

# INNER VOICES

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MY JOURNEY WITH PSYCHOSIS AND  
SCHIZOPHRENIA

MAY-MAY MEIJER

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Translated from Dutch to English by Karen Loughrey, Kumar Jamdagni and May-May Meijer

Front cover: Picture of May-May Meijer by Brenda van Leeuwen

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## PRAISE FOR INNER VOICES

“Meijer eloquently shows how chaotically a psychotic brain works and how it can mislead. Impressive!” - **Ypsilon, Dutch Association for Family and Friends of People With a Psychotic Vulnerability**

“In *Inner Voices* the insidious progression from suspicion to complete psychosis becomes crystal clear. Meijer has succeeded, despite the limitations of her sensitivity and the side effects of medication, in giving a meaningful new interpretation of her life.” - **De Volkskrant**

“A book for all those who want to learn how psychosis can be a process of meaning and the way towards a meaningful life.” - **Jim van Os, Full Professor of Psychiatry and Head of Division for Neuroscience, University Medical Center Utrecht**

“Highly recommended! An inspiring book.” - **Anoiksis, The Dutch association for people with psychosis susceptibility**



*For Everybody Who Needs Love*



I see the sun rising behind the mountains  
It lights up the whole kingdom with its bright light  
Even the dark part is lit  
Herds of animals gather around the lake to drink  
Peace seems to spring from here, peace on earth  
God's Kingdom is lit up with your love  
Humanity becomes one with nature  
God's will becomes truth  
Peace on Earth  
Hallelujah!

Poem by Valerie (2009), fellow patient in the Rembrandthof





## PREFACE

For many years, ‘good afternoon’ was the first thing I heard at the start of my day. This was due to the side effects of my medication and because I couldn’t face what the day might bring. I felt so terrible and lonely that as soon as I was out of bed, I threw up. The words ‘schizophrenia’, ‘divorced’ and ‘unemployed’ echoed in my head. I missed an empowering perspective. I got support from my lovely family and from books. To illustrate what a person suffers when experiencing psychosis, and what it’s like to be in compulsory hospital admission, I wrote the book *An Accident in My Head*, directly after my first period of compulsory admission, under the pseudonym Yasmin Vermeer.

Now, eight years later, I see everything from a different perspective. I’m much better now, although I sometimes still get out of bed late, and I have gained more insight into how my illness started and the reactions of shocked family members. I also see that my psychotic episodes were not only ‘accidents in my head’, but that they gave me new insights as well. My heart guides me now. My psychotic episodes were the foundations for my dream of world peace, therefore I founded the peace organization Peace SOS. I am open about my love for Christ and my mental vulnerability. That’s why I’m now telling my story in English, too.

With *Inner Voices* I want to contribute to a better understanding of people with a mental vulnerability and their family members. Additionally, I hope the book will reassure people who are vulnerable to

psychosis, depression and mania, and will help their family members, their loved ones and caregivers working in mental hospitals.

I have tried to write things down as close to the truth as possible, in order to give readers a real insight into the mind of someone who is severely psychotic. In addition, I have done my best to make the story easy to read. That's why I sometimes combined the nurses, psychiatrists and fellow patients into a few characters. Social-psychiatric nurses work in several shifts. There is a morning, afternoon, evening and night shift. I also met several psychiatrists: a psychiatrist at the outpatients' clinic, several psychiatrists in the closed wards, other psychiatrists in the open wards, and independent psychiatrists. I have also tried to make allowances for vulnerable people in this book and for sensitive issues.

The original title of this book in Dutch was *Mission World Peace*, since that was my mission during my psychosis, and one which I still pursue with others to this day. Remarkably, the day that that title popped into my mind, the sun turned red. However, the title *Mission World Peace* also led to confusion amongst some of the readers, who didn't expect a book about psychiatry. Therefore, Liesbeth Heenk, my former publisher, proposed its current title *Inner Voices. My journey with psychosis and schizophrenia*. About the title *Inner Voices*: when I was in the deepest part of my psychosis, it seemed as if I was talking to others via telepathy. As if I was exchanging thoughts with other people. This is how I still 'talk' to Christ, God, sometimes. Christ is within me.

