is all that it says.

08

09

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N31

**207**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

01

02

*Twenty*

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

On the train to Dordrecht early the next morning I study a dossier

12

that describes Lien's life with my grandparents from the time of

13

her return to Dordrecht in late September 1945 to the time when the

14

report was completed on November 25, 1947. It was put together by an

15

organization called Le-Ezrath Ha-Jeled, which promoted the welfare

16

of Jewish orphans after the war. Lien gave me the bundle as I left last 17  
night. In the quiet railway carriage I spread its loose sheets, about 18  
thirty in all, on the speckled blue plastic table and place them in order.

19

There are reports of meetings, accounts of correspondence, descrip-

20

tions of the rooms in the household, and summaries of the people in-

21

involved. There are also various letters in an appendix, including one

22

from Mr. van Laar, who believes that Lien is now living in England or 23

Palestine. He is asking to be reimbursed for some dental expenses that 24

he incurred on her behalf.

25

26

27

Le-Ezrath Ha-Jeled (Hebrew for “for the help of the child”)

28

was formed in response to the situation facing child Holocaust survi-

29

vors in the Netherlands in 1945. After the war had ended, Jewish chil-

S30

dren who had been rescued by the resistance were being stopped from

N31

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

returning to their families, not simply through personal action but

02

through policies supported by the Dutch state. As early as September

03

1944, Gesina van der Molen, a Calvinist resistance leader, had begun

04

printing leaflets that instructed members of her network, which had

05

saved around eighty children, to keep hold of their charges in the

06

event that a mother or father should return to reclaim their child. By 07

handing their children to the resistance, she argued, Jewish parents

08

had renounced their parental rights. Then, on August 13, 1945, when

09

the government established a Commission for War Foster Children

10

(known as the OPK), Gesina van der Molen was appointed as its chair.

11

The OPK, which had only a minority of Jewish members, pursued

12

what it called a child- centered policy. This meant that the cases of 13

around four thousand Jewish children who had survived the war in

14

hiding would be dealt with on an individual basis. If in the view of the 15

commission their best interests would be served by remaining with

16

their foster parents, this should happen, even when family members,

17

potentially including parents, were still alive.

18

Seventeen days after the commission was established, Abraham de

19

Jong, who had himself survived the war in hiding, founded Le-Ezrath

20

Ha-Jeled. Its aim was to combat the OPK's power.

21

Thanks to funding from the American Jewish Joint Distribution

22

Committee, De Jong's Le-Ezrath Ha-Jeled quickly established itself

23

as a serious and professional organization. By April 1946 it had thirty 24

staff members and by September fifty- two. These included social

25

workers, investigators, caregivers, and campaigners. In spite of fierce 26

opposition from Gesina van der Molen's OPK, the staff of Le-Ezrath

27

Ha-Jeled soon began to conduct research into the circumstances of

28

Jewish children. The report on Lien was one product of its work.

29

In contrast to the OPK, Le-Ezrath Ha-Jeled wanted, if possible

30S

(and even against an orphan's wishes), to return a child to the culture 31N  
into which it had been born. To do this they would track down

**210**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 210

11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

surviving relatives or, where this failed, suggest Jewish couples who 01  
might be willing to adopt. In Lien's case both options were consid-

02

ered. She had been part of a large extended family, but, as the dossier 03  
tells us, only two adult members of that family were left alive in 1945.

04

It is perhaps natural to assume that there would be a specific mo-

05

ment at which Lien discovered that her parents had been murdered.

06

The realization, however, had been more gradual, and it stretched

07

back a very long time. Already in December 1942, when she rolled her

08

two rings between her hands until they fell under the floorboards of

09

the house in the Bilderdijkstraat, Lien had said a kind of farewell to 10

her mother and father. After this, she shut off her mind to their mem-

11

ory. In a way, for the nine- year- old girl they ceased to exist as real 12

people, either in the present or in the past. When after the war ended 13

her parents continued not to be mentioned, this confirmed that they

14

must have been murdered, but this fact remained somehow distant

15

and abstract, too awful to contemplate as an actual event. It was im-

16

possible to visualize that horror. It would be decades before Lien could 17

even see them in her imagination as they had been. When, eventually,

18

she was again able to picture her parents, the shock to her psyche

19

would prove profound.

20

The person who last saw Lien's mother alive (at the moment before

21

she stepped with Lien's grandmother onto the cattle truck that was

22

bound for Poland) was Aunt Roza, who features in the report by

23

Le-Ezrath Ha-Jeled. Aunt Roza was the widow of a maternal uncle.

24

She came to see her niece almost immediately after Lien returned to

25

Dordrecht, and during that visit she contributed a poem to Lien's

26

poesie album, which is dated November 24, 1945. It is the first entry 27

in over two and a half years:

28

29

*Dear Lientje,*

S30

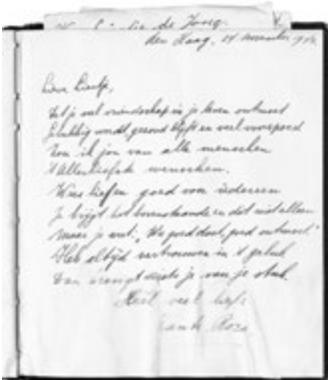
*I hope that in your life you'll meet*

N31

211

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11/23/17 12:47 AM



**Bart van Es**

01

*Health, prosperity, and all that's sweet,*

02

*And of all the people that there are*

03

*I wish this most for you, by far.*

04

*And if you're always dear and true*

05

*I know these things will come to you*

06

*For she who's good is sure to find*

07

*That others in return are kind.*

08

*So always trust in your good luck*

09

*Then from yourself you cannot be unstuck.*

10

11

*With much love,*

12

*Aunt Roza*

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

The handwriting is a little blotted and uneven, but other than this

26

I wonder whether there is much that is personal in this poem. It is hard 27

to think so. The wishes for her niece are heartwarming, but surely, for 28

Aunt Roza, there had been nothing in the last five years to back up the 29

view that “others in return are kind.” It has been Roza’s “luck” to sur-

30S

vive Auschwitz, but only at the cost of years of medical experimenta-

31N

tion at the hands of Josef Mengele, which had left her infertile, among 212

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 212

11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

many other terrible things. In the group photo of Lien’s family that

01

was taken on the beach in Scheveningen in the 1930s, it is Aunt Roza

02

who stands there at the center in a white bathing costume, holding a

03

volleyball. A decade later, of the twenty- two healthy young men and 04  
women in the picture, she is the only one left alive.

05

By 1947, when the dossier was completed, Roza Spiero had already

06

left the country, first for Indonesia and then later for the United States.

07

Lien remembers her as a force of nature, full of glamour and strong

08

opinions. When they first met again, Aunt Rosa disapproved of the

09

Socialist Youth Club uniform that her niece was wearing and took her

10

shopping for something that had what she called allure. Lien followed 11  
meekly. In the almost empty department store, she remembers how

12

her aunt knocked over a display stand, scattering and smashing little 13  
bottles all over the floor. The scent was overwhelming. But rather

14

than being embarrassed, as Lien was, Aunt Rosa rounded on the serv-

15

ing staff, raging that they ought to be more careful when setting out 16

their wares. The Le-Ezrath Ha-Jeled report is heartless in its verdict 17

on this traumatized woman, who is labeled a shallow bohemian. Still,

18

their conclusion that she was unsuited to the care of children was

19

probably right.

20

There was no more optimism from the committee about Lien's

21

other adult relative, Uncle Eddie. He is missing from the photo of the 22

beach party in Scheveningen because even then he was regarded as the

23

family's black sheep. Aunt Rosa had once lent him an expensive cam-

24

era that was not returned, and there was also the matter of some miss-

25

ing suitcases that resulted in enquiries from the police. By the time the 26  
war broke out, Eddie was abroad, in irregular contact. Unsurprisingly, 27  
he was not considered a suitable guardian for a teenage girl.

28

He was charming, though. Lien remembers his sudden arrival in

29

the summer of 1946 at the door in the Frederikstraat, a man in his late S30  
twenties in a sergeant's uniform, full of stories about his travels. He N31

**213**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM



*Bart van Es*

01

had brought a pair of shoes for her, high- heeled and pretty but too 02  
small to wear. There is a photo of the two of them together: he in his 03  
military formals; she bright- eyed, her whole face transformed by a tri-

04

angular smile.

05

06

07

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09

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16

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18

19

Of course Uncle Eddie wanted to write something in her album.

20

Sadly, there were no more empty pages, so he used a separate sheet of 21 paper, which she tucked, next to Aunt Rosa's, into the back of the

22

book. It is dated Dordrecht, July 10, 1946.

23

Uncle Eddie worked hard on his entry and he no doubt meant

24

what he wrote about "meeting together again as friends before long,"

25

just as he meant to send her the promised sweets and bicycle from

26

England, but promises, for Uncle Eddie, were always difficult to keep.

27

She waited in for him once, on a day when he said he would visit, but 28

there was a problem with transport. He would send some photographs

29

of his new wife and daughter in London, but she never saw him again.

30S

With neither Aunt Rosa nor Uncle Eddie an option, Le-Ezrath

31N

**214**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

Ha-Jeled did consider whether a Jewish family might be able to adopt

01

her. A couple from Gouda came over to the Frederikstraat to visit. All 02

went well, and they invited Lien to their house to stay for a weekend.

03

She was collected by a chauffeur in a Bentley, which smelled of wood

04

and polish, as did the great house with its tennis court and marble

05

floors. But Lien did not like it. All she had ever wanted was to stay 06

with the Van Esses, and in the end even Le-Ezrath Ha-Jeled agreed.

07

Though they were, in general, very far from easy to persuade on

08

these matters, the committee agreed that family relations at the

09

Frederikstraat home were exceptionally good:

10

11

*Mrs. van Es makes no distinction between the children. There is*

12

*great harmony. The ideals of humanism are put into practice here.*

13

*The children get on delightful y. Have always had many Jewish*

14

*friends. During the occupation had other Jews in hiding. . . . The 15  
foster parents are warm and kind. They bring Lien up with care and 16  
good sense and regard her as their own daughter. . . . The Van Esses 17  
are truly very remarkable people. The whole family bears their*

18

*stamp.*

19

20

“She is with us now,” my grandmother is quoted as saying, intend-

21

ing this to be the final word. As for Lien, she already feels part of the 22  
family. The interviewer reports as follows:

23

24

*She dearly loves her foster sisters and brothers. Her dearest friend is 25  
her six- year- old foster sister and when asked “who else are your 26  
friends?” she answered “this little brother” (a boy of one and a half).*

27

28

That boy is my own father, who was born just two weeks after

29

Lien returned.

S30

N31

**215**

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***Bart van Es***

01

02

03

In the end, Le-Ezrath Ha-Jeled defeated Gesina van der Molen,

04

whose OPK was abolished on September 1, 1949. This meant that, by

05

and large, child hideaways went back to a Jewish environment, espe-

06

cially where it could be shown that their home background had been

07

religious. Around half were reunited with one or both parents. Others 08

who were not so lucky were sent out for adoption or were transferred

09

to orphanages, in quite a few cases forced to leave a caring rescue fam-

10

ily with whom they had wanted to stay. The large- scale rescue of chil-

11

dren separate from their parents had been a phenomenon unique to

12

the Netherlands. Many thousands had been saved, but the emotional

13

repercussions of survival would play out over the decades to come.

14

Lien, in staying with the Van Esses, was an exception. Out of more

15

than 4,000 children nationally, she was one of only 358 who remained, 16

at the end of the process, with non- Jews.

17

18

19

My train pulls into Dordrecht station. From there I take the short

20

walk to the city library, which sits at the center of the old town. Here I 21

hope to learn more about the public life of my grandfather, who is her-

22

alded as such a remarkable person in the report by Le-Ezrath Ha-Jeled.

23

The picture they paint of him is of a serious, intensely hardworking

24

man of principle. His large bookcase, which they describe, is filled

25

with socialist literature, with history books, and with journals on the 26

latest developments in technology and science. Largely self- taught, he 27

had a prodigious appetite for learning and a faith in the potential for 28

human progress. During the war he had risked everything for the re-

29

sistance, and afterward, to my grandmother's concern, he took a big

30S

drop in salary to run for political office. Things continued to be finan-

31N

cially precarious for him each time elections came around.

**216**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

In Dordrecht's central library, upstairs on a steel mezzanine among

01

sections on travel and teenage fiction, there are some shelves devoted 02

to local government. Here I read about my grandfather's role in the

03

city's development after the war. It does not take long before I come 04

across a photo of him. Resting his chin on his fist, he sits as one of the 05

five burgesses on a raised table addressing a meeting of the council, a 06

clerk taking shorthand at a desk directly in front. Behind him on the 07

wall huge maps show plans for the city's transformation. He looks

08

lean, businesslike, confident, and a little bored by the questioning, 09

which, according to the record, kept on for fourteen hours.

10

The picture was taken in January 1962, a high point of optimism,

11

both for my grandfather and for the town. Like almost all of the coun-

12

try, Dordrecht saw spectacular growth in the postwar decades. Once

13

Marshall Plan aid came onstream in 1948, the bridges, ferries, rail

14

lines, power stations, and factories that had been destroyed or stolen 15

were quickly rebuilt. The city stands as a model for the national effort 16

of reconstruction (the so-called *wederopbouw*) that was driven by in-

17

vestment in infrastructure. My grandfather, who also spoke at na-

18

tional conferences about what was called gas- and- water socialism

19

(aimed at improving living standards through practical interventions), 20

played a big part in that.

21

By the mid 1950s, the city, which had been a relative economic

22

backwater, was a booming industrial center. It assembled ships and

23

aircraft, turned coal into coal gas, and manufactured biscuits, leather 24

goods, and cigarettes. The Electrical Motors Factory, where my

25

grandfather had worked, was expanded. Meanwhile, the ironworking

26

company Tomado launched a range of iconic products that were in-

27

spired by the abstract art of Piet Mondrian. They made shelving units, 28

bookcases, draining racks, bottle scrapers, and later mixers, coffee

29

grinders, and kettles, all in a range of primary colors. From the early S30

1960s, new factories came to make vacuum cleaners, paint, and ovens.

N31

**217**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

Then DuPont chose the city to manufacture its miraculous fibers:

02

Orlon, Lycra, and Teflon, each on a separate site. To meet demand,

03

workers were bused in from as far as Belgium, more than two

04

hours away.

05

For my grandfather, the new prosperity would be the engine for a

06

socialist future. New housing was needed: clean high- rise flats with 07

fitted bathrooms and kitchens and elevators that carried you almost

08

soundlessly into the sky. He pushed through the development of new

09

estates of affordable public housing: thousands of reprints of the same 10

sensible design. There were new parks, libraries, and leisure centers; 11

new health clinics and new schools. The invention of grain concrete,

12

in which cement was made from the crushed stone and brick of de-

13

molished buildings, speeded the process still further. With this magic, 14  
the dust of history was transformed into the clean, the bright, and the 15  
new. Some complained when the old neo- Renaissance post office,

16

with its fairy- tale turrets and towers, was knocked down and replaced 17  
with concrete shop fronts, but my grandfather's faith in progress was 18  
boundless. For him and his fellow burgesses, fourteen hours of debate 19  
at a council meeting was a waste of precious rebuilding time.

20

I look again at the photo of my grandfather, framed by maps three

21

times his size. Given his experiences before and during the war, the

22

answers were obvious: central planning, a clean slate, education, cars 23  
and parking lots, more train lines, and bigger roads. Such improve-

24

ments would bring shared prosperity and decent provision for the sick 25  
and the old. And it could all be paid for from the profits of the facto-

26

ries. The war, for all its horrors, had shown what government and in-

27

dustry, working in partnership, were able to achieve.