For my recovery, I owe many thanks to my son, my sister, my parents and the partners of my parents, the psychiatrists, the social-psychiatric nurses, the therapists and all the other staff at the mental health hospitals of the Rembrandthof and GGZ Delfland, the father of my son and his partner, my other family members, friends and fellow patients, among whom Niels, and all the other people appearing in this book and who helped me through my difficult years. For the realization of this book, I would like to thank my publisher Liesbeth Heenk of Amsterdam Publishers, Karen Loughrey and Kumar Jamdagni who are the English editors, Jet Hoogerwaard, the editor of the Dutch version of my manuscript, Kimm and Kim who were willing to read the original version of my manuscript and Brenda van Leeuwen who made the cover photo. In addition, I would like to thank the psychiatrists Jim van Os and René Keet, Father Dresmé and all the people of St. Vitus Church. A special thanks to the people who are mentioned at the end of this book

such as Pearl, my former colleagues and my partisans of the Dutch Labour Party. I would also like to thank all the other people who were directly or indirectly involved, like my fellow peace activists Charles Dickson and Supriya Vani who inspired me to write this book and the people of Seats2Meet at Amersfoort station. Everyone contributed in their own unique and vital way. Thank you all for your commitment to breaking the stigma around mental illness and give insight into the mind of someone who is severely psychotic, locked up inside herself and striving towards world peace.

I wish you peace and an enjoyable reading experience.

With love,

May-May Meijer



## BIZARRE ADVENTURES IN CUBA

It's a sunny day in May when my husband Vince and I – we're both 33 years old – arrive in Cuba's capital city Havana. Vince is the love of my life. We love discovering new places and have made a lot of trips together. We met 11 years ago during the induction week at university, in the Leidseplein in Amsterdam. In Turkey we went camping in the wild after a local lent us his tent. We were woken up by sheep, and local farmers invited us to eat *ekmek* with them. In Egypt we slept in the fishing village Al Quseir, where a woman pushed her young son into my arms because she was convinced that it would bring him luck. Together with my family in the Netherlands, we visited our relatives in Indonesia. After our fairy-tale romantic wedding at De Haar Castle – Vince loves castles – we celebrated our honeymoon on Mauritius.

And now we are about to discover Cuba. As usual, when we arrive somewhere for the first time, I'm the one studying the map in the *Lonely Planet Guide*. We are walking on the street leading to the former national parliament, carrying our backpacks. It's hot and we've just had a long flight. This is the moment when my first visions and ideas about the secret service start to appear.

"That's the former parliament, El Capitolio," says Vince, nodding towards a prestigious-looking building. Although I have never been

there, it reminds me of the Capitol Building in Washington D.C. I have a 'light' feeling in my head. We go inside.

"This looks marvellous, what do you think?" Vince asks, as he gazes at the painted ceiling.

"Yes, it's beautiful," I say without thinking. I'm not feeling well.

Vince walks on, intrigued by the beauty of the building.

I feel as if I'm experiencing the past. I see vague images of a group of men quarrelling and a group of people calling for war.

I start mumbling, "People used to gather here... fight here?"

I feel shaky and look to Vince for support, but just then I stub my foot.

"Ouch!" I look down and see dark-red blood seeping from my toe through my open shoe.

"Are you OK?" asks Vince, looking slightly worried.

"I'm... I'm... not feeling well," I manage to say, as I try to lie down.

Vince walks towards me.

I'm lying on the floor now. "I need an ambulance."

"What's the problem?" asks Vince.

"I've hurt my foot."

"It's only a very small wound," says Vince, as he inspects my toe. "Come on, get up... Come on..." When he sees that I'm having trouble getting up, he says, "Look at your toe yourself, it's nothing."

I try to get up on my knees, but I need to lie down again. I'm feeling dizzy after seeing the blood and after the long flight. I also feel as if the atmosphere of the building – the violence of the past – is literally pushing down on me. I'm feeling so weak that I can't explain this to Vince. He doesn't know what all the fuss is about. He leaves me alone and walks on, taking in all the details around him.

"Vince, Vince..." I call him softly.

He doesn't hear me.

I fight against the black mist which is coming from under my eyes. I don't want to lose consciousness so I focus on a marble ornament on the high ceiling. Nevertheless, images start to appear and I begin mumbling again.

Vince doesn't hear me.

"People, I see masses of people. People arguing. People running down the stairs. Blood?"

After a while, Vince sees that I'm still lying on the ground and he walks towards me. "Are you OK?"

At that moment the images start disappearing and my sight becomes clear.

"Yes, yes," I say with a quivering voice, and get up again.

I don't feel well for the rest of the day, but I don't say anything. Neither do I tell Vince about the visions I had. We never talked about visions in my family when I was young. If we ever did, my mother would immediately brush it off by saying that the spiritual world was "unrealistic and woolly". I was raised with sayings like: "If you are not lying in bed, you can't be ill," and my parents – especially my father, my role model – hardly ever complained. Besides, Vince is the love of my life. Having been partners for so many years, we know each other's strengths and weaknesses inside out. Vince is very kind, ambitious, always looking for adventure, and an entrepreneur. But he doesn't have a gift for dealing with someone who is ill.

The next day, as we are strolling through the streets of Havana again, past the marble, colonial buildings with their colourful façades, Vince tells me about the Cuban secret service. Apart from the James Bond films I have seen, the secret service has hardly ever crossed my mind. Because I had barely given the secret service any thought before, Vince gives me new insight when he says, "Cuba's secret service is probably observing us."

"Why do you think that?" I ask.

"They control the masses. Maybe there are secret agents out here on the streets."

I look around to see if I can spot a secret agent, but everybody and everything seems 'normal' to me. People are selling their wares – there are many bookstalls – and Cuban women are sauntering through the streets. But of course, you can't tell if someone's a secret agent. I don't give the intelligence service or secret agents another thought that day. A young, light-brown dog runs towards me and jumps up against me, rubbing his head in my lap. I stroke his back and his head. Then he starts licking my hand. I enjoy the impressions I'm gathering.

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After a couple of days in Havana, we spend a few days in the countryside. Vince has hired a shiny, light-green classic Cadillac, a car that is so typical for Cuba. Our guides, Roberto and Ernesto, drive us past the different cultural highlights. Together, these two form a magnificent Cuban-looking duo. Robert is rather corpulent and wears a cowboy hat, while Ernesto is slim and sports a moustache.

During one of our trips, while we are sitting in the back of our car and Roberto is driving, Vince says to me, “I think our guides have been selected by the government. They only point out the schools and the churches, and hardly answer any questions about the standard of living here.”

This triggers me to start asking Roberto and Ernesto questions about the well-being of the local people too, without making them feel uneasy. Although they are very polite, it does indeed seem as if they are avoiding our questions relating to the welfare of the people. It fuels my suspicion subconsciously. When we pass a farmer with a horse wearing a western saddle, Vince asks if it’s OK for me to sit on the horse’s back. As I mount, I can smell that lovely horse smell. Roberto finds this so interesting that he asks if he can take a photo of me, which I agree to. I pose with the chestnut horse in front of a giant pink bougainvillea with large, dark-green cactuses poking through. But I wonder why the guide wants to take a photo of me. Is it to show the secret service what we are doing?

Despite these thoughts popping into my mind, I don’t share them with Vince and enjoy Cuba and all the things we are experiencing to the full. I love being in Cuba. We are taken to see a grand old lady playing the piano like a real diva, and she looks like one too. She has bare shoulders, wears dark-brown eye shadow and lots of mascara, a light-green cowboy hat and huge silver earrings. Vince and I enjoy listening to her music. On the streets, we also see a girl who looks as though she’s about to get married. She is celebrating her ‘sweet sixteenth’ birthday. She looks beautiful in her crisp white dress, with a soft yellow belt and a matching yellow flower in her dark-brown hair.

But Cuba also has a flip side. I feel sorry for the people standing in long queues for their daily necessities and for the people who ask us for just anything to read or for a bit of soap that is so hard for them to get.

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From Havana and the surroundings, we travel on to Cayo Largo, a small island south of Cuba where the white powdered sand is surrounded by the crystal-clear blue Caribbean Sea. There we meet Sean from the United Kingdom. Sean is good looking, with curly maroon-red hair; he seems intelligent and is approximately our age. He approaches us in the lobby of the hotel – we are enjoying our welcome cocktails – and starts talking to us.

“So what do you two do?” Sean asks.

“I’ve set up a brokerage firm with partners in Amsterdam,” answers Vince.

“And I’m assistant professor at the Centre of Philanthropy at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. But I also advise an endowment fund for microcredits and I’m active in politics,” I tell him.

“What about you, Sean?” asks Vince.

“I work in the City,” says Sean, and he explains what he does. It sounds interesting to me. I enjoyed visiting London – it’s such a vibrant city.

At this point, Vince leaves to go to the toilet.

“May-May, what political party are you active for?” asks Sean, moving a bit closer to me.

“The Dutch Labour Party. I’m a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee. We discuss foreign policy with MPs from the Dutch Labour Party.”

I wonder why Sean wants to know this. Is he checking to see if he’s speaking to the right person?

“Ah. OK...” Sean takes a sip of his drink.

“Did you see that film on the hotel TV this afternoon, that film with the gay men?” he asks.

“Yes, I saw it,” I answer.

“What did you think of it?”

“Oh, I enjoyed it.”

“What do you think of the *gays* in the film?” he continues.