28

29

30S

At lunchtime I head out for a sandwich. The town center

31N

outside the library was left almost untouched by 1960s renewal,

**218**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

although there had been plans for demolition even here. Leaning on a

01

wrought- iron railing, I gaze at the medieval city hall, which is built, 02

with gorgeous lopsidedness, half of brick and half of stone, across a 03

low- arched bridge. On either side there are Renaissance merchants'

04

houses with stepped gables glinting in the sun. This, though, is just an 05

island in a sea of modern construction. Two hundred yards away,

06

down the street, I can see the discolored gray- brown brick of the C& 07

A building, the white paneling on which has buckled over the years.

08

Before this morning I never understood how town planners, here

09

and throughout Europe, could have demolished ancient tenements to

10

construct such buildings, but their actions can be traced, at least in 11

part, to the confidence in improvement, the wish to be rid of the old 12

history, that came in those frantic decades of reconstruction after the 13

war. When I think of my grandfather and his wartime experiences I

14

start to see how all this could come about.

15

16

17

Returning to the library in the afternoon I read on into Dor-

18

drecht's history in the next decade, when almost overnight the good

19

news disappeared. On January 1, 1970, Bekkers, the metalware fac-

20

tory, shut its doors with the loss of 220 workers, and a few months

21

later, the pharmaceuticals company Chefaro also announced it would

22

close. All of a sudden there was competition from Asia; the United

23

States undid the link between gold and the dollar, making Dutch ex-

24

ports more expensive; and then the oil crisis hit. Dordrecht, which for 25

a short time had been so new and full of promise, was now old-

26

fashioned, polluted, and too small to pull its weight. Its great

27

companies— Tomado, the steelworks, the leather factory, Victoria Bis-

28

cuits, the shipbuilders, the brewery— went bust or moved production

29

elsewhere. Steadily, from 1975 onward, the city, whose population

S30

was still only 100,000, lost 2,700 jobs a year. Unemployment brought

N31

**219**

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***Bart van Es***

01

crime and drug addiction and also a degree of racial tension with the 02

Moroccan guest workers who had been invited to come to Dordrecht

03

at precisely the moment when the job losses began. By that point my

04

grandfather was no longer on the city council, having been elected to 05

parliament's First Chamber (the rough equivalent of Britain's House

06

of Lords). The family moved for a while to Brill, a small town in the 07

west, where he served as mayor, but his bid to get a seat in the Second 08

Chamber (the main national parliament) did not meet with success.

09

He had been an impassioned modernizer, and the troubles of his city

10

must have hit him hard.

11

12

13

That night I stay in a dockside hotel, a converted building

14

that once housed the offices of the Electrical Motors Factory, the

15

place where my grandfather used to work.

16

The EMF went bankrupt in the 1970s. A color photo of it taken a

17

decade after the closure shows a steel skeleton surrounded by garbage 18

and stagnant pools. By this time the whole docks area, once thronging 19

with laborers, was derelict, and to the thousands of men who had

20

worked here since their school days the place must have felt like a

21

grave. Once in my room, which looks out onto a smokers' terrace with

22

rubber matting, I think back to my grandfather, who spent so many

23

years here and who did so much to shape this town.

24

I was nine when my grandfather died. I remember the news of his

25

death with perfect clarity. My dad picked the phone up in the living

26

room and after a few moments began to cry. Beyond this I have just

27

two snatches of memory related to him: my grandfather's anger when

28

I broke a window of his greenhouse, and his relentless, determined

29

winning when we played a game of cards. In both cases I recall the

30S

sharp smell of cigar smoke (we collected the boxes that the cigars

31N

**220**

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**the cut out girl**

came in and these still carried a deep, sweet, leafy scent). I also re-

01

member the sharpness of his eyes. There was a sense of greatness

02

about him, an aura of command that came from his heroic war years

03

(which were never talked about) and from his decades of political

04

work. My father recalls that in Dordrecht it was always quite some-

05

thing to be known as his son.

06

My grandmother, who died when I was twenty- three, is much

07

more vivid to me. Love came from her especially through the kitchen,

08

which she kept perfectly tidy with a small wall- mounted spice rack

09

and a set of hanging stainless steel pans. On the fridge there would be 10

news from the Labor Party stuck on with magnets, and I also remem-

11

ber a few wise sayings (such as “The days are what we make them”)

12

around the house, painted on wooden signs. She was great with young

13

children. When we traveled on buses she could make pressing the

14

“stop” button on the handrail an act of immense power. On current

15

affairs, which we enjoyed discussing together as I grew older, she was 16

pessimistic. People’s lack of appreciation for the good things that the 17

welfare state gave them made her angry, and this was especially true

18

when she talked about women. They got up too late, served too many

19

ready- made dinners, drank beer, and sunned themselves on foreign

20

beaches when they should have been thinking about their children.

21

As she grew older I think my grandmother's life was colored by a feel-

22

ing of disappointment that the paradise that she and her husband had

23

thought they were building proved unreal and unloved. My mother

24

quotes a letter that grandma wrote in the mid- 1990s in which she

25

mentions my brother and me:

26

27

*And then my two lovely grandsons. In dark moods I think "it*

28

*was all pointless," but then I see Bart and Joost in front of me and I 29  
think, yes, it did have purpose after al .*

S30

N31

221

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***Bart van Es***

01

Children, especially her grandchildren, were a constant pleasure to

02

her, and she loved Lien's children, when these arrived, as passionately 03

as the rest. But those "dark moods" were something that came in later 04

years to haunt her. In the diary that she kept for some of the postwar 05

years she mentions a "long- lasting spiritual depression" that was con-

06

nected in part to global politics and in part to problems closer to home.

07

She writes of "ungratefulness" from the children that she took in and 08

rescued and of how "the duty to care for children in addition to your 09

own should be wished on no one because it is such a heavy burden to

10

bear.”

11

12

13

On the desk in my hotel room lies a second sheath of papers.

14

They were given to me by Lien last night along with the dossier from

15

Le-Ezrath Ha-Jeled. There are eleven typed pages of narrative, which

16

she wrote as part of a set of therapy sessions in February 2001. They 17

bear the title “This will be for once the concrete story of my relations 18

with the van Es family.” Lien’s “concrete story” will be one important 19

source for how I understand the row between her and my grandpar-

20

ents.

21

In the middle of page 4 she starts a new section, dealing with her

22

return to Dordrecht in 1945. It begins as follows, with her reception 23

by Ma van Es:

24

25

*The welcome was very warm. She embraced me, called me Liene-*

26

*pien, and said that it seemed as if I had never been away. But for me 27*

*it was very different.*

28

29

I read further into the document, which presents a picture of life in 30S

the Van Es family from Lien's perspective in the postwar years.

31N

222

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01

02

*Twenty-one*

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

Not long after returning to Dordrecht, Lien switches from saying

12

“Auntie” and “Uncle” to saying “Ma” and “Pa” like everyone else.

13

It first happens one evening as she sits at the table doing her home-

14

work, shading a map of Holland. “Ma,” she calls out, and the word

15

shocks her when it comes out of her mouth. But Ma just answers with

16

“Yes, Lienepien,” which is the pet name that she always uses, and after 17

that the change becomes fixed. No word is spoken— the family does

18

not really talk about feelings— but it feels normal, which makes sense 19

because Kees and Ali, who first had a different mother, must also at

20

some point have said “Ma” instead of “Auntie” for the first time.

21

At least on the outside, life at the Frederikstraat is just as it was at 22

the old house. After school she plays kick the can with children in the 23

street. The tin can is put on the pavement at the corner where the field 24

starts and you can creep up to it in different ways. One way is through 25

the bushes, crouching among the prickles, inching forward, feeling

26

the cold through the soles of your shoes. Or you can edge along the

27

fence. You can also dodge in and out of the hedges on the Emmas-

28

straat, risking an angry word from Mrs. Peters, who does not like you

29

bending her plants.

S30

N31

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

If someone calls out your name and your position then you are out.

02

“I see you, Lientje, behind the postbox!”

03

“I see you, Kees, in the hedge on the Emmastraat!”

04

Kees is not really her friend now. He joins in with the big street

05

games, but alone together, he does not like to play with girls. She has 06  
plenty of friends though, such as Rieka Maasdam, who writes in her

07

poesie album on one of a growing collection of loose sheets tucked in 08  
at the back:

09

10

*1946, 11 March*

11

12

*Dear Lientje,*

13

*What shall I write on this page?*

14

*I have been thinking for an age!*

15

*Hey, Lientje, I know what,*

16

*Just be happy with what you've got!*

17

*For the remembrance*

18

*of your friend*

19

*Rieka Maasdam*

20

21

Crosswise at the bottom of the page Rieka writes: "the 29th of

22

November, that's the day you must remember." When that day comes

23

Rieka will be twelve. Though they are schoolmates, Lien will be thir-

24

teen already because she has gone back a year in school after all the 25  
lessons she missed during the war.

26

Some friends, like Rieka, are from her class and some are from the

27

streets around them, and still others are from the Socialist Youth

28

Club, the AJC, which is where she spends almost all of her weekends.

29

Lien still remembers when the material arrived for her uniform: a

30S

rough, brown rectangle of Manchester cloth for the skirt and a light

31N

blue one for the blouse, plus a red neckerchief, all tied together as one **224**

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### **the cut out girl**

packet with string. Ma cut and sewed it for her. Now, early on Satur-

01

day mornings, she, Kees, and Ali will head out to a park, to town, or 02

to the station, collecting others on the way. At the AJC they play

03

rounders, hold quizzes, practice dancing, or do gymnastics. There are 04

also lectures with serious titles like “Women in World History” or

05

“Life on a Collective Farm.”

06

07

08

09

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

The big event for the AJC is the annual gathering, where young

20

people from all over the country join together. For this they travel to 21

Vierhouten, four hours away by train. Lien's group is called the Mi-

22

grant Birds and they do sound like birds all squeezed together in one 23

carriage, squealing and laughing, making promises about who will

24

sleep where in the tent. The group leader tries to keep order by start-

25

ing singing practice, but after a while she gives up. At Utrecht the

26

train stops, and through the window they see another youth group

27

waiting in line on the platform, Catholic girls in purple velvet capes.

28

After two more hours the train stops at a station with no roof and

29

a wooden platform. There the doors open onto a sea of brown, blue,

S30

and red. She keeps an eye out for the Migrant Birds flag so as not to N31

225

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***Bart van Es***

01

get lost in the crush of people as they worm their way through the

02

crowd to find their camping field. Inside the big white tent the light is 03  
weirdly hazy and it smells of grass and earth. Lien puts her bag down 04  
next to her friend Maartje's. Through the shining, moving canvas she  
05

can hear the camp announcements from the speakers, slightly dead-  
06

ened: there is news of the nature knowledge lecture, the forest hike, 07  
the campfire, and the arrival of a group of visitors from France.

08

In the morning, after a night of secret whispering, they eat their

09

breakfast in the sun. It is porridge from an enormous pan. Seated on hay 10  
bales, cradling the hot metal of their bowls, they look across at the 11

neighboring group of boys. Then there is exercise, in long lines facing a 12  
big stage that has microphones on it and a woman in a kind of swim-

13

ming costume who shows them what to do: things like bending, stretch-

14

ing, and doing star jumps on the spot. Later there are running races, 15  
which she loves. She glows with inner pride when she wins her heat.

16

There is a boy called Wim who likes her, Maartje says. By the

17

third day they are exchanging nervous glances and then, in the eve-

18

ning of the fourth, during the maypole dancing, their fingers touch

19

and stay in place. After this, on hikes, they often walk together. She 20

likes the funny stories that he tells her and the way he wears his collar 21

flipped right up against his neck. Wim is also from Dordrecht, so

22

they plan to stay in touch.

23

The journey home feels shorter. She leans against the girl beside

24

her as the carriage jolts along. For the final roll call at Dordt station 25

they answer weakly through a fog of sleep. After this she, Kees, and

26

Ali trudge back to the Frederikstraat. Though Ma has dinner waiting

27

they are too tired to eat it and can barely speak.

28

29

30S

In the morning the curtains shine bright orange. Downstairs

31N

Marianne is running and calling out. Ali stretches in the bed beside her.

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### **the cut out girl**

“I have slept soooooo well!” she yawns.

01

Lien points her toes and fingers, making her body as long as it

02

will go.

03

Then they play the game that they call tickling, scratching, rub-

04

bing, which has a precise order to it. One girl lies flat on her stomach 05

while the other tickles and then scratches, gently, down her back. And 06  
finally there is the rubbing, with hands flat and warm in circles, which 07  
is bliss.

08

At this point Marianne bounds in and orders them to breakfast.

09

“You must get *up!*” she chants, bouncing and repeating “*up*” with 10  
every bounce.

11

Tousle- haired, the two girls are shooed down to the table, where

12

Ma is seated with a pile of washing, sorting items into different piles.

13

Their three blue shirts are already hanging in a line across the win-

14

dow, darkening the room.

15

“You girls have slept a hole in the day,” Ma tells them, smiling.

16

“What you need is a bit of healthy sunshine and then tonight you’re

17

off to roost with the chickens. It's school again tomorrow."

18

"Off to roost with the chickens" means going to bed when it gets

19

dark. Ma likes these funny expressions. It is one of those differences 20  
between the talk of the Van Esses and what she was used to at the Van 21  
Laars.

22

"If we go to bed with the chickens then we can lay our own eggs in

23

the morning!" Lien answers, but as she says this she knows all of a

24

sudden that her joke has not fallen right. In Bennekom such language

25

of the farmyard was common, whereas here the idea of people laying

26

eggs is somehow dirty, and Lien feels she has caught this infection in 27

her way of speaking and that, because of what she has said, the mood

28

in the room has changed. Ali smiles in her loyal, kind way, but Lien

29

senses an edge of pity. Ma continues sorting the laundry piles.

S30

Feeling downcast in the silence, Lien adds this error to her secret

N31

**227**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

mental list of mistakes. Last week, for example, Ma called her a

02

fusspot for cleaning, as Mother van Laar taught her, with two sepa-

03

rate cloths. And then there was the bike trip where she called out

04

“Hooray for the Liegemen!,” which Ali told her afterward was all

05

wrong. The Liegemen, apparently, were the bad ones, not the good

06

ones. The Van Esses, the Labor Party, they were on the Patriot side,

07

whereas the Liegemen, that was the side of the church, which is the

08

side of the Van Laars. So all of her dreams of castles and towers and 09

princes and princesses, which she got from those books that she read

10

in Bennekom and Ede, they were wrong.

11

Lien sits there scowling.

12

“Hey, Lienepien,” says Ma not unkindly, “enough now of those

13

dirty looks!”

14

15

16

There is a group photo of the five children— Ali, Kees,

17

Lien, Marianne, and my father— that was taken around 1948. Lien,

18

who is now fifteen and who sits to the far left of the picture, is for the 19  
first time too old to have a bow in her hair. My dad, the baby of the 20  
family, sits directly in front of her, his sister's arm holding him steady.

21

Blond and smiling, he looks exactly like my own son did when he was

22

that age. Ali, in an armchair with a wicker back, sits crosswise at the 23  
center, already looking like a grown woman in her long skirt and

24

white blouse with a brooch at her neck. By the time I was old enough

25

to remember Aunt Ali she was over fifty, but it is easy to recognize her 26  
sweet- natured, timid, serious expression.

27

Marianne, who is eight and stands behind her older sister, is still

28

more familiar. She looks self- possessed and not at all childish in spite 29  
of the big white bow that she wears.