I’m starting to get suspicious now. Why is Sean so interested in my opinion about gays?

“What do I think? Nothing. Gays and lesbians are OK. Of course. Why?”

“Oh, just curious,” he answers casually.

I wonder why Sean is asking me these questions.

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A few days later there's another incident with Sean which makes me start to wonder if he might be a member of the secret service. I'm coming out of the sea with Vince. We had been arguing on the boat, but as always, we had quickly forgotten about it. We are wearing our diving suits and standing on the beach. Vince is talking with some other people as Sean approaches me.

"How was your dive, May-May?"

"Fun. We saw a sea turtle and a nurse shark. I also helped a Russian guy who'd lost his weight belt."

"You mean you saved his life?"

"Well, it wasn't such a big deal," I say. "Vince helped me once when I nearly lost my weight belt."

Sean nods at a guy in the corner. "That guy over there mentioned that his cousin recently visited Boston. Can you tell me where Boston is? I forget where it is. Is it in the USA or in Canada?"

"In the USA."

I'm getting suspicious again. Is Sean testing my geographical knowledge because I'm a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee? I decide to keep it as neutral as I can. "Why are you asking me this?"

"Oh, nothing special. I just wanted to know."

"Do you want a drink, Sean?"

"Yes, I'll have a Sprite."

"Can I have a Sprite and a Diet Coke?" I ask the barman.

The barman gives me a Sprite and a red wine.

"No, I ordered a Sprite and a Diet Coke," I say to the barman.

He gives me an orange juice instead of a Diet Coke.

I have the feeling that Sean is watching me. Is he waiting to see if I will accept the orange juice instead of the Diet Coke? Did he pay the barman to give me the wrong drink? Did they set this all up for me?

"A Diet Coke, I ordered a Sprite and a Diet Coke, not an orange juice," I say politely but firmly.

The barman replaces the orange juice with a Diet Coke this time.

"Yes, it's important that you get what you want," says Sean.

I look at him. *What does he mean by this? Was it indeed a test? And did I pass?*

As my husband approaches, Sean leaves.

I say to him quietly, “Sean’s a nice person, but he keeps asking me all kinds of questions.”

“Well we’re leaving to go back to Havana tomorrow, so we won’t be seeing him anymore. That’ll be the end of our trip, darling.” Vince gives me a gentle kiss on my forehead.

As always, he knows how to comfort me. We’ve been through thick and thin together. Nevertheless, thoughts are running through my mind, like: *Is Sean testing me to see if I’m able to fulfil a position in national politics? Does he work for the British intelligence service, and are they cooperating with the Dutch intelligence service? Is that why he’s spying on me?*

The next day, in Havana, Vince and I are walking through the lobby of the magnificent Hotel Nacional de Cuba. Vince is reading a travel guide.

“Look, this hotel has got history. Jean-Paul Sartre visited Cuba in 1960 with Simone de Beauvoir. They were staying in this hotel. They had an interview with Che Guevara. You know, old Che, the revolutionary!”

“Wow, I’m so glad you found this place!”

“We’re going to stay here for a couple of days,” he says, putting his arms around my waist.

I smile and place my head against his chest, breathing in the fresh odour of his Cool Water aftershave. How sweet of him to surprise me!

For the rest of the day we walk along the Malecón, a wide promenade and seawall which stretches for eight kilometres along the coast of Havana. When the sea breeze blows through my hair, I have the feeling we are celebrating life to the fullest. It’s exciting to discover new places, to meet people within their own culture and to smell all the different smells. Sean seems to be far away now.

Vince and I enjoy staying in the Hotel Nacional de Cuba because of its immense history. Excited and tired from all the impressions of the day, we go to bed, falling asleep quickly.

In the early morning, I’m awakened by a noise outside.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

Vince walks to the window. “A mass demonstration. They’re heading towards Plaza de la Revolución.”

We hurriedly put on our clothes and rush downstairs.

Looking out of the window, I see protestors holding up banners with texts denouncing Bush and the USA. The crowd chants “USA go to hell.”

Down in the lobby I notice a middle-aged man sitting alone at the bar. An expat. He tells me he has lived in the Netherlands, too.

I hope he can clarify what’s going on. “Why are all these people protesting against the USA?” I ask him.

“There are demonstrations here all the time. People are forced to demonstrate by their employers. If your boss tells you to go, you go. Your colleagues report back the next day, telling your boss whether you were at the demonstration or not.”

“Have these people ever been to the USA?”

“No. Most of them haven’t.”

“This is all very strange for me. I can’t imagine my boss telling me what to do in my spare time... that he would force me to protest against another country.”

“It’s all different here, honey, it’s all different.”

I’m feeling very confused. I’m in the middle of a mass demonstration. People are very angry at the USA and Bush, but I get the feeling that they don’t know much about him or the American people. They hardly seem to know what they are protesting against. I go outside towards Plaza de la Revolución and see a cameraman filming the scene. Because of his blonde hair and fair skin, I assume he’s from a Scandinavian country.

As he takes a break, I step towards him. “What are you filming exactly?”

“The angry masses.”

“I was told that these people are being put under pressure to demonstrate. The viewers in the USA and the international viewers will get the idea that the people here don’t like them. So if you only film people demonstrating, I wonder... I wonder if you’re filming the whole story?”

“Yeah, I see what you mean, I do film from a certain perspective. But my boss told me to film the demonstration, so that’s what I’m doing.”

“I understand. It reminds me of what Walter Lippmann says in his 1922 book *Public Opinion*. It’s a story set on an island in the ocean. At the beginning of the First World War, just a few people live there. Englishmen, Frenchmen and Germans. The mail steamer arrives every 60 days. When it finally arrives, the English and the French learn that they had been fighting against the Germans. For 60 days they thought

they were friends, but their countries were actually enemies.” The cameraman still seems to be listening with interest, so I continue. “The media are very important in determining the relationships between people... in determining the relationships between countries.”

I’m suddenly overcome by a feeling which I find hard to describe. A feeling of being tested all the time and becoming aware that the secret service and the media play a role in foreign policy, in wars. Reading about it is different to actually seeing masses of people protesting out on the streets and walking among them.

I walk towards my husband, looking for support. “Vince, this country... I don’t know. I love Cuba... but it’s also... so strange.”

He simply replies, “We fly home tomorrow, darling.”

His words do not comfort me entirely this time. I feel as though I have just embarked on a turbulent journey.

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## THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON COMMUNICATION PRACTICE IN SLOVENIA

The next day, we meet Sean again at the airport in Havana. He gives me a smile and Vince and I have a short conversation with him about our holidays in Cuba. On the plane I notice that Sean is reading *Sophie's World* by Jostein Gaarder. I have read that book too. It's a book about a teenage girl, Sophie, living in Norway. She is introduced to philosophical thinking and the history of philosophy by her teacher Alberto Knox. She receives her lessons through letters brought to her by a dog. Because Sean is testing whether I will be able to fulfil a position in national politics, I wonder if the fact that he is reading *Sophie's World* is a sign that I will be further introduced to the world of politics.

Once home in Bussum – which is close to Amsterdam – in the Netherlands, I barely have time to pause. I have to pack my suitcase for Slovenia where I will present my work at the International Conference on Communication Practice. When I have finished packing, I see Wouter Bos, the political leader of the Dutch Labour Party, on television debating about leadership with the leader of the Green Left Party. I suspect that they are broadcasting this especially for me. It runs through my mind that Sean was reading *Sophie's World* in order to introduce me to the idea that I would get a mentor, too. Wouter Bos is introducing me to the world of politics via television. He is my teacher,

like Alberto Knox was for Sophie. But I don't have much time to think about it.

The next day I'm at Schiphol Airport again to catch a flight to Ljubljana in Slovenia. I see a man and woman arguing at the gate in the departure hall. I assume they're a couple. They are arguing very loudly. "I'm telling you, you can't take your scissors on the plane!" the woman is shouting. The man jumps up, "Who do you think you are, telling me this?" He makes angry gestures with his hand. The woman is angry too, "If you don't listen to me, I won't leave with you!"

The idea of the secret service pops into my mind again. *This is probably a piece of theatre. And they are both actors. They are acting out this performance for my benefit because I argued with Vince openly on the boat when we were in Cuba. We lost face. The intelligence service wants to show me that if you fulfil a high position in national politics, you can't argue in public.* But I don't think about it for very long, and board the plane.

On the flight, I'm seated next to an elderly Italian businessman. His age, combined with his professional-looking suit, gives me a reassuring feeling. We are having an animated conversation and I tell him I'm on my way to an International Conference on Communication Practice in Portorož, Slovenia.

"What kind of university do you work for?" he asks, with interest.

"The Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam."

"Ah... I see." He pauses for a while. Then he says, "Do you know that universities are often linked with political parties?"

"Linked with political parties? Oh no. We do independent scientific research."

"Yes, I know. But nonetheless, universities often have links with political parties," he says firmly, straightening his tie as though confirming his words with this gesture and signalling that the topic was closed as far as he was concerned.