30S

The Van Esses are a good- looking family, but the most striking is

31N

Kees, already dressed in a suit and tie, who smiles in a roguish,

228

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11/23/17 12:47 AM



**the cut out girl**

mental list of mistakes. Last week, for example, Ma called her a

01

fusspot for cleaning, as Mother van Laar taught her, with two sepa-

02

rate cloths. And then there was the bike trip where she called out

03

“Hooray for the Liegemen!,” which Ali told her afterward was all

04

wrong. The Liegemen, apparently, were the bad ones, not the good

05

ones. The Van Esses, the Labor Party, they were on the Patriot side,

06

whereas the Liegemen, that was the side of the church, which is the

07

side of the Van Laars. So all of her dreams of castles and towers and 08

princes and princesses, which she got from those books that she read

09

in Bennekom and Ede, they were wrong.

10

Lien sits there scowling.

11

“Hey, Lienepien,” says Ma not unkindly, “enough now of those

12

dirty looks!”

13

14

confident manner. You can see the man in him: the handsome and

15

There is a group photo of the five children— Ali, Kees,  
kindly big brother my father so fondly remembers, for whom every-

16

Lien, Marianne, and my father— that was taken around 1948. Lien,  
thing seemed to come easy, and also the family patriarch of later years.

17

who is now fifteen and who sits to the far left of the picture, is for the In the  
picture there is a big empty space between Kees and his

18

first time too old to have a bow in her hair. My dad, the baby of the foster  
sister. The gap looks awkward, yet the two of them had first

19

family, sits directly in front of her, his sister's arm holding him steady.

been such close friends. It is not just from him, though, that Lien

20

Blond and smiling, he looks exactly like my own son did when he was  
seems to be separated. In spite of the physical closeness, she looks

21

that age. Ali, in an armchair with a wicker back, sits crosswise at the somehow set apart from her siblings, and this is not just on account of 22

center, already looking like a grown woman in her long skirt and

her darker complexion and differently textured hair. While the others 23

white blouse with a brooch at her neck. By the time I was old enough

smile and gaze in the same direction at the photographer, her eyes are 24

to remember Aunt Ali she was over fifty, but it is easy to recognize her slightly averted, at once dreamy and fierce. There is a brooding qual-

25

sweet- natured, timid, serious expression.

ity to her, which matches with Lien's own account of her feelings at

26

Marianne, who is eight and stands behind her older sister, is still

this time.

27

more familiar. She looks self- possessed and not at all childish in spite In the hotel room in Dordrecht, shifting from Lien's "concrete

28

of the big white bow that she wears.

story of my relations with the van Es family," I look back at the report 29

The Van Esses are a good- looking family, but the most striking is

by Le-Ezrath Ha-Jeled, which I studied this morning. The report

S30

Kees, already dressed in a suit and tie, who smiles in a roguish,  
makes mention of “a break in the girl’s emotional engagement” and

N31

**229**

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***Bart van Es***

01

states that “the child gives the impression of not having fully devel-

02

oped.” “The delay in her spiritual growth,” it concludes, “is

03

noticeable.”

04

Maybe I am projecting too much onto a single photo, but I do

05

sense this aura of separation in the picture. The light falls differently 06

on her. Lien looks almost as though she has been taken from another

07

photograph entirely and then pasted in.

08

Lien's "concrete story" describes an incident that occurred around

09

the time the family portrait was taken:

10

11

*I remember one time that I was darning socks by the stove. I thought 12*

*it was really rather a fun little job. But at a certain moment I was 13*

*sent directly to bed without my supper, something that was used as a 14*

*punishment in the house. Ma's point was that I had been looking so 15*

*angry and disagreeable and that I had to learn that sometimes I had 16*

*to darn socks and that was that. It didn't matter that I said that I 17*

*hadn't minded darning socks at all. The punishment went through.*

18

*Ma also said to me quite often, "You are irritating me immeasur-*

19

*ably, but I don't know why."*

20

*As I write this, memories are triggered and I think that I must*

21

*have been deaf and blind to the signals that my presence was too*

22

*much for the family. And the question is, did they love me?*

23

*Even then, I always had the feeling that they didn't need me but*

24

*I did need them. I was conscious that I probably loved them more*

25

*than they loved me.*

26

27

There are these moments when Lien feels separate from the fam-

28

ily, when she stares into the distance and feels an oppressive sadness, 29

but life is good, really, on the whole. The buzz of the house is a joy to 30S

her. Always there are people at the door who need to speak to Pa. And 31N

over dinner there are heated conversations, big important topics with **230**

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**the cut out girl**

principles at stake. Ma and Pa are completely honest. Though the

01

house that they rent is quite large, they own almost nothing, and what 02

they have they share. Come 1953, when the great flood (the *Water-*

03

*snood*) drowns much of the country, they will, without a moment's 04

consideration, open their home to refugees.

05

As well as sisters and brothers, Lien has many friends around her.

06

Girls still sometimes write in her poem book. She has a special pad of 07

yellow paper, which she now uses for these extra entries, like the fol-

08

lowing verse:

09

10

*Two clear eyes, the prettiest I've seen*

11

*I hope that you love me, my dearest Lien*

12

13

It is Lien now instead of Lientje. One day in school a teacher tells

14

her that Lientje sounds childish and this moment marks the change.

15

School is a pleasure. Though a year behind, she is soon again near

16

the top of the class. She enjoys the stillness of homework. Numbers

17

line up and resolve themselves as her pencil moves from square to

18

square. In Dutch, she likes the gentle unpicking of sentences: the sub-

19

ject, verb, and object that are strung together on an invisible line. Best 20

of all, there is geography, in which she traces the edges of continents, 21

oceans, deserts, and jungles, and great sheets of ice.

22

There are friends at school, at the AJC, and in the street, and also

23

at home where she can talk about Wim (whom she has seen quite a

24

few times now) to Ali, do puzzles with Marianne, or read stories to

25

little Henk. It is only with Kees that she has lost her connection.

26

There is a wildness about him, in which she used to share but that

27

now excludes her. He is always saying that she is odd. Lien wants him 28

to like her again and maybe it is because of this that, one time, when 29

walking through the fields in August, she tells him what happened in

S30

Ede and afterward in the woods just outside Bennekom.

N31

**231**

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***Bart van Es***

01

They have just come back from an AJC meeting and as Lien talks

02

she looks down at her sandals and at her gray woolen socks.

03

“You know, when I was away, in the wartime, a man did things to

04

me that I didn’t like.”

05

Kees slows his step.

06

“What kind of things?” he asks her, intrigued for once.

07

She hadn’t planned this and doesn’t have the language.

08

There is a word that has been whispered by wide- eyed girls in

09

class.

10

Rape ( *Verkrachten*).

11

“He used to rape me,” she says.

12

The phrase feels awkward in her mouth.

13

Kees stands still.

14

“Did he take your clothes off?” he asks.

15

As she looks up at him, Kees suddenly looks childish in his red

16

neckerchief and his khaki AJC shorts. Turning away, she starts to

17

walk.

18

He lags behind and then strides toward her.

19

“Hey, if you can do it with some stranger you can do it with me,”

20

he puffs.

21

“I could make you,” he adds after a moment, mumbling.

22

When he speaks like this she is suddenly frightened and she begins

23

to run.

24

“You are odd!” he shouts after her, without trying to catch up.

25

26

27

It was an exchange that took just a few seconds, and Kees, a

28

fourteen- year- old with no understanding of his sexual feelings, per-

29

haps hardly thought about it. Afterward, he told his parents, who did 30S

their best to talk the matter over with Lien. But there was no language 31N

for what had happened to Lien in Ede and Bennekom. In that

232

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## **the cut out girl**

postwar half decade there was barely a language for emotions at all.

01

So the rapes that Lien suffered remained as a fenced- off part of her 02  
existence, never referred to but still sensed, perhaps by everyone, as a 03  
presence.

04

05

06

It is not long after this that Lien finds herself on the

07

broad tree- lined gravel path through Orange Park that leads to the

08

Higher Burgess School (the HBS) on her way to sit the entrance exam.

09

This is the secondary school that teaches more difficult subjects such 10  
as geometry, sciences, Greek, and Latin; from here students can go on 11  
to university, although Lien has not thought at all about that. Almost 12  
a year ago, after good reports in all of her subjects, the teachers told 13  
her that she should try for HBS admission. They even provided some

14

extra lessons in preparation. Mostly, though, Lien feigned illness and 15  
did not turn up.

16

It is not the thought of the school itself that frightens her; it is the 17  
thought of what will happen at home. Once, when she brought an

18

English book back from the library, Ma told her that she could not

19

possibly understand it and she ought to be careful of showing off. That 20  
comment has stuck like an awkward piece of grit inside her. With

21

Kees and Ali already at the MULO (the More Advanced Lower Ed-

22

ucation College, where the subjects are easier), how would it feel if she 23  
were suddenly one of those boastful HBS girls?

24

On all sides children are heading in the same direction, some with

25

their parents beside them offering last- minute advice. The building is 26

enormous: row upon row of high, blank windows staring out across

27

the park. The muted crowd is gathering around a side door, digging

28

holes in the deep gravel with their shoes. After twenty minutes the

29

door opens and a man with whiskers invites them in.

S30

It smells of chalk, chlorine, packed lunches, and damp clothes.

N31

**233**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

Rows of wooden benches are lined up facing a lectern and a clock. On

02

them there are little stacks of printed sheets, face down, evenly spaced.

03

These are the exam papers. The big room echoes with the squeaking

04

and scraping of wood.

05

And now it is really happening. When the whiskered man calls out

06

there is a frantic rustle. Beside Lien, a girl starts writing immediately, 07  
her tongue edging in and out to the ridge of her teeth.

08

Part I is mental math, with no rough working allowed. Lien turns

09

her paper:

10

11

1.  $88 - \dots + 8 = 70$

12

2.  $3/25 = \dots$

13

14

The girl beside her is working fast.

15

What would it be like to be here? Lien looks up above the paneling

16

to the white wall and the clock.

17

18

1. 88— . . . . + 8 = 70

19

20

Is it true that the girls who go here are mostly snobs?

21

22

1. 88 - . . . . + 8 = 70

23

24

If she gets in, how will the news be greeted back home? The

25

thought gives Lien a shiver. In her imagination, she can see Kees

26

scoffing at some “Burgess School expression” that she will pick up

27

here, and Ali, though supportive, inwardly hurt, as if by an act of be-

28

trayal. And then Pa? Almost every evening he sits at the dinner table 29

at his studies. What will happen if Lien brings home books about

30S

geometry, Greek, and Latin? Thinking of Pa and Ma, the idea fills

31N

her with shame.

234

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### **the cut out girl**

Lies decides that she does not want it. She does not want to stand

01

out as a HBS girl. And so, after five more minutes, she starts to guess 02

at the answers almost at random, her letters crossing the dotted lines.

03

A few weeks later she gets the news of a disappointing perfor-

04

mance in the examination. Admission, the letter says, is permissible, 05

but it is not recommended in her case. The decision to go to the

06

MULO instead comes to Lien as a relief.

07

08

09

And so life goes on as before in the household, with Lien in the

10

class below Kees at the MULO, where he rises with distinction to be-

11

come head boy. And life really is happy. After Henk there is another

12

baby brother, Geert Jan. There are holidays to the seaside and long

13

visits to the grandparents in Strijen. And there is Wim from the AJC

14

who becomes her fiancé, though in the end they break up.

15

Of course there are family tensions. Pa is, to be honest, a man with

16

a temper, and Lien too has a passionate side. At rare moments Lien

17

can boil over, hot with fury at some injustice, defiant of consequence, 18

railing in her anger. On these occasions Pa will hit her, hard. This, 19

though, also happens with Kees (with Ma just the same, screaming

20

and desperate to stop the beating), and on the street these rages from 21

fathers are far from unique. Lien has nothing to complain of. Her lot 22

is far better than most.

23

When the time comes, Ali leaves home to go to nursing college

24

and Kees, the star of the MULO, goes on to train as a flight engineer 25

and then to work for Fokker in aircraft design, quickly rising through 26

the firm. And Lien? She would like to work with children. There is a

27

place in Amsterdam that would suit her: a residential nursery. She can 28

live there and get training and return to Dordrecht most weekends.

29

Then, after a year, she would progress to Middeloo College in Amers-

S30

foort to complete a qualification in social- educational care.

N31

235

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***Bart van Es***

01

So in 1950, aged seventeen, she takes the train to the big city and

02

then the tram to a grand villa with gates around it, where she gets her 03

uniform: a white apron over a blue dress. The evenings are lonely be-

04

cause few of the other girls stay over, except to do the night shift, and 05

she never goes out. But the work appeals to her. They take children

06

with behavioral problems and work with them, giving them confi-

07

dence, drawing them out. As she follows her course of studies, Lien

08

takes a special interest in organizing little concerts, with the children 09  
playing their recorders all in a line.

10

On Fridays Lien will pack her bag and head out to the bus stop,

11

looking forward to Ma's cooking and to seeing everyone at home. She

12

will sleep in her old bedroom and chat, maybe, to Ali, if she is also 13

back for the weekend. Downstairs Pa will be smoking and reading,

14

first the work papers from his briefcase and then his books on politics 15

and history and science. It is all so comforting, and because of this it 16

hurts her that Ma, feeling that the house gets crowded, says some-

17

times, "You know, you don't have to come."

18

At work they are developing new approaches. It is a matter of un-

19

derstanding the child as a whole person, with a specific background

20

and a character of his or her own. The idea is to give children the

21

freedom to develop not only as individuals but also as part of a social 22

world. To help them with this, there are methods such as counseling,

23

setting child protection guidelines, home visits, and play therapy,

24

which change the old routines.

25

After a year, Lien moves, as planned, to Amersfoort to continue

26

her studies. Then, another year on, she must fix on a placement. The

27

director asks Lien to come to his study to look at the options for where 28

she might go. There is a new children's home called Ellinchem that,

29

he suggests, would suit her. The establishment is based on innovation.

30S

It is the first to mix boys and girls together, from babies to the age of 31N

twenty- one. With a humanist ethos, it sets out to tackle issues such as 236

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## **the cut out girl**

loneliness and bereavement. He has spoken to the management.

01

Might Lien take up a position and continue her education there?

02

She considers for a moment. The place is quite near Bennekom,

03

which spooks her a little, but she agrees.

04

05

06

So in 1953 she is twenty and working in another villa, this time

07

in a rural village rather than in a big town. Less than a decade back, 08

Ellecom, where the institution is based, was the home of the Dutch

09

SS training college, but to most people that now feels a long time ago.

10

And the director was right; it does suit Lien. She is expanding her

11

contacts, becoming more of a leader, finding a mission in life. But

12

still, like all young people, she wants a home to go to, and she feels the 13

pull of the Frederikstraat.

14

It is on a Monday there in late autumn that she is dozing on the

15

sofa at the end of a weekend visit, having been a bit under the weather 16

and planning to go back by train the next day. Rain slants across the 17

window. The objects in the room are so familiar: the clock, the arm-

18

chair, and the cabinet of polished wood with its china teapot and

19

matching unused cups. For once, the house is peaceful. Even Ma is

20

out. Only Pa is to be heard in the kitchen, clinking crockery as he

21

brews his coffee.

22

She drifts off, well now but still tired, and only wakes when the door 23  
opens and Pa asks if she's okay. It is not like him to ask. Lien lies there, 24  
confused and dozy for a moment, and then answers that she's fine.

25

Then something strange, frightening, and unexpected happens.

26

As an event it is fleeting, and what actually occurs is open to interpre-

27

tation, but the consequences will be profound. Pa is there beside her as 28  
she lies on the sofa, his breathing unsteady. Before she knows what is 29  
happening he is kissing her and stroking her hair. This man, whom

S30

she thinks of as a father, seems excited by her as a woman.