I start to think back. My father is a full professor at TU Delft, University of Technology, but it took him a long time to get there. I had been chair of the Dutch National PhD council and handed over a report to the Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Science. It was around

that time that my father was awarded his professorship. Was this due to my position, my connection with politics? I didn't consider that he was asked to become a full professor as a result of many years of hard and passionate work, his enormous publication list in the field of micro-electronics and winning the prestigious Simon Stevin Award.

As our plane arrives at Ljubljana airport, the businessman gives me his card and says, "If you want to meet me, just call me."

I board the shuttle bus which ferries the international participants to the hotel. I'm still puzzled by the Italian businessman. I wonder if universities are also test cases for politicians-to-be? *Am I being spied upon by the secret service?*

A middle-aged man starts talking to me in German.

I respond automatically. "Oh, you're from Germany. I went to Berlin with my husband a while ago."

"What did you think of Berlin?"

"It was impressive. We went to Checkpoint Charlie. There was a museum in which they showed all the possible ways people did their best to cross from East to West. I remember that people even got into a pram to get to the West... I was told that they wanted to destroy part of the wall to build houses there. I wonder why... The wall is a historic symbol."

"Yes, I know. I was a politician for the Social Democratic Party in Germany."

"Oh, OK," I answer casually. But I'm puzzled by his remark. Here is a former politician of the Social Democratic Party in Germany, the sister party of the party I'm active in! *Is he going to test me to determine whether I'm able to fulfil a position in national politics?* I don't have a lot of time to think about it. A young lady from Slovenia interrupts us.

"Shall I tell you something about Slovenia?"

"Yes, please," we answer in unison.

"Slovenia became independent after the ten-day war, which started in 1991. This saw the break-up of Yugoslavia into several successor states: the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Macedonia. Our unemployment rate is about seven percent." The young lady continues talking. The German former politician listens to her closely. I'm amazed by her knowledge of the history and macro-economic statistics of the country. I doubt if I could be such a great representative for the Netherlands.



As soon as I step off the bus, the Slovenian chairman of the congress, Boris, welcomes me. He's a successful-looking flamboyant man, exactly how I would imagine the owner of a communication company to look. I feel slightly flattered by the way he approaches me. He clearly appreciates my presence. He opens his wallet and shows me some photos.

"Look, these are my children. What do you think of them?"

"They're lovely. I love children."

"They *are* lovely. I love children too..." He looks at me and continues. "You look gorgeous. I like your smile and your teeth, they are so white, did you know that?"

"Uhm..." I do not know what to say. In fact, I have veneers on my front teeth because I didn't like them when I was young, but I don't feel that this is the appropriate time to mention it. "OK, I am going to check out my room," I say as I walk away.

My room is comfortable. A standard hotel room with a bed, a blanket, a cupboard and a small table. Before I go to sleep, I study the handout for the presentation and write some notes.

The next day, I give my presentation *Does Success Breed Success? Effects of news and advertising on corporate reputation*. There are approximately 35 people in the room. I feel a bit uneasy because the microphone isn't working, but I decide that I can do without it. Luckily, my PowerPoint presentation *does* work. I talk about the three different types of news we can identify: 'success and failure news', 'support and criticism news' and 'issue news'. I also explain that every type of news has a different effect on corporate reputation. The audience is enthusiastic. At the end of my presentation there is some time for questions. The mayor of a city which was severely damaged during the war wants to know how he can improve the reputation of his city. I tell him that I understand that this is difficult and advise him to build on the strong points of his city. After two more questions, the next presenter is waiting to present. When I walk out of the room, I feel relieved that my presentation went well.

In the afternoon, the German former politician I had met on the shuttle bus approaches me.

"I appreciated your presentation, May-May."

"Thank you."

“You know that lady last night... she was telling such an interesting story about the history and economic situation of Slovenia. But I can’t remember the unemployment rate. Do you know what it is?”

“Uhm...” I answer. I wonder why he wants to know this.

He continues. “Was it seven percent?”

“Could be,” I answer. I’m feeling stupid. I have never been good in acquiring knowledge from hearing people speak, I prefer to read. I wonder if this is a test by the intelligence service. If it is, then I probably failed.

That evening, we have dinner together with all the participants. I feel as if I’m in a scene from a James Bond film. It’s a posh dinner. A woman asks me what she has to use the small plate to the left of her big plate for. I explain to her that it’s a side-plate. Meant for the bread. Does the secret service want to test me to see if I still remember what I learned at the School of Hospitality Management I studied at?