N31

**237**

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***Bart van Es***

01

Lien stands up and laughs a little, her heart running incredibly

02

fast. He stands close by her, his hand touching her arm.

03

“I’m not so well, I’m going upstairs to bed,” is what she thinks

04

she says.

05

As she rushes up, her mind is scrambled, unsure what has hap-

06

pened. She paces and looks out onto the rain- slicked balcony, trying 07

to calm down. Her hands are trembling, more from shock and confu-

08

sion than from fear. After ten minutes of silence in which her hearing 09

buzzes, she curls up on the bed and lies there under the covers star-

10

ing in the half- light at the door.

11

And then the handle turns and he is there again, to get something

12

from the cupboard, he says. He's gone within a minute, but then he's

13

back and standing by her bed. Pa bends to kiss her and she hears that 14

heavy breath.

15

Perhaps she screams? She really doesn't know.

16

And then he's gone and it's over and nothing happened. But for

17

Lien, the world has altered and it can never be the same. For her, Pa is 18

no longer her father; he is just a man.

19

She writes a note to say that she needs to be alone for a while and

20

then she leaves the house.

21

22

23

In my hotel room a sharp smell of cigarette smoke is pushing

24

through the closed vent above the window from the terrace. I head

25

through to the bathroom, where my skin looks blue in the mirror un-

26

der the tile- reflected light.

27

28

29

Some might say that Lien, her perception distorted by the

30S

rapes she endured at the hands of Uncle Evert, imagined intentions

31N

that were never there. The circumstances— the empty house, the

**238**

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### **the cut out girl**

trusted older man who seems at first to comfort— have something in

01

common. Perhaps they triggered an association that had long been

02

latent in her mind?

03

In the end, though, I do not believe that what Lien experienced

04

was a projection. Her testimony in the typescript “the concrete story 05  
of my relations with the van Es family” is straightforward:

06

07

*Suddenly he came toward me, breathing very fast, and began to kiss 08  
me. I can still feel the shock and the fear of it. Pa, the stern father, the 09  
uncompromising moralist, who was suddenly so tactile and*

10

*excited. . . . He saw me as a woman.*

11

12

Later, Lien and I will discuss her recollection of those moments.

13

Aware of the danger of a false accusation, she has played the incident 14  
again and again in her memory, but her judgment has remained the

15

same. In the end, I must write my account of these few minutes from

16

her perspective, aware that it could color my grandfather's reputation, 17  
risk distorting the legacy of a life of courage and ideals.

18

Tomorrow I will go to the Frederikstraat to look onto the balcony

19

and to walk around those rooms. After that I will take the train to

20

Amsterdam, where I am meeting Lien. She wants to show me the

21

Portuguese Synagogue, the place where she got married.

22

23

24

25

26

27

28

29

S30

N31

**239**

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01

02

*Twenty-two*

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

Sunshine pours in through the windows of the Portuguese Syna-

12

gogue in Amsterdam and under my feet I feel the grains of the

13

sand strewn on the floorboards to dampen sound. Above my head,

14

golden chandeliers float against the dark timber of the vaulted ceiling 15

while stone walls and columns rise all around me, massive and honey

16

white. It is all so simple and restrained. At the time of its completion 17

in 1675 it was the world's largest synagogue, and aside from its tempo-

18

rary closure in the 1940s, it is still the oldest in continuous use. Even 19

now, there is no electricity or heating. It is lit for the great services by 20

nearly a thousand candles, which shine from holders on the plain

21

wooden benches as well as from high up in the three- tiered chande-

22

liers.

23

Lien smiles proudly as she stands beside me. We are on a walk

24

round Amsterdam's old Jewish Quarter and will head on to the Jewish

25

Historical Museum after this. As we wander across the courtyards

26

and peek into prim little rooms and offices, she tells me about her

27

wedding, which took place here on December 20, 1959.

28

By that time her connection with the Van Es family had been rees-

29

tablished. She stayed away for a year, living rather miserably in insti-

S30

tutional accommodation, but then Pa came to see her. They met on

N31

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***Bart van Es***

01

neutral ground in the bar of a hotel in Arnhem, not far from where

02

she worked. He told her that nothing had happened and that she had

03

better come home.

04

That was not how Lien saw it, but because she missed Ma and her

05

brothers and sisters, she accepted the offer, resuming the old pattern 06

of weekend visits. The incident and her year of absence were never

07

discussed.

08

There was, though, a new sense of distance between Lien and her

09

foster parents, and perhaps it was partly this that made her choose to 10

join the Jewish Student Society rather than the Socialist Union when

11

she began to study in Amsterdam for a qualification in social work. It 12

was in Amsterdam that she met her future husband, Albert Gomes de

13

Mesquita, a scientist completing his PhD. Physically frail and soft

14

spoken, he nevertheless had a confidence about him.

15

“He *was* someone,” as Lien puts it. “I remember that he told me it 16  
was easy to be happy. He knew how to live.”

17

Happiness, for Albert, flowed from the rules and the rhythms of

18

Judaism, the age- old patterns that brought with them a sense of peace.

19

He was himself a descendent of those who had built the great syna-

20

gogue. His maternal grandfather, a prosperous banker, had been

21

chairman of the board of the Portuguese Jewish Council and his

22

great- grandfather had been the author of celebrated Ashkenazi books

23

of prayer. Although, in contrast, his father's family were poor dia-

24

mond cutters, they too were observant believers, their lives shaped

25

by the Sabbath, the marking of feast days, and the keeping of di-

26

etary laws.

27

Albert, of course, had his own story of survival. In August 1942,

28

aged twelve, he had gone with his parents and sister to hide in a set of 29

purpose- built safe rooms. Holed up in the hidden ground floor of an

30S

Amsterdam town house, they had a large store of provisions, a secret

31N

escape route, a set of reliable friends to supply them, and a routine of 242

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**the cut out girl**

exercise and mental occupation to keep their spirits up. They played

01

Monopoly, whist, chess, and bridge. Each week Albert completed the

02

logic puzzles in a magazine supplied by their outside helper, who also 03

brought in fresh food. Every Sabbath they performed the usual rituals 04

and sung the usual prayers.

05

Yet, in spite of all their preparations, before the year was over, they 06

had been discovered. Very early in the morning there was banging on

07

the blacked- out windows, and then a burly figure charged in through 08

their escape route, shouting for them to move to the back room. One

09

by one he interrogated the family members, including Albert and his

10

little sister, all of whom fully expected that outside there must be a 11

police van waiting, which would take them to a concentration camp.

12

Weirdly, however, at the end of a morning of questioning, they were

13

left alone and unguarded, free to leave. The raider, it turned out, was 14  
a robber and not a policeman. The family had lost their possessions

15

and their safe house, but though friendless on the streets of Amster-

16

dam in late December, they were still alive.

17

After this narrow escape, they went through a dozen different hid-

18

ing places across the Netherlands, crouching behind panels in attics

19

and escaping several raids. At times they were starved and flea bitten, 20

beyond hopelessness, but somehow they stayed together as a unit.

21

They had stories to share and, come May 1945, their collective survival 22

as mother, father, and two children to celebrate. So for Albert, the

23

saddest moment came only after the liberation, when he discovered

24

that of his large extended family of aunts, uncles, and grandparents, 25

just three people were left alive.

26

After the war, Albert's family resumed its old patterns of living,

27

which they had tried to keep going even during the occupation. They

28

rejoined their community, kept kosher, observed the Sabbath, and cel-

29

ebrated the festival days. On May 9, the same day as the overall Ger-

S30

man surrender, a service of thanksgiving was held in the Portuguese

N31

**243**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 243

11/23/17 12:47 AM



*Bart van Es*

01

Synagogue. Across the whole of the Netherlands, however, Albert's

02

family were now numbered among just eight hundred remaining Sep-

03

hardic Jews.

04

05

06

The photographs of Lien's wedding at the synagogue have a

07

golden quality to them. She and Albert stand arm in arm in a door-

08

way, her head tipped down shyly in a Lady Di pose.

09

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26

In another shot they are seated in the back of a gleaming motorcar,

27

Lien looking as perfect as a 1950s film star with her Colgate smile

28

framed by her veil and white dress.

29

Then there are the pictures of the reception: my grandfather in

30S

a pin- striped suit with a spray of flowers in his buttonhole and Ma, in 31N

a hat, both caught mid conversation as they stand in a line to accept **244**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 244

11/23/17 12:47 AM



### **the cut out girl**

Synagogue. Across the whole of the Netherlands, however, Albert's

01

family were now numbered among just eight hundred remaining Sep-

02

hardic Jews.

03

04

05

The photographs of Lien's wedding at the synagogue have a

06

golden quality to them. She and Albert stand arm in arm in a door-

07

way, her head tipped down shyly in a Lady Di pose.

08

09

10

11

12

the congratulations of well-wishers, beside a resplendent Lien. My fa-

13

ther sits smiling at a table with his brother and sisters. Aged fourteen 14

at the time, he remembers it vividly: the brilliantly funny speech from 15

Jan Heroma (Took's husband); the stage that collapsed as the rabbi

16

was speaking; and his little brother, caught short, having to pee

17

against a wall in the street. Everyone was joyous and united. Even

18

Ben, Lien's cousin (the baby who had sat beside her in those photos in 19

the Pletterijstraat) was present. He had survived, also as a child in 20

hiding, and Lien had found him only very recently by searching

21

through the records of war orphans kept by Le-Ezrath Ha-Jeled.

22

For Lien as well as for my father, the speech that Jan Heroma made

23

toward the end of the evening was a highlight. The words that he

24

spoke about her are the only element of her story that she has repeated 25

In another shot they are seated in the back of a gleaming motorcar,

to me more than once. Having given a brief and witty outline of her

26

Lien looking as perfect as a 1950s film star with her Colgate smile

character, he turned to the subject of Albert and asked the audience, 27

framed by her veil and white dress.

rhetorically, “Now, is this scrawny, ginger- haired gentleman really 28

Then there are the pictures of the reception: my grandfather in

good enough for *our Lien*?” “Good enough for *our Lien*”— it was a rev-

29

a pin- striped suit with a spray of flowers in his buttonhole and Ma, in  
elation to her: that she should be presented as something special, and S30

a hat, both caught mid conversation as they stand in a line to accept that she  
should be thought of as *theirs*. Happiness shot through her.

N31

245

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

She felt completely united with the friends and family who had gath-

02

ered to send them on their way. She felt at one with the Van Esses and 03

now a part of the Jewish community as well.

04

If one were looking for a simple, happy conclusion to the cut out

05

girl's story then this would be the place to end it. Albert is proud of 06

her, protective, and gentle, and he knows so many things. Ma also

07

loves him: he is so interested, hardworking, and polite. In the morn-

08

ing, in the back of the shiny, black wedding car, the honeymooners

09

drive to the airport, where a gleaming Dakota awaits them for Lien's

10

first- ever journey by plane. As the flat, regular fields of the Nether-

11

lands recede below them, Good Lientje rises toward the sunlight on

12

silver wings.

13

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29

30S

31N

**246**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 246

11/23/17 12:47 AM

01

02

*Twenty-three*

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

Leaving the Portuguese Synagogue behind us, Lien and I cross a

12

busy road to get to the Jewish Historical Museum. Her hand, as

13

it always is when we cross roads here, is there on my elbow, not be-

14

cause she needs my support as an eighty- two- year- old, but because she 15

suspects I'm not to be trusted with the traffic. As was the case at the 16

synagogue, it takes a little while to enter the building on account of 17

the intense security. A white police box stands outside on stilts, pre-

18

senting its blacked- out windows. Inside, we queue for airport- style 19

searches before we can enter the museum itself. The people waiting

20

around us are mainly American teenagers wearing headphones and

21

carrying backpacks, part of organized tours. They sip from their water 22

bottles, apply lip balm, and check their phones as they chat about top-

23

ics like the quality of the breakfast at their hotel. Mixed in with this, 24

though, there is also serious talk about history. Most have been or are 25

going to the Anne Frank house and in their preppy New York accents

26

the two girls who lean against the wall beside us are discussing the

27

details of life here in the 1940s, specifically the idea of wearing a Jew-

28

ish star. I wonder if Lien beside me is listening. If she is then she must 29

feel almost like an exhibit. Her husband, Albert, had Anne Frank as a S30

N31

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 247

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

classmate, and once, in the playground, Anne offered to tell him about 02

the facts of life.

03

The museum, which is housed in the old Great Synagogue (one of

04

the four ancient synagogues that are clustered in this area), is divided 05

into two display spaces: the first covers Dutch Judaism, mainly in its 06

religious practice, until the end of the nineteenth century; the second 07  
takes us through the twentieth century up to the present time.

08

Lien sweeps through the first hall with all the focus of a ten- year-

09

old. “We don’t have to worry about that,” she calls back as I lag behind 10  
and peer at an ancient Torah scroll that sits on a lectern behind protec-

11

tive glass. I point to a historical painting, but pre- twentieth- century 12

art does not especially interest her. “I suppose I don’t have the context 13

to appreciate it,” she says as she trips up the steps to the higher gallery, 14

clearly having no intention of picking up that context now. Lien has

15

inherited my grandparents’ passion for the modern and will be reas-

16

sured a year later when she visits my office and finds it (contrary to her 17

expectations of Oxford) to consist of exposed concrete and walls of

18

plate glass.

19

The space devoted to more recent Jewish history in the Nether-

20

lands is also part of the ancient synagogue, but it feels contemporary 21

thanks to its sleek aquariumlike display cases and the low blue light of 22

its numerous screens. Subsections on topics such as “Amsterdam’s

23

Jewish Quarter,” “The Diamond Industry,” and “Life in the Prov-

24

inces” chart the gradual emancipation of poorer Jews as they joined

25

unions and socialist parties, where many became prominent on a na-

26

tional scale. After this, a section on “The Elite” shows how a small

27

section of Jewish society flourished thanks to the growth of big busi-

28

nesses, like the department stores De Bijenkorf and Maison de Bon-

29

neterie. Then there was also cultural influence: theater, music,

30S

literature. As I stand looking at a display about famous music hall acts 31N  
and jazz players, Lien calls me with excitement in her voice.

**248**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 248

11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

“Look!” she says. “This is exactly the material I remember my

01

mother cutting at the kitchen table!”

02

And there it is— like some animal suspended by Damian Hurst in

03

a tank of formaldehyde— a broad strip of yellow cloth on which stars 04  
are printed reading “Jew,” “Jew,” “Jew,” “Jew.”

05

It is monstrous, yet also intimate. Lien stands beside it, half smil-

06

ing, her face yellowed by the reflected light. Right behind her in an-

07

other aquarium is a little girl’s dress with a star stitched upon it and 08

also a wooden sign with the printed message Forbidden for Jews.

09

10

11

An hour later we are seated at a plastic table in the mu-

12

seum café. Lien wants me to try some of the kosher food that they

13

serve here and especially recommends gefilte fish (chilled, salty fish 14

cakes) and bolus (hot, syrupy, ginger- filled doughnuts straight from 15

the oven). Amid the clear, white simplicity of the café, Lien tells me 16

about preparing meals in the 1960s, when she and Albert lived in

17

Eindhoven, where he worked for Philips Electronics. Every Thursday

18

evening a pack of kosher meat would arrive from Amsterdam, and

19

given that they had no freezer, needed to be cooked and processed

20

before the lighting of the Sabbath candles the following day. Albert's 21

mother, an imposing presence, was often there for the weekend with

22

her husband, giving precise instructions on how to follow dietary laws.

23

An enormity of single- purpose saucepans simmered with separate

24

dishes in them, and all focus was on the coming evening with its

25

white- clothed table, candles, and sung prayers.

26

Lien had no experience of this kind of existence: her family in The

27

Hague kept up a few Jewish traditions, but nothing with this kind of

28

formal weight. She did find the mechanics quite troublesome. Albert

29

insisted that all this was necessary if his parents were to be able to visit.

S30

For him, keeping kosher was partly a social requirement rather than

N31

***Bart van Es***

01

an absolute religious belief. At the same time, following the old cus-

02

toms was what made him happy and for Lien too, in spite of the work

03

it demanded, the Orthodox life gave a sense of assurance that she was 04

part of a group. She was, she thinks, someone without much sense of

05

her own identity, so it was easy for her to follow where others led.

06

Lien and I talk about these customs. On the one hand they are a

07

restriction, to me completely irrational, but there is also a magic to 08

them, especially through the feeling of belonging that they confer.

09

Nothing quite like this exists in Christianity and certainly not in my 10

own atheist family, where even my parents are the children of nonbe-

11

lievers who had no special rituals around mealtimes at all. Still, I can 12  
see their spiritual power. You can understand how Albert could say it 13  
is easy to be happy.

14

For a decade, pretty much, the patterns of the old Jewish life also

15

helped to make Lien happy. There was a community around her,

16

there were weddings and Bar Mitzvahs, there was comfort in being

17

part of a tribe. Albert was mild and clever. He did well at his job and 18

their children did well at school. And Lien? She was a busy mother

19

and wife.

20

21

22

We leave the cafeteria and head back out into the sunshine. The

23

ticket that we bought for the Portuguese Synagogue also covered the

24

museum. In addition, the Hollandsche Schouwburg is part of the itin-

25

erary for the Jewish Cultural Quarter, although entry there is free, so 26

Lien and I begin the half mile walk toward it. She has never been.

27

Until the war, the Schouwburg was a popular theater. In 1900, for

28

example, it saw the premiere of *Op Hoop van Zegen* ( *In the Hope of 29*

*Blessing*), a play about the hard lives of North Sea fishermen written 30S

by the Jewish playwright Herman Heijermans, which still attracts

31N

large audiences today. The Nazis briefly made it an official Jewish

**250**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 250

11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

playhouse. Then in August 1942 it became a kind of prison: the as-

01

sembly point from which tens of thousands of Jews, who had first

02

been concentrated in Amsterdam, were sent onward to the transit

03

camp of Westerbork in the north of the Netherlands and from there to

04

the death camps in the east. For a year it was full of frightened, in-

05

tensely thirsty men and women, who were often so tightly packed to-

06

gether that they struggled to breathe. Its task completed, the place was 07

sold in 1944 and converted into a venue for parties, dances, and wed-

08

dings, which continued to be held there quite successfully even after 09

the end of the war.

10

Lien and I spot the Schouwburg long before we reach it because

11

another white police box stands on stilts in the road guarding the en-

12

trance, its windows dull black in the bright sun. Since 1962 this has  
13 been a memorial. Beyond the templelike facade, which is all that re-

14

mains of the original building, there is a courtyard with benches in it  
15 and a dark stone column that sits on a base in the shape of the Star of  
16 David. On the wall to the left as you enter, 6,700 family names look

17

down on an eternal flame. They represent the 104,000 Dutch Jews

18

who died.

19

The contrast between this and the sunny street where a moment

20

ago, we were chatting quite happily is absolute. A few figures in heavy  
21 coats stand alone in silence. Two people are whispering as they scan

22

the list of names. It is a good thing that this is now a place of remem-

23

brance instead of a party hall, but the wall from which the names

24

shine green, back- lit through darkened glass, has a clinical quality to 25

it. The names of the dead run— long and then short and then long

26

again— column after column, like a patient's cardiogram:

27

28

Jolis

29

Jolles

S30

Jolofs

N31

**251**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 251

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

Jonas

02

Jong

03

Jong, de

04

Jong- van Lier, de

05

Jonge

06

Jonge, de

07

08

From a plastic trough we are handed a device like a mobile phone

09

to point at the names of our choosing, but there are so many De Jongs 10

that we have to scroll through to select the ones who lived at number 11

31 in the Pletterijstraat (an address that pops up in a little “active map”

12

in a square on the right):

13

14

Charles de Jong

15

Rotterdam, 10 December 1906—

16

Auschwitz, 6 February 1943

17

18

Catharina de Jong- Spiero

19

The Hague, 28 October 1913—

20

Auschwitz, 9 November 1942

21

22

On the memory bar of the touch screen we are presented with var-

23

ious options, such as “Print family,” “Add a family member,” “FAQ ,”

24

and “Donate!”

25

“I’m going home,” says Lien.

26

After hugging her good- bye at the exit and agreeing on a time for

27

dinner at her apartment, I head upstairs, where there are still some

28

scruffy rooms that are attached to the original facade. For an hour I 29

stand hunched over old display cases that contain some intensely mov-

30S

ing objects (a bundle of farewell letters, for example, or an infant’s 31N

252

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

clog). Then I leave the old theater, cross the road, and head down a

01

side street, with the gates of the city’s zoo to my right.

02

Two minutes later I am at the doors of the Resistance Museum.

03

The building, like the Hollandsche Schouwburg, was once a center of

04

Jewish culture, having been built for a choral society whose Star of

05

David is still there on the gable facing the street. There is a fixed route 06

through the collection, a kind of tunnel with plasterboard walls that 07

takes you from invasion to liberation, past a series of windows that

08

show things like official call-up papers and false identity cards. Over 09

time, as you follow the route, the national mood shifts from reluctant 10

acceptance to mass opposition, with violent reprisals from the Nazis

11

becoming more common. Occasionally, the tunnel opens out onto a

12

mocked-up interior, such as one where an illegal newsheet is being

13

produced.

14

Secret printing played a big part in the story of Dutch resistance.

15

As well as providing information to those who were directly fighting

16

the Germans, it helped to build a new national identity, which became 17

all important after the war. Even today, a substantial part of the na-

18

tional media (including newspapers such as *Trouw*, *Vrij Nederland*, 19

and *Het Parool* and the publisher De Bezige Bij) has its origins in the 20

underground press.

21

Set against this, there was government propaganda. In an imita-

22

tion town square I look up at billboards on walls and street hoardings.

23

Mussert Speaks announces a poster bearing the face of the Dutch

24

fascist leader, who became a powerless head of state in December

25

1942. Mussert, a clownish version of the already clownish Mussolini,

26

never got much of a following, but the other images that I see around 27

me undoubtedly had some effect. Many feature cartoons of attrac-

28

tively vulnerable women, cast down amidst debris and blood. Bol-

29

shevism is Murder and This Is the Second Front they call out,

S30

N31

253

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 253

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

while the women's modest dresses, in spite of all their best efforts, ride 02

up to reveal curvaceous thighs. Alongside these posters of women

03

there are others with muscled blond men, whose chins stand resolute

04

in the face of great blasts of cold air. Tough Guys for the Waffen

05

SS, Be Brave, Be a Stormer, or A New Netherlands in a New

06

Europe, join the battle with the NSB,” these announce. On one

07

occasion there is also a bearded, hooked- nosed villain who clasps a 08  
little dagger and flaunts a six- pointed star.

09

10

11

I am the last to leave the museum. Having retrieved my suitcase, I

12

walk through the center of Amsterdam to Lien’s apartment, crossing

13

little humped- back bridges, looking into shops and cafés, and dodg-

14

ing bicycles all the way. When I get there Lien is busy in the kitchen.

15

She sends me through to the seating area, where she puts out some

16

bowls of snacks and a glass of beer. It will be our last evening together 17

before I fly back to the UK.

18

After dinner, Lien fetches a letter. It is a long one, from Ma to her, 19  
dating from the early months of her marriage. It responds to Lien's

20

worries about a growing distance between the affluent and religious

21

Orthodox world she has now entered and the more basic values of the

22

family in Dordt:

23

24

*Dear Lien,*

25

*Oh, oh, sometimes a whole life does not make us any wiser I*

26

*think. How uncertain and how vulnerable you are. And you so*

27

*often take things differently from how they were meant! . . . You are 28*

*worried, you say, about the distance between Albert's family and*

29

*ours when it comes to atmosphere and life view and that this will 30S  
always be there.*

31N

*Look, Lientje, I see it like this.*

**254**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 254

11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

*When you came to us in those years as a child and a growing girl*

01

*we were often so grateful that you were with us.*

02

*Perhaps you remember one time, when you'd come back from*

03

*Bennekom, I said, "That Lien, now she is home again and luckily*

04

*not at all changed."*

05

*And you said, "Unchanged? I'm so happy!"*

06

*You were amazed, I think, that I said you were the same.*

07

08

Ma reflects on the war and its fear and hardships and also about

09

her money worries. Then she says:

10

11

*Now I must tell you that our dear little Lord has blessed me very 12  
much in life in being unmissable for others. I was 28 and had four 13  
children to look after and only one of them was my own. You had all 14  
been shaped by others and sometimes you looked very critically on 15  
what I was doing. When you have a child yourself you must in all*

16

*honesty imagine for yourself for a moment what it would be like to 17  
have three more, all dependent for everything on you.*

18

19

“But still,” she continues:

20

21

*I sometimes had this great feeling of joy because I felt so needed.*

22

*What is there, I ask you, that a person could want in life more than 23  
that?*

24

25

She writes about the marriages of Kees and Ali and about Pa:

26

27

*Pa also needs support and he comes off worst with me because*

28

*somewhere (and I tell you this in confidence) I do have a sense of 29  
resentment that he has left the care of you all pretty much entirely to S30  
me. But stil , everywhere we go we are met with great respect and N31*

255

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 255

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

*admiration and that did not come out of nothing. That has cost Pa 02  
a lot of effort and it has also taken a lot of sacrifices from me.*

03

04

She describes some of the pressures upon her: parents and a sick

05

sister to look after, her own children, and then grandchildren as well.

06

07

*And who is there to comfort me amidst all these troubles?*

08

*Everyone expects something from me. It is nice to be unmissable,*

09

*but it is also very tiring.*

10

11

Ma paints a picture of a chaotic St. Nicholas evening a few days

12

ago, where there were half a dozen children in her care:

13

14

*Anne screaming, completely exhausted. Anneke and Geert Jan*

15

*fighting over a toy. A moment later, Anneke vomiting because she*

16

*had swallowed far too large a piece of bread. And then Gerard was 17*

*insulted because I dared to find it disgusting. Really it was like 18*

*some comedy in the cinema. It was all easy enough to manage*

19

*eventually, but you have to be used to it. Imagine your Albert in the 20*

*midst of all that!*

21

*And because of this my dear 'Pientje. For us you will always*

22

*belong to us, but we want to protect you from being closed off*

23

*to the outside world. You have to make choices in life. You*

24

*will never lose the things you left behind that were valuable*

25

*to you. We did so much in the past to make for happiness*

26

*in life.*

27

28

Ma worries about some of the choices she made as a mother, that

29

she sent her adopted or fostered children into the world too soon, that 30S

she pushed them away with a sense of release. Then she closes:

31N

**256**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 256

11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

*Now, 'Pien, I'm going to stop here, there is no more to say. Try to 01*

*come for Christmas for a few days. Maybe Albert can come and*

02

*collect you afterward?*

03

*Bye Lienepien. Love from mum who will always*

04

*love you just as much as the others.*

05

06

This is a kind and loving letter, filled with a true and solid wis-

07

dom. Ma understands Lien and for all the trouble that lay behind

08

them it is hard to see how the bonds that tied these women together

09

could break. My grandmother could sometimes be hard and judgmen-

10

tal, but she was also someone with a deep sense of duty, especially to-

11

ward her children. How could things go from such a letter to the one

12

that severed contact for good?

13

14

15

16

17

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25

26

27

28

29

S30

N31

**257**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 257

11/23/17 12:47 AM

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 258

11/23/17 12:47 AM

01

02

*Twenty-four*

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

The newlyweds, Lien and Albert, buy their furniture from Bas

12

van Pelt at 24 Leidsestraat in Amsterdam. Its enormous front

13

window, more than three times her height, reveals an almost empty

14

interior: a gray stone floor, white walls, and a white ceiling, all per-

15

fectly featureless and flat. For the first five yards beyond the glass 16  
there is nothing to look at. Then, set back at unconventional angles: a 17  
steel- and- glass table; a curving, bright orange armchair; and an in-

18

verted standard lamp. The shop smells of polished wood and leather

19

and there is music playing. As they enter they receive a smile from the 20  
sales assistant, who wears a purple tie. She and Albert move freely, her 21  
heels clipping on the steps as they climb to the showrooms upstairs.

22

The two of them lounge back on a sofa to try out its feel.

23

They already have a flat in Eindhoven, assigned to them by Al-

24

bert's new employer, Philips. Its window looks out onto a helipad and 25  
several times a day Lien watches as the helicopter lands like a dragon-

26

fly on the yellow H that is painted on the concrete below her, its rotors 27  
crushing a neat circle in the surrounding grass.

28

Eindhoven is a high-tech city. As well as being the home of Philips, 29  
it houses the Technical University, the Design Academy, and Braban-

S30

tia, a firm that makes sleek pedal waste bins and other stainless steel N31

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 259

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

household products. Near the center of town there is, since 1966, a

02

huge concrete flying saucer called the Evoluon, which sits alongside a 03

clock tower with rocketlike fins. People from all around the country

04

come just to gaze at it, like crowds do in films when the aliens land.

05

Albert is a chemist, but he works in the Physics Laboratory, which

06

for him is like a playroom with its wires, switches, tubes, and screens.

07

He has always loved this. Even in the war, while his family hid during 08  
the night in the ceiling of a house that was attached to a small factory, 09  
he built his own radio from scrap equipment and conducted experi-  
10  
ments with chemicals that he found lying around. They are making  
11  
such amazing things, he tells her: small stereos that you can carry and 12  
that run off batteries, magnetic tape that stores images as well as  
13  
sound. Each morning he cycles off like a schoolboy, eager for the day 14  
ahead.

15  
Soon there are children to complete the picture. They appear one  
16  
by one in Lien's photo album. First a baby girl in white in the arms of 17  
her proud mother; then two children seated between the couple on the  
18  
sofa, with mum holding an arm to keep the little boy straight; then  
19  
three, all laughing, squeezed together, with the youngest, another boy, 20

holding hands with his brother in the middle. Batja in 1960, Daan in

21

1964, and finally Arjeh in 1970. They are happy. The boys do judo

22

and play football and Batja is a great debater at school. Reports from 23

the teachers say that they are doing well. The final photo in Lien's

24

album of the family together is perfect: three beaming childish faces, 25

Albert above them with a gawky grin, and Lien smiling blissfully

26

with her eyes cast down at her lap.

27

Time passes. It is not right for her to work now that she is married

28

with children. She sits as a volunteer on various committees and, in her 29

spare time, mixes with other housewives, who are mostly also Jewish

30S

and whose husbands also work long hours at impressive- sounding jobs.

31N

**260**

11/23/17 12:47 AM

## **the cut out girl**

Life could hardly be better. They host dinner parties or invite families 01  
over so that the children can play. In the holidays they fly or take the 02  
sleeper train to pretty cottages in Austria, or Italy, or southern France.

03

And really she is not all that busy, at least not in the way that it was at 04  
home with Ma and Pa. There are all those modern conveniences— the

05

fridge, the washing machine, the dryer, the vacuum cleaner— and

06

there is also a lady who comes round to clean. Because of this, quite 07  
often she finds herself at the edge of some playground, or at home

08

when the children are sleeping, with hours to spare. In the large mod-

09

ern kitchen of the house they buy a few years later, Lien feels like a cut 10  
out picture of a perfect wife from a magazine.