During the dinner, another participant arrives. He’s wearing a striking shirt with a floral print, which makes him stand out in our company. As he sits down, he asks me, “Do you believe in conspiracy theories? I don’t, I think politicians just mess up.” And he laughs.

I start laughing too but I feel uncomfortable. *So now they want to know if I believe in conspiracy theories. To assess my mental health.*

After dinner, back in my hotel room, I call Vince. I’m so glad to hear his voice. He misses me too and calls me “beauty” like he did when we first met. After our phone call, I change my clothes and go to a bar with the other conference participants.

The chairman of the conference, Boris, approaches me. He looks me straight in the eye. “I heard you went to Cuba,” he says. “Tell me, were you on your own there?”

I assume he’s trying to find out if I know about Sean. If I was aware that there were secret agents spying on me. But that should stay confidential of course.

“Well... I think...”

“You don’t need to tell me.” He gives me a meaningful look. “For one night, how much for one night? I’m just joking, you tell me in the morning, May-May.”

The speaker from the United States touches my arm and points to a

man sitting at a table further up, “See that guy, he worked for the KGB. But since the collapse of the Soviet Union, he’s been out of work.”

“OK,” I answer as light-heartedly as possible.

It’s all becoming clear to me now. *There are many, many spies around me. There were a lot of spies in Cuba but there are also many spies here in Slovenia.* As I walk back to the hotel, a participant whom I didn’t notice before asks me if he can accompany me. I refuse his offer politely.

In the morning, the chairman of the conference approaches me again. I assume he wants to find out if I know about the spies in Cuba. He asks me to join him at the buffet. Then he says, “Did you think about it?”

“About what?”

“About what I asked you last night.”

I recall his “how much for one night?” remark from yesterday.

Being both non-native English speakers, and because I’m living in my own world, I assume that he wants to know if I have an idea about how many secret agents there were in Cuba, and how many there are in Slovenia.

“Yes, I did.”

“So what is it?”

I can’t estimate the exact number of secret agents or ask too many questions because everything has to be kept secret from the other guests. So I answer, “A lot.”

He smiles. “Come on, tell me!”

“I can’t tell you. A lot... an awful lot.”

“OK, OK. You don’t want to tell me. Then come and fly with me to Paris.”

I’m surprised by his remark. “No, no, that’s not possible,” I answer quickly.

“You’re right. It’s not possible. Maybe we’ll meet again in the after-life.”

We both start laughing.

I love Vince very much and I am confused, but I don’t want to offend the chairman of the conference.

“Thank you for your presence May-May. The bus is waiting to take you to the airport.” He gives me a wink and walks away.

. . .

I'm glad to be going home, and when Vince picks me up at the airport, I notice that he's looking quite handsome. He's wearing a white shirt with a rectangle pattern which matches his green-blue eyes, making his skin look lightly bronzed. At the sides of his head his hair is turning grey, which complements his dark-blond hair. He smiles and his eyes sparkle as he sees me. We give each other a big heartfelt hug. I love him so much! As we approach our white house in the forest and I see the magnificent tree in the driveway, I feel intensely happy.

In the late afternoon, my sister Famke, who is two-and-half years younger, calls me. Famke has the same big brown magical eyes as our mother and is just as smart and pretty. She studied psychology. She works for a company that provides jobs to the unemployed. We've been very close from an early age. Being her elder sister, I've always protected her when she needed me. There was no way I could ever have imagined that in the very near future our roles would be reversed.

"How was your holiday and your conference in Slovenia?" she asks, her voice full of curiosity and excitement.

"Cuba was fantastic, but I fainted."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."

"And there was a mass demonstration going on."

"Did you stay away from it? Was there any violence?"

"No. No. You don't have to worry."

"But?"

"There was also a man asking me all kinds of questions."

"Oh?"

"In Slovenia, too. The chair of the conference was... a secret agent."

"A secret agent? What makes you think that?"

"He showed an interest in me."

"So what? Maybe he fancied you?"

"That's not possible. He was wearing a ring."

"Yes, but sometimes married men still like other pretty women."

"Oh..."

There is a moment of silence between us. I'm thinking of what my sister has just said. Indeed, sometimes married people are attracted to people outside their marriage.

Then Famke continues, "What do you think? Maybe he liked you?"

I pause for a moment. "Well, when I think about it... your theory sounds more logical than mine."

My sister's words bring me back to reality. I decide to tell Vince everything. My ideas about how I'm active in politics for the Committee of Foreign Affairs and am therefore being tested by the secret service. The relationship between universities and politics. Vince is very worried about me and takes me to a GP the next day. She suggests that I may want to see a psychiatrist. But because I feel ashamed of my situation and of seeing a psychiatrist, I decide not to. A cousin – who has had psychosis – visits me. He also recommends that I see a psychiatrist, but I don't take his advice either. Yet, somewhere in the back of my mind, it occurs to me that I had suffered a light psychosis. Vince mentions to his parents that I was working too hard and had behaved strangely in Cuba. I feel very ashamed about it and tell him not to discuss it with anyone again, aside from my sister and my parents. After a few days, I feel fine again and I've soon forgotten everything.

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## A BABY IS BORN

I am alone in the toilet as I pee onto a strip of white paper. This isn't the first time I've taken a pregnancy test – we've been trying for a while – but this time I feel a strange sensation as I study it. A little later, I ask Vince to come and sit next to me on the bed. We're going to have a baby! We kiss and hug. We decide not to tell anyone – not even my sister or Saskia, one of my best friends – until we've passed the 12-week mark. A friend of mine had done it this way, and we think it's best. After Vince leaves for work, I sit in silence at my computer for half an hour. I'm going to be a mother! We're going to be parents! There is life in my belly! I decide to participate in a programme to help other women get pregnant by donating urine to the NGO, 'Mothers for Mothers'.

When I am eight weeks pregnant, we go to the midwife. She's blonde and smiles a lot. She's a bit younger than we are and runs the clinic with another midwife. She asks me to uncover my belly and rubs a blob of gel onto it. Soon, we can see the baby's heart light up on the screen. Vince and I are ecstatic. The flickering white light is the very first sign of our baby.

A few weeks later we visit the midwife again. As before, she gently rubs gel onto my belly. Then she looks at the screen and asks us cheerfully, "Do you want to know if it's a boy or a girl?"

My husband and I exchange glances. Although we always thought

that we wanted to know, having a baby is so special that it doesn't matter to us anymore.

It's as if Vince can read my mind as he says, "No, we'd rather wait till the birth."

"It's nice if it's a surprise," I say, in agreement.

When I'm 12 weeks pregnant, we tell my mother the news.

She's delirious with joy. "What?! You mean I'm going to be a grandma?" she says. She jumps up and walks around the room pretending she's pushing a pram. "Yippee! I'm going to be a grandma! Yippee!"

Later, I will regret not telling my sister, parents and my friend Saskia sooner. But it feels good that the secret is out and everybody can now tell whoever they want.

I'm around four months pregnant when Vince asks me if I want to go on holiday before the baby is born. "Shall we go to Africa?" he asks.

"To Africa, are you crazy? I'm pregnant!"

"I've looked through the travel guides," he replies calmly. "It seems we'll be fine in South Africa."

He shows me some photos, and a couple of weeks later I follow him to South Africa, despite my doubts and the concerns of my parents and sister. On the plane, a man in a red jumper is sitting next to us. To me, the colour red is a sign telling me he will save us in an emergency. I'm special and should be taken care of. My suspicious thoughts have not disappeared. I don't discuss this with Vince.

A tour bus takes us along the rocky road leading to Robben Island – where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned. The tour guide tells us about the prisoners and I feel tears welling up in my eyes. He talks about the impressive work done by Steve Biko, who was also imprisoned purely because of his dark skin and for standing up for his rights.

"Often, one man is known for his efforts, but in order to achieve great things, many people are needed. Steve Biko gave his life," continues the tour guide.

Tears are running down my cheeks behind my sunglasses, forming a salty trail. I quickly dry them. The guide seems to notice, but thankfully he doesn't mention it.

We are shown Nelson Mandela's cell. What a strong mentality he must have had to be able to survive in prison for 27 years, and to forgive his guard. We watch the sun burning down on the rocks outside. Nelson Mandela was forced to dig out limestone, which damaged his eyes. I feel sorry for him. As we stand in the inner courtyard under the burning sun, I suddenly feel overwhelmed. The baby I'm carrying in my stomach isn't moving. Will the baby be alright? Luckily, I feel movement a few minutes later.

As well as Robben Island, we visit Kirstenbosch, the National Botanical Garden near Table Mountain. We marvel at the special flora, including proteas, or 'sugarbushes', and the magnificent green fields. We have a drink with a view of Table Mountain, an enormous rocky flat-topped mountain three kilometres wide. I notice a man wearing a hat at a table to our right. It seems as if he is watching me. Is he a secret agent? I don't mention it to Vince. We continue our trip via the Garden Route. Suddenly we find ourselves in front of a magnificent estate complete with a vineyard. It's for sale.

"Shall I buy it?" says Vince