11

Those hours of spare time are a luxury for her, but she tries her

12

best to fill them with social engagements and charity work. This is

13

partly to be useful but it is also because the spare time brings ques-

14

tions and she has never asked questions before. They are inconvenient 15

and sometimes frightening. Who is she really? Where does she be-

16

long? What is it that she believes?

17

Along with the questions there is, over the years, a new anxiety

18

over the answers. Once, at Daan's nursery, they asked her to put a

19

baby book together (a few little facts about the family that he could 20

learn), but when they explained the idea it sent a sudden wave of panic 21

through her and she had to leave. The past, which was once so easy to 22

hide from, now looms ever darker, like a vast shadow that she knows

23

lies behind her but that she dare not face. So she keeps on going to the 24  
coffee mornings and she keeps on smiling at the playground's edge.

25

All the same, as the decade passes— as Kennedy is replaced by

26

Johnson and Johnson by Nixon, as history moves from the Cuban

27

Missile Crisis toward defeat in Vietnam, as the Prague Spring is

28

crushed, as Paris riots, and as people march to ban the bomb— at

29

night the questions creep in upon her, even though the doctor has

S30

N31

**261**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 261

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

given pills to help her sleep. Aunt Roza told her how it happened:

02

Lien's mother and grandmother, together, hand in hand.

03

She has never looked into it, but her mother must have been

04

younger when she died than Lien is now.

05

"I ought not to be here." It is the sentence that she cannot get out

06

of her head. Like drumming, it sits there in the background growing

07

ever more loud. And as it gets louder she feels that she does not belong 08

to the world around her. She does not belong to the lovely house, to

09

the lovely furniture, and to the lovely kids. She brings a darkness with 10

her. It becomes an effort to smile.

11

Albert goes to the synagogue but the synagogue has stopped work-

12

ing for her. The potions and the conjuring— Shabbat, Rosh Hasha-

13

nah, Hanukkah, Pesach, Yom Kippur— they feel like husks with no

14

content at all. And it frustrates her that Albert continues to follow 15

these rules that have no purpose. He has no time for the questions she 16

is asking and he tells her simply to be happy and to carry on. But his 17

mildness is now a kind of nothing, just like the words in the syna-

18

gogue are nothing. Inside she feels that she is changing: a new being—

19

fearsome, demanding, hungry— opens inside her like a seed.

20

Up to now in life, she feels that she made no choices, that she has

21

had no real opinions, and that somehow this is all because she has not 22

dared to look behind her at the past. But then, when she sees that past 23

in glimpses, she is frightened and she hears the sentence in her head 24

that tells her that she should not be here, that she should have died in 25

Auschwitz alongside all the others.

26

After a happy decade, once the 1970s start she is again free- falling, 27  
listless but fretful, cut out from the world. And with Albert she cannot 28  
even start to share this, because while she sits frozen full of hidden 29  
turmoil, he is quite unchanging, tied to old conventions, keeping  
30S  
all his daily habits, kind but rigid, without understanding for her in-  
31N  
ner life.

**262**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

01

02

Meanwhile, as Lien looks ever closer inward, Ma van Es looks

03

outward and places her worries there. In the diary that she kept up for 04

around a decade, Ma writes of how she cannot understand the way

05

that people all around her seem to exist in isolation, free from duty 06

and appreciation of the good things they have. Though she often

07

mentions her fondly, Ma thinks that Lien, like all of her adult chil-

08

dren, is too introspective, asking unnecessary and pretentious ques-

09

tions while the world is under threat. Also, in her darkest hours, Ma is 10

haunted by a fear of returning war:

11

12

*Last night I was hit by a terror. I hope that if something like this 13*

*happens again I will be able to fight it because for the whole of last 14*

*night and for the whole of this day I have seen in front of me what 15*

*would happen if a third world war broke out. Pa would be the first 16*

*to be taken by the Russians, or worse. And you all (meaning her*

17

*children), I have never found you so lovely and all consuming. And 18*

*Marianne, if I should not be able to see her growing older, and Henk, 19*

*such a fine young healthy boy, and Ali, who is expecting her second 20*

*baby, and little Anneke. And all the others. Oh, what a terrible*

21

*thing.*

22

23

As she grows older, Ma feels that time moves ever faster, and yet in

24

the midst of her global worries, she still takes new people into her

25

care. When her sister, Bep, gets divorced, for example, and arguments 26

are raging that might be harmful for the children, Ma takes in her

27

nephew and niece for half a year. It all takes its toll on her psyche. She 28

knows that she is getting fatter but she can never stick to her diets. As 29

always, Ma worries that she is not an attractive woman, that she is not S30

the right match for her strong and active husband.

N31

**263**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

In the end it is really with little children that Ma is in her element: 02

she feels their illnesses intensely and she glories in their small mo-

03

ments of triumph. Seeing her foster daughter and stepdaughter— Lien

04

and Ali— pregnant gives her intense pleasure, and at the birth of

05

Lien's "gorgeous little girl" Batja she writes of overwhelming expecta-

06

tion and joy. Motherhood for Ma is a defining purpose in life.

07

The note on Lien's role as a mother, though, is among the last en-

08

tries in Ma's diary. "I am thinking of stopping with this book," she

09

writes a few pages later, "I am writing so irregularly and it is not inter-

10

esting I think." Run- down and feeling less purposeful without young 11

children, Ma is, she admits, increasingly prone to grumbling in spite 12

of her best efforts to keep her spirits up.

13

By the start of the seventies Ma and Lien are quite distant from

14

one another. They meet at birthday parties and perhaps at Christmas,

15

but the contact between them rarely runs deep. When Lien calls on

16

the telephone, Ma answers “I’ll call you back” but she rarely does.

17

18

19

Then on the evening of the Day of Atonement in September

20

1972 it is Albert’s turn to give a talk at the synagogue. Lien will not 21

join him. As so often, she instead sits at home watching the rain as it 22

runs in tracks down the windows, her head fogged by the sentence she

23

cannot escape.

24

At 9:30 she hears Albert's key in the door.

25

"How was the talk you gave?"

26

"If you'd have been there," he answers, "you would have known."

27

His irritation is not unexpected, but when he says this something

28

strange happens inside her. It is as if a magic word has been spoken, as 29

if a switch has been flicked. Lien gets up from the sofa and heads up-

30S

stairs, her feet heavy, then crosses the carpeted landing, enters the 31N

bathroom, and opens the cabinet that hangs above the sink on the wal .

**264**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

To her at this moment it is the perfect solution. She almost smiles

01

at its brilliance. What if, in an instant, she just wasn't there?

02

She normally does not like to swallow pills and can't really do it.

03

They just sit there on her tongue, the water washing over them, leav-

04

ing a bitter taste in her mouth. That is why she has taken so few. That 05

is why there are so many left. But this time it is easy. It is all so effi-

06

cient. In no time at all the white plastic rectangles are empty and there 07

is nothing left to push through the foil. With slow, deliberate move-

08

ments, she puts the packet of sleeping pills back in the cabinet and

09

walks down the stairs.

10

Outside it is still raining. She sits down on the sofa. The sound of

11

the rain is a comfort because it helps her to sleep.

12

13

14

15

16

17

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S30

N31

**265**

11/23/17 12:47 AM

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01

02

*Twenty-five*

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

There is a photo of Ben Spiero, Lien's cousin, that was taken at her

20

wedding in 1959. It is the first image that I have of him since

21

those baby snaps from the Pletterijstraat, where he sits, thumb in

22

mouth, round- faced, on his mother's lap, with Lien beside him in her 23

checked dress with a white bow in her hair. On the photograph at the

24

wedding he is in his midtwenties, seated at a table just after the dinner 25

has finished. My grandfather is in shot directly behind him, looking

26

animated in conversation with a group of other guests. Ben's face is a 27

shock to me. A thick, ugly scar runs from one corner of his cheek to

28

the other and the eye furthest from us stares out blankly at an odd

29

angle, hooded and blind. The damage to his face was the result of a

S30

motorbike accident that happened years after the war had ended, but

N31

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

the way he drove was connected to a sense of abandonment, which

02

Lien also felt. Like Lien he was handed over by his parents to the re-

03

sistance. Like her, he suffered horrors during the war. A short while 04

after this photo was taken, Ben Spiero succeeded in hanging himself.

05

06

07

For some days it was touch and go whether Lien would survive the

08

overdose. Albert rushed her to the hospital, where she stayed for over 09

a week. Then, in celebration of her homecoming, he organized a little 10

party. “The unhappiness is over,” he wrote on the cards that he sent to 11

their circle of friends. As much as anything, the fact that these cards 12

were written in all sincerity showed the distance between them— that 13

he had failed to understand her, or perhaps that she had failed to

14

explain.

15

“It was like being the guest of honor at my own funeral,” says Lien.

16

17

18

Ma’s reaction is the opposite of Albert’s. She is furious. Taking pills 19

and abandoning your husband and children is an insult to everything

20

she believes. After all the sacrifices that people have made for her, how 21  
could she be so selfish? What kind of person would do such a thing?

22

What kind of person? Yes, that is the question. What kind of per-

23

son is she when you cut out what surrounds her, when you cut out the

24

scientist husband, the synagogue, and the comforts of a prosperous

25

life? Does she really belong to the Van Esses, or to the world of Jewish 26  
ritual, or to something entirely different that she has yet to find?

27

Her attempt at suicide was a terrible error, she can see that, and she 28  
promises her older children, aged eight and twelve, that she will never 29

do anything like that again. But to go back now to the coffee morn-

30S

ings and the kosher cooking, to go back to leaving questions unan-

31N

swered, that she also will not do.

**268**

11/23/17 12:47 AM

## **the cut out girl**

In the years that follow, Lien works at her problems. There are

01

various unsuccessful therapies, such as time spent in analysis, with the 02  
psychiatrist sitting in a chair behind her as she lies there on his couch.

03

It frightens her that she cannot see him.

04

“This man who started to kiss you,” he asks, “am I right in think-

05

ing he is the man who saved your life?”

06

The sessions of psychoanalysis do not help her and they are aban-

07

doned, but there are other approaches that do. Lien finds solace in

08

meditation, in the teachings of Buddhism, in Humanism, and in dis-

09

cussions with new groups of friends. What is it, she asks herself, that 10  
she really wants from life? What is it that she believes? Is there a pat-

11

tern to history from which we can learn?

12

Wanting to be stronger as a person, Lien decides to return to work.

13

With Albert it is not easy. He does not see why anything has to

14

change, and because of this life at home starts to fill with tension and 15  
with petty rows. This is hard on the children, who, as so often hap-

16

pens in these situations, tend to blame themselves.

17

18

19

It is the spring of 1979 when the phone rings. Pa has lung cancer.

20

Years of work with asbestos and many more of heavy smoking did not

21

leave him with much of a chance, and by the autumn he is dying in

22

hospital and she is seated beside him on a visit as he lies there in bed.

23

There is whiteness all around him, his face leaner than ever now that 24  
the cancer is eating him up.

25

She sits there and they speak of nothing. In all the years since she

26

first came to stay with the Van Esses they have rarely been together

27

alone.

28

Lien passes him a plastic cup of water that he holds and then spills

29

with his blotched hands.

S30

She does not say “Thank you” or “I love you” or “Something did

N31

**269**

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

happen when you tried to kiss me like that in the Frederikstraat when 02

I was twenty and it changed things forever for me.” This family does

03

not speak of such things. But then, what family does?

04

“I’ll come and see you next week again,” Lien tells him.

05

“Yes, do that,” he says, almost without breath.

06

And then, three days later, Ma calls to tell her that Pa has died.

07

08

09

As expected, a white envelope edged with gray drops through the

10

letterbox a week later. This will be the card with the funeral arrange-

11

ments, but when she opens it the text cuts into her stomach like a

12

knife:

13

14

**H E N D R I K V A N E S**

15

*husband of*

16

**Jannigje van Es-de Jong**

17

18

Dordrecht, 8 November 1906—

19

Dordrecht 20 October 1979

20

Ali and Gerard

21

Kees and Truus

22

Marianne and Pierre

23

Henk and Dieuwke

24

Geert Jan and Renée

25

26

Grandchildren and Great- grandchildren

27

28

They have listed all of Pa's children and their partners, but her

29

own name is missing from the card. It is so unexpected that she can

30S

hardly believe it. Her fingers feel weak.

31N

But it is not a mistake, far from it. The instructions are clear: there **270**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 270

11/23/17 12:47 AM

## **the cut out girl**

will be official mourning cars for Ma and the children, whereas Lien

01

must travel with the aunts, uncles, and other family members that

02

follow behind. Pa was firm on the matter: Lien was not to be shown

03

to the world as his child.

04

Albert cannot see the point of making a fuss about the arrange-

05

ments. After all, she was his foster daughter, which is different, and 06

what does it matter what car you ride in or whether you are listed on 07

some card? If need be it can be discussed at some later moment, but

08

now is hardly the time. At the reception, he chats quite happily with 09

the other mourners, staying longer than is necessary, while Lien shifts 10

awkwardly between the tables of sandwiches, wondering when she

11

might leave.

12

For Lien, it is obvious now that their marriage is over: she has

13

changed but he hasn't. In the big house that they have bought to get

14

more space from each other they avoid contact, have separate routines.

15

She had wanted to explore the big questions, to meet different sorts of 16

people, but he is set, unrelenting, in his ways. From his perspective, 17

Albert cannot see why she makes things so difficult, why everything

18

could not stay as it was at the start. In 1980 he leaves the household, 19

taking a nearby flat, while she remains at home with their youngest

20

son as they make plans to sell their beautiful villa, which sits at a sharp 21

V-shaped junction where two roads meet.

22

23

24

So here she is, aged forty- seven, a divorced woman making a fresh

25

start. Lien had qualified as a social worker on the day of her marriage, 26  
but it is only now, at the start of the 1980s, that she begins to work full 27  
time. She takes a job with Eindhoven Social Services, and once the

28

villa is sold, buys a modest house in a livelier part of the city. It is in a 29  
planned estate known as the White Village, designed in the 1930s by

S30

Willem Dudok, where busy playgrounds full of children blend in with

N31

271

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

terraces that have Art Deco curves. Neighbors here put yellow

02

Nuclear Energy? No Thanks! stickers on the quirky porthole win-

03

dows that sit in the long identical lines of front doors. This makes it a 04

kind of blend of the style that she shared with Albert and the messy, 05  
communal warmth that she remembers from her childhood in Dordt.

06

Her life here is not straightforward— the work that she does with

07

families is difficult; her children have their problems as they grow

08

up— but this existence is something that she has chosen and, for the

09

first time in more than a decade, Lien feels that she belongs.

10

A few years later she embarks on a new relationship. He is some-

11

one she and her family have known since she first moved to Eind-

12

hoven, a widower named Bernard, who is known to everyone as Ber.

13

Although he is three decades older, it does not feel like it. Still

14

youthful- looking, he has swept- back silver hair and wears shirts but-

15

toned to the top without a tie. An amateur actor and director, Ber has 16  
a passion for art, books, opera, and also for the big questions in life.

17

What she loves most is his childlike enthusiasm, the way that he can

18

talk for hours, for example, about the characters in a play. As he prowls 19  
the stage in some piece of modernist German theater, he seems eter-

20

nally young.

21

By the summer of 1987 she and Ber have been a couple for four

22

years. Then all of a sudden, in the midst of rehearsals for his latest 23  
production ( *The Wedding* by Elias Canetti), he becomes dizzy and gets 24  
headaches: it is a brain tumor. He has just a few months to live. Given 25

the difference in their ages she was always likely to outlive him, but 26

the change is far more rapid than she could have imagined. Once the

27

doctors have decided that intervention is impossible, he is moved to a 28

hospice, at first spending his weekends at home with Lien. By the

29

start of the autumn he cannot remember her, and needs feeding,

30S

mouthful by mouthful, as he lies blankly in bed, where he is visited by 31N

many friends.

**272**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

It is with Ber on her mind that Lien drives to Dordrecht one

01

morning that August to see Ma. The house that Ma rents is part of

02

the big new estate in the south of the city, one of the many great build-

03

ing projects that Pa helped to establish. Number 15 Algolring is a

04

four- bedroom, yellow brick end-of-terrace house, well maintained by

05

the housing association and by a man who comes to do the garden

06

once a week. In her early seventies, Ma is entirely healthy, kept vibrant 07

by her interest in politics, her love of the grandchildren, and a firm 08

determination to keep a clean, nice- looking house.

09

Lien has invited herself for coffee. She never feels terribly welcome 10

when she phones up to arrange such visits, though Ma is very warm

11

with Lien's children and also with Albert, with whom she has kept in

12

touch. Lien's divorce, about which Ma was very disappointed, has not

13

been forgiven, but the cautious distance between them runs much fur-

14

ther back than that. Lien sometimes wonders what Pa said about that

15

moment in the Frederikstraat, after which she left home for over a

16

year. Was Lien's exclusion from the card and the ceremony of Pa's fu-

17

neral related to that?

18

Ma stands at her big plate- glass window as Lien drives her Volvo

19

into the cul-de-sac and then edges it backward and forward, trying to 20

park in a smallish spot. Eventually, Lien opens the car door, clutching 21

her bag and a bunch of white tulips, and smiles as she waves the flow-

22

ers while walking up to the front porch. Ma waves back and then hugs

23

her as she enters. She is at her best at such moments, being the hostess, 24

welcoming people into her home. There is an easy joy in the way that

25

she compliments Lien on the choice of tulips, in the way that she

26

takes her coat and hangs it on one of the hooks in the hall. The house 27

smells of coffee and lavender. Lien feels her toes on the spotless blue 28

carpet after removing her shoes.

29

“I have just put the coffee on,” says Ma, heading into the kitchen,

S30

where the machine is making faint coughing sounds.

N31

**273**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

“And there is cream cake from the bakers— they do it nicely there,”

02

she adds while unwrapping the tulips, whose stems she cuts with a

03

pair of scissors on the worktop before arranging them in a vase.

04

Ma breathes a little heavily as she stands there working.

05

“Can I do anything to help?”

06

“You can put those on the dining table,” comes the answer as Ma

07

moves toward the fridge.

08

So Lien carries the vase of flowers, first into the hallway and

09

then into a long room that is filled with light, thanks to the big win-

10

dows at either end. Turning, she sees Ma through the serving hatch,

11

which connects to the kitchen. Ma is whisking milk in a little pan on 12

the hob.

13

“I’ll be round in a minute,” Ma calls without looking round.

14

Lien wanders across to the seating area. There are two fairly new

15

dark brown sofas, a glass table, plus an armchair with an extendable

16

leg rest that matches the sofa set. Against the wall is a unit of built-in 17

shelves and cupboards in dark wood and glass. As always, Lien walks

18

over to it and looks in at the lit-up glass menagerie of hedgehogs,

19

swans, rabbits, owls, and poodles, which cast little rainbows of broken  
light.

21

Ma enters with a tray on which two shop- cut triangles of cake sit

22

on separate saucers. Glossy circles of egg- yolk- yellow apricot nestle  
among the folds of cream. The cups have happy domestic scenes

24

printed on them, with apple- cheeked mothers serving trays of coffee  
and cake. They are like little portraits of Ma in her prime.

26

Using the glass jug from the percolator, Ma fills the cups and adds

27

frothy milk, which she spoons across from the pan. In her own she

28

puts two cubes of light brown sugar. Then, after a few mouthfuls of

29

the rich cake, they begin to talk about Dordrecht and the family cir-

30S

cle: changes to the bus timetable, restructuring at Geert Jan's work-

31N

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

place, the health of her friends, how Lien's children are doing. It is all 01

perfectly friendly, but it is Ma who runs the conversation and there is 02

no mention of Ber.

03

"Do you have plans for your birthday?" Ma asks after a moment of

04

silence.

05

It is common for Lien to host a lunch or a little drinks party to

06

mark the occasion, although Ma (who now rarely travels far beyond

07

Dordrecht) often does not come.

08

“I won’t do anything this year. Fifty- four is nothing special and

09

with Ber in hospice it doesn’t feel right,” says Lien.

10

They talk a little more about other upcoming birthdays, where

11

they will see each other, and then, after a second cup of coffee, it is 12

clear that the visit is at an end.

13

There is a hug and three kisses and then Ma stands again at the

14

big window as Lien edges the car backward and forward to exit the

15

parking space. Once she is clear, Lien gives a final wave. Then there is 16

a high whine from the engine as she reverses down the narrow street.

17

18

19

The weather is pleasant that September, with sunny days and

20

temperatures in the midtwenties. Before and straight after work, Lien 21

goes to Ber in the hospice where he lies, suddenly immensely old look-

22

ing, in a raised surgical bed. No conversation is possible, so she sits 23

there holding his hand, looking out at the gardens and welcoming

24

visitors.

25

Every day, Ber's daughter, Miep, calls from Israel, asking for news

26

on her father's health. Then, as the situation worsens, she fixes on a 27

week to fly over and see him for what must be the final time. Lien and 28

she get on well together, but there is little point in them both sitting 29

there for so many hours, and besides, it will be good for Miep to have S30

N31

275

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

*Bart van Es*

01

some time with her father alone. So for one weekend Lien has a bit of 02  
free time.

03

As it happens, it all works out nicely. The weather is still gorgeous 04  
and so Lien suggests to a friend that they book a hotel at the seaside 05  
and go walking together for a couple of days. After all those months

06

in the hospice it is just what she needs.

07

For this reason, on September 7, Lien is walking across the dunes

08

with the wind in her face looking out at the Van Speijk lighthouse,

09

which has stood on the sands of Egmond since 1833. Its copper turret

10

blazes in the sunlight, and as they come closer, they make out the

11

golden mermaid on its weather vane. By the time they get back to the

12

hotel's little foyer, the two of them are happy with tiredness. Then, 13  
just as they are about to head up to their bedrooms, they are greeted by 14  
the welcoming cheers of two old friends. It is a complete surprise.

15

One of the friends is Esther van Praag, the sister of her stand-in

16

foster father, the man who would have been there with his wife to look 17  
after her if anything had ever happened to Ma and Pa. Esther has

18

known Lien, as a kind of niece really, for a very long time.

19

The other woman, who rushes up to embrace her, is Took.

20

A widow for decades now, white- haired and nearly eighty, Took

21

Heroma is still as vibrant as ever. She envelops Lien with a feeling of 22  
wonder, just as she did when Lien was a little child. There is that

23

sense of her as a great personage— a former parliamentarian, a former 24

delegate at the United Nations, a former member of the Labor Party's

25

governing board— but there is also an intensity of personal contact as 26

she asks her, with both hands resting on Lien's shoulders, about Ber.

27

The glasses for the wine are set out ready on a table in the bar

28

and they have made a restaurant booking, an easy five minutes walk

29

away down the street. Lien is completely happy: the talk is on all her 30S

favorite topics, the food is perfect, they laugh till they are short of 31N

breath.

**276**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 276

11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

01

02

Ber passes away that November. His life is celebrated at a large

03

and beautiful funeral, in which Lien plays a full part. There is sadness 04  
but also a sense of completion— a life well lived and a duty done.

05

Then, early in the New Year, there is another Van Es birthday: a

06

party in a house in Dordrecht with wine and children and slices of

07

cake. Lien arrives, gives her flowers to the hostess, and mingles among 08  
family and friends.

09

Ma is there, seated in an armchair. Something is wrong, though,

10

because when Lien gets closer she stares darkly and turns her head.

11

After a bit, Lien plucks up the courage to approach her, perching on a 12  
sofa to one side.

13

Ma's voice, normally so forceful, comes through very soft.

14

"I don't want to talk to you," she says, turning to look into space.

15

The two of them are so close together, almost touching, but they sit

16

there locked in silence, cut off from each other and from the hubbub

17

all around.

18

“But what is the matter?” asks Lien, frightened.

19

You can see that it pains Ma to speak.

20

“I only think it’s very dishonest,” she says at last, with her jaws

21

locked together. Her words barely make sense. Then she adds, “I

22

heard all about it from Took,” and Lien understands after a few sec-

23

onds that this is about her birthday party, which she had told Ma

24

would not be happening but was organized anyway as a surprise by

25

Esther and Took.

26

Explanation is useless. Her failure to mention the party after it

27

happened, it seems, is enough of a betrayal, and Ma, seeing the whole 28  
thing as a conspiracy, believes nothing that Lien says. When Lien will 29  
not move to sit elsewhere, Ma lifts herself with an effort and tells one S30  
of the other children that she wants to be driven home.

N31

**277**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 277

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

02

03

That night Lien writes a letter. It is the “terrible letter” that Ma

04

tears to pieces after reading it only once. For Lien, it is a letter of ex-

05

planation: of the birthday party, of how important Ma is to her, and of 06

how much she loves her, but also of her mixed feelings toward Pa. Of

07

that moment in the Frederikstraat where he tried to kiss her she says 08

nothing, but she does say that she always loved Ma more than she

09

loved him. Lien thinks that this will resolve the situation, but such 10

letters are dangerous. Letters such as these are not read in the way

11

they were intended. Their recipients will pull the most jagged phrases 12

from them and the rest will flow unnoticed through their hands.

13

If I look for a moment from my grandmother's perspective I think

14

I can see the source of her anger, though this is not to say that her ac-

15

tions were right. She had no vocabulary for trauma. To her, Lien, as

16

she returned from Bennekom, was just a difficult and rather sullen

17

child. Later, Lien's attempted suicide and divorce went against every-

18

thing that Ma believed in. She found Lien self-indulgent. Moreover, 19

Ma was saddened by the state of the modern world. And then for Lien

20

to go out and be secretly happy with Took of all people and to write a 21

letter of explanation in which Pa was treated with a lack of respect, 22

this ignited an anger that had for a long time burned low.

23

Ma did not, I expect, think of Lien's exclusion from the funeral

24

arrangements or of the many harsh words she had spoken to Lien over

25

the years.

26

27

28

A day later a lilac envelope drops through Lien's letterbox at the

29

Burghstraat in Eindhoven. The address is scratchily written “To Mrs.

30S

L. de Jong” and the stamps are pasted at awkward angles, one upside

31N

down.

**278**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 278

11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

Lien was reluctant at first to show me the letter. As she hands it to 01  
me, she averts her eyes.

02

03

*Dordt 7.4.'88*

04

05

*To Lien*

06

*As you know I do not like writing letters. They are always the*

07

*cause of misunderstandings. But I still want to ask you not to call 08  
me etc., for a while. That seems to me, given the situation, the best 09  
way to proceed.*

10

*With best wishes*

11

*Mrs. v Es*

12

13

These are the last words Lien ever received from my grandmother,

14

who died seven years later, the quarrel unresolved.

15

16

17

18

19

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S30

N31

**279**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 279

11/23/17 12:47 AM

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 280

11/23/17 12:47 AM

01

02

*Twenty-six*

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

It is so trivial, an argument over a birthday party when compared to

12

a history that paired the two of them together against the backdrop

13

of the Second World War. All the same, the row escalates quickly. Ma

14

tells the rest of her children not to contact Lien, that Lien has written 15

terrible things in a letter, that she will not ever again be in the same 16

room as Lien. Attempts to persuade Ma to reconsider are met only by

17

anger. Though some of Lien's siblings do at times reach out to her, the 18

connection between Lien and the rest of the family is broken from

19

this point on.

20

In June 1995 Lien hears from my mother of Ma's passing. Unin-

21

vited, she attends the funeral and listens to a colorless service in which 22

Lien (and in fact the whole war and Ma's part in it) is left as a blank.

23

She feels entirely cut out.

24

But perhaps there is such a thing as creative destruction? Starting

25

with a counselor at her work, Lien begins the task of rebuilding: long 26

hours of therapy through which she slowly discovers a balanced sense

27

of herself. She visits the Jewish Historical Museum and requests the

28

dates of her parents' deaths and the details of how they died. Lien's 29

"concrete story of my relations with the van Es family," the document S30

N31

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 281

11/23/17 12:47 AM

*Bart van Es*

01

that I first read in my hotel room in Dordrecht, is a product of this 02  
time.

03

There was also another breakthrough that came a little earlier. It

04

was a kind of reunion, a Conference for the Hidden War Child, which

05

brought together more than five hundred surviving child hideaways in

06

Amsterdam in 1992. For three days in August, those who had gone

07

into hiding as children exactly fifty years earlier got to know each

08

other through workshops, speeches, and poetry readings, through the

09

sharing of photos on bulletin boards, films, psychology lectures, and 10

countless conversations one-to-one. Lien found it a moment of recog-

11

12 nition because so many others there had, like her, been haunted for

12

decades by the feeling that they did not belong in the world. The or-

13

ganization that ran the conference, the Society for Jewish Social

14

Work, produced a daily newspaper to circulate among those attending

15

so that they could record their experiences and respond to those of

16

others. As children who had grown up in isolation, almost all felt that 17

the sharing of stories was something they had always lacked and

18

craved.

19

Ed van Thijn, the mayor of Amsterdam, himself a wartime child

20

hideaway, started the conference off with this theme of the “untold

21

story.” Though comfortable with public speaking, including public

22

speaking about the Holocaust, he had, he told the audience in his

23

opening address, been thrown into panic at the thought of having to

24

tell them something personal. “Even yesterday,” he said to the hall of 25

five hundred hideaways, “I did not know what I should, or rather,

26

what I could say.” Only at the last minute did it occur to him that to 27

speak of oneself as a hidden child was, almost by definition, an im-

28

possible thing:

29

30S

*To whom should we have spoken? Who was really able to listen to*

31N

*our story? The story of hiding has defined our whole existence, but 282*

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 282

11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

*we— at least most of us— have tried desperately all our lives to drive 01  
that story away.*

02

03

Lien cried when she heard this, as did almost all the others around

04

her in the room.

05

The Conference for the Hidden War Child was in retrospect the

06

first stage in her move to Amsterdam, where she now feels that she

07

has at last found her place. She has kept in touch with the Society for 08

Jewish Social Work, which sends out a magazine and organizes non-

09

religious trips and small- scale get- togethers for the roughly thirty 10

thousand Jews still living in the Netherlands, mostly in this city. Lien 11

sits across from me in the chair that she bought with Albert all those 12

years ago in the fashionable Amsterdam shop, looking content.

13

“After all that counseling and those nights of crying, it was finally 14  
over for me. I can talk about it now without emotion, though that

15

might sound strange. In Buddhism there is this concept of waves in

16

history and the way that people are caught up in them. You see that

17

you cannot control everything and there is peace in sensing that big-

18

ger flow.”

19

She hugs her teacup, a little embarrassed by the grandness of her

20

speech.

21

“Anyway,” she continues, “once I could place what had happened

22

to me in a pattern, things changed for me. I could make choices, like 23

the choice to live here in Amsterdam.”

24

The magic of the city is still with me from this morning: its spires, 25  
bridges, and the lines of step- gabled houses shining across the water 26  
in the cold January light. Quite tranquil even at its center, Amsterdam 27  
does seem like a place at peace with itself.

28

From her pretty white- walled house in Eindhoven, Lien moved

29

first to a scruffy little worker's cottage in De Pijp, a youthful district S30  
known for its street market, cafés, and rebellious, alternative vibe. Her N31

**283**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 283

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

friends were a bit worried for her, but Lien was happy. She bought a

02

season ticket to the opera, visited art galleries, attended lectures on 03

Buddhism, started meditation and yoga, and met many new people.

04

Then, after fifteen years, she heard of a group of friends, many of

05

them artists or social workers, who had a plan for living together in 06  
retirement. As a move it came a bit early, but the chance was perfect, 07  
so she asked if she could join them. It is in this block of apartments 08  
that we are speaking now.

09

Lien puts her cup on the table and pours some more pepper-

10

mint tea.

11

“It was only then— I’m not good with dates, but it must have been

12

2003 or something like that— that I felt ready to face Auschwitz. I’d 13

been so frightened of it till then. I thought: I can’t do that. If I went 14

with non- Jewish people I feared that something might be said that

15

would hurt me. And then, if it was with other Jews it would be this

16

trail of collective trauma and I did not want that either, so I just never 17

dared. But I heard about a Buddhist teacher who took people to Aus-

18

chwitz for a week's vigil, where it was possible to say something per-

19

sonal, and that felt like the right thing to do. They made a video of it.

20

Shall we watch it together?"

21

And so, moments later, we are again seated at her desk looking at

22

her computer. It is just what we did for her testimony to the Shoah

23

Foundation. Now, though, the Lien on the recording is much closer to

24

the one beside me in age. What is also different from last time is that 25

Lien is happy with the images that play out before us on the screen.

26

"I found it such a positive experience. I was given all the time I

27

needed. People were crying. It was done with respect," she says as the 28

film begins.

29

There, through the hell mouth gateway, amid broken walls and

30S

lines of rusted barbed wire, stands Lien, her skin blue- white with

31N

**284**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 284

11/23/17 12:47 AM

**the cut out girl**

cold. On the video there is sharp, chilling, discordant music that is 01

somehow human and a voiceover that tells us the facts of what hap-

02

pened in this factory of death. The Buddhist group spent many long

03

days together conducting their vigils. They stayed for a week, sleeping 04

in a kind of hostel, sitting and standing for hours on railway lines, in 05

the barracks, and in the gas chambers themselves.

06

On the DVD, the scene changes and the camera pans to show

07

windowless concrete rooms that are lit only by a few candles. Within

08

them, people crouch and stare into the middle distance or whisper

09

prayers with tight- shut eyes. Midway through, there comes the point 10

where Lien is given her moment to address the vigil. She stands in the 11

half- light of the former women's barracks, a wide circle of people

12

around her, and speaks in English with a series of long pauses, her

13

voice breaking now and again. Including the slight imperfections in

14

grammar, these are the exact words that Lien speaks:

15

16

*When I was eight years old, I went hiding and I said good- bye to my 17*

*father and mother and I thought it was just for a few weeks.*

18

*And it went on and on and it did not end and I didn't see them*

19

*anymore.*

20

*My father was Charles de Jong and he died in Auschwitz and he*

21

*was thirty- seven.*

22

*My mother was Catharine Spiero and she died together with her*

23

*mother, Sara Verveer. My mother died when she was twenty- nine,*

24

*and my . . . my grandmother was fifty- six.*

25

*The parents of my father were David de Jong, he became fifty-*

26

*eight and died with his wife, Hesseline Lion, and she became*

27

*fifty- seven.*

28

*My father had one sister, she became thirty- nine and she died at 29*

*the same day as her children: Serina Mozes and David Mozes.*

S30

N31

285

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

*Serina was my favorite cousin and she became fifteen and David*

02

*was only three months older than I was. I always played with him*

03

*and he became nine.*

04

*And they all died in Auschwitz.*

05

*Their father died in Sobibor. He became forty- four.*

06

*The brother of my mother became forty- four and died in*

07

*Auschwitz.*

08

*Another brother was thirty- two and he died in the middle of*

09

*Europe and his wife was thirty- six and died in Auschwitz.*

10

*And their children . . . and their children, Nico and Robbie, died 11  
when they were four and three years, and the eldest became . . .*

12

*lived . . . after the war, but he hanged himself after the war.*

13

*And then there was one sister of my mother and she became*

14

*twenty- seven and died in Auschwitz.*

15

*And I want to tell you. And I missed them the rest of my life.*

16

17

*After this there is silence and soft crying as Lien's long list of*

18

*names is enfolded by waves of many others:*

19

20

*Frieda Singer, Mordecia Singer, Golda Singer, Moshe Singer . . .*

21

22

And on.

23

We sit for a while in silence. “It is beautiful,” I say eventually, “the 24 way you name them.”

25

Lien nods.

26

“I was very happy with it,” she says.

27

28

29

That night, I stay with friends in Leiden. The first stage of re-

30S

search for my book about Lien is now over. In the morning I check a

31N

few last references in the University Library and make plans for a

**286**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 286

11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

return later in the year. When we planned this trip in December Lien

01

told me that she would not be free on the final day of my visit. Even as 02

late as yesterday morning she did not actually say what she would be

03

doing, feeling a little embarrassed, perhaps, at describing something 04

as intimate and intense as the Buddhist discussion group that she will 05

be hosting in her flat. Yesterday evening, though, she did tell me about 06

it and about how important these sessions now are in her life. Lien

07

suggested we could have lunch together beforehand. The Buddhist

08

meeting does not start until 2:30 p.m. Before the members of the

09

group start arriving, I could move to the front section of the apart-

10

ment, which can be shut off from the sitting area with a set of glass 11  
doors. I could sit and work there before heading off, at about 4:00, to 12  
catch my flight.

13

So over lunch, with sunshine cutting through the stained- glass

14

artworks on the windows, we sit as friends together one last time for a 15  
while to come. Then, as the group will soon be arriving, Lien pulls

16

the division across the room. This way, once the session has started, I 17  
can slip away through the side door without disturbing the people on

18

the other side of the glass. We say good- bye to each other. I hug her.

19

Till Easter, when I'll be back for another research trip, and sooner via 20  
a Skype call, we say.

21

Then Lien sets off to get the room ready and I take a seat at her

22

desk. It seems a good idea to make copies of all the interviews, photo-

23

graphs, and documents I have gathered. I will store these on her desk-

24

top, just to be safe. So I sit there, quietly porting the files across. After 25

a bit, members of the group begin to drift past the window, ringing

26

the doorbell and heading straight to the front room via the corridor as 27

Lien welcomes them in.

28

When all this is finished I put a memory stick on Lien's desk, an-

29

other in my pocket, and a third in my suitcase. The memories that I

S30

have collected feel now like my most valued possessions. I recheck my N31

**287**

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

ticket and confirm that I have my passport to hand. It is time to go.

02

Before heading out, I move just quickly toward the glass doors that

03

now divide the apartment, catching Lien's eye and giving her a little 04

wave. Seated with the others, she smiles as she sees me. Then, taken

05

up in the moment, she stands up and moves forward to open the doors.

06

The glass folds away and she invites me in.

07

Lien addresses the people around her. "This is my nephew, Bart,"

08

she says. "He is going to write my book."

09

10

11

12

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30S

31N

**288**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 288

11/23/17 12:47 AM

01

**epilogue:**

02

03

*July 2017*

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

Without families you don't get stories."

12

When I first heard these words just under three years ago

13

I knew very little about my family's wartime history and I knew al-

14

most nothing about Lien. I also understood much less about my rela-

15

tionship with my own children, especially Josie, about whose troubles 16

I had struggled to think or speak. Getting to know Lien has changed

17

me. It has made me more reflective and less absolute. For the first

18

time I feel I have seen someone else from the inside from the earliest 19

stages of her life. I have also seen myself in another person, my grand-

20

mother. Not, of course, in her courage, but in some of her mistakes.

21

The way that Lien introduced me to her Buddhist group as a

22

“nephew” in January 2015 confirmed something special, the healing

23

of a breach. I can claim no special credit for this. Lien has done the 24

healing herself. Still, our meeting has proved to be the start of a series 25

of fresh connections. I have since met up with her children and she

26

has got to know mine. Last summer Lien came to visit us in Oxford,

27

where she stayed at my parents' house, meeting my father for the first 28  
time in many years.

29

Lien and I meet often now as friends and keep up with each other's

S30

news. It was during her visit to Oxford that Lien first mentioned to

N31

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 289

11/23/17 12:47 AM

***Bart van Es***

01

my wife, with whom she developed an instant connection, that she

02

was meeting up with someone, a man, who seemed nice. He was not

03

exactly a new acquaintance. I had, in fact, seen his face on a photo on 04

the very first day, back in December 2014, when I first met Lien.

05

At that point it was just a photograph among many others: the

06

school scene taken in The Hague in 1939 in which Lien, wearing a

07

pinafore, sits with another little girl at a school bench, with two little 08  
boys to the right of them, wearing ties.

09

The picture, I later learned, was given to her when she was twenty,

10

and performing in a Christmas show at Middeloo College After the

11

performance, a lady who had been part of the audience came up to the

12

stage.

13

“I think I recognize you. Are you, by any chance, Lientje de Jong?”

14

she asked.

15

Lien, puzzled, said that she was.

16

The woman remembered her from The Hague. Lien and the

17

woman's son, Jaap, had been at primary school together.

18

"I still have a photo of you," she said, "you and Jaap, both aged

19

five."

20

Jaap van der Ham, it turned out, was now also at Middeloo, on the

21

same course as Lien. They knew each other, but neither remembered

22

that they had once been classmates and even friends. A few days later 23

Jaap's mother sent Lien a copy of the photograph, pointing out that

24

her son was the boy with the neat side parting, shorts, and long stripy 25

socks on the far left.

26

Lien was not a great one for asking questions at this point in her

27

life: the past was something on which she feared to dwell. Still, she 28  
and Jaap, although they moved in different circles, did talk on a few 29  
occasions about their shared childhood in The Hague. It turned out  
30S

that they had been classmates for another two years after the photo  
31N

was taken. Then, in 1941, Lien had to leave to attend the Jewish  
290

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11/23/17 12:47 AM

### **the cut out girl**

school. Jaap avoided the same move only by a fraction: his father was 01  
Jewish but his mother was not. For this reason, in March 1943, by  
02

which time Lien had already been in hiding in Dordrecht for over half 03  
a year, Jaap remained at home with his mother when his father was  
04

deported to Poland, never to return.

05

Lien kept the photo that Mrs. van der Ham had given her, adding

06

it to the small collection that she had from her parents. Beyond this, 07  
though, the connection with Jaap was only a distant one. He had a

08

steady girlfriend who soon became a fiancée, and though he was kind

09

and charming, once the course at Middeloo was over, he and Lien lost

10

touch.

11

12

13

When Lien and I met in December 2014, the photo of her as a

14

little girl on the school bench with Jaap to one side was still a me-

15

mento no different from the others. In October of the following year, 16

however, a letter was sent out by some of her former fellow students at 17

Middeloo College in which a reunion of its old members was pro-

18

posed. Jaap was one of those doing the organizing. Though Lien de-

19

cided against attending, she did reply with an inquiry asking how he

20

was. There was, after all, the oddity that they had known each other

21

as children in primary school. Her inquiry sparked an exchange of

22

e-mails and then two meetings, the first in Amsterdam and the sec-

23

ond in the village of Velp near Arnhem, where Jaap now lived.

24

On a bright May morning in 2016 Lien arrives on a train from

25

Amsterdam at The Hague's central station. She is meeting Jaap again

26

for the third time now. When they last met, in Velp, the two of them

27

discussed their early years together and conversation moved to the

28

Jewish school, which Lien said she would like to visit. Jaap, who re-

29

mained living in this city until he was eighteen years old, still remem-

S30

bers where it stood. There is a new memorial now.

N31

**291**

9780735222243\_CutOutGirl\_TX.indd 291

11/23/17 12:47 AM



***Bart van Es***

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13

He stands there waiting in the high- ceilinged hall of the station.

14

Although a little thickset and in need of a cane, there is still something 15  
of the schoolboy in him. He wears a flat cap and has clashing stripes on 16  
his shirt and jacket, which make Lien smile. There is a gentleness to 17  
him, an easy warmth as he moves forward to give her a hug.

18

Soon, on a terrace in the spring sunshine, they are drinking coffee

19

and planning their route. First, Lien would like to pass by her old

20

home on the Pletterijstraat, which was only a very short distance from 21

their primary school. From there they can walk to the site of the me-

22

monial, and then have lunch. They have all day for this journey.

23

And so, an hour later, they stand in the redbrick archway with the

24

door of 31 Pletterijstraat before them. To the right, there are the con-

25

crete stairs with metal railings that lead up to the landing, where there 26

are doors for numbers 27 and 29. It was up on that landing that she

27

used to sit with Lilly, their noses pressed against the ironwork, their 28

feet hanging down. It was here in the hall that her mother parked her 29

bicycle. It was down these stairs that she ran to ask Mamma if she

30S

could tell the secret about going to stay somewhere else for a while.

31N

Lien and Jaap stand in silence, taking it in.

**292**

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**the cut out girl**

The place where their primary school once stood is now taken up by

01

a block of apartments, dark brick and rather brutal, twelve stories high.

02

As eighty- three- year- olds looking up at it, they are more dwarfed by 03  
this building than they ever were as little children by the school itself.

04

It feels right, being here with Jaap.

05

They talk together as they walk along the canal toward the center

06

of the city, traffic rushing beside them, its noise reflecting from the 07  
dirty windows of run- down shops. It does not need to be the big sub-

08

ject of the past that unites them. Conversation shifts easily among

09

topics: a concert they might attend together; a song they remember

10

singing in primary school; Jaap's plans for a holiday with his son in 11

Israel; a sculpture exhibition here in The Hague this July. Now and

12

then they stop and Jaap tells her about the things that once stood in 13

the places where there are now hotels and offices with mirrored

14

glass that shines in the sun: the old bakery, the greengrocer's, Lien's 15

uncle's ironware shop.

16

And then they have reached it: the site of the old Jewish school. It

17

is a pleasant square now with modern apartment blocks looking down

18

onto a cobbled pedestrian area that is planted with sycamore trees.

19

There are rows of tables with sun parasols facing a sushi restaurant, 20

and, on one side, the imposing walls and gardens of a seventeenth-

21

century church. The whole clutter of ramshackle buildings that stood

22

here when they were children has gone. Jaap rests on his walking stick 23

for a moment and surveys the scene.

24

The memorial is not conspicuous, but they find it under the syc-

25

mores: a nest of shiny stainless steel tubing in the shape of a little 26

cluster of chairs. As the two of them approach they see that there are 27

six of them, of different heights, with rungs like ladders. A bicycle is 28

leaning against the one that is closest, and on the chair in the center a 29

dark-haired girl is clambering, her face serious, determined not to fall.

S30

From a short distance, a woman looks on with an encouraging smile.

N31

**293**

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*Bart van Es*

01

The memorial on the site of the old Jewish school is designed as a

02

climbing frame, blending in with the hubbub of the square. Only if

03

you look closely can you see that there are names and ages engraved on 04

the steel tubing. They are the names of murdered children: four hun-

05

dred in all.

06

07

08

After their visit that day to the site of the former Jewish school

09

in The Hague, Jaap and Lien have met up more and more often. This

10

summer they went on holiday together to Spain and they are now a

11

couple, dividing their time between Amsterdam and the village of

12

Velp. They enjoy country walks, museum visits, music, and spending

13

time with their children and grandchildren, sometimes as a group.

14

Now well into their eighties, they know this cannot last forever, but 15

they are happy. Lien feels connected to the world around her. She feels 16

whole.

17

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**294**

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*Acknowledgments 2 Pages TK*

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## *Acknowledgments*

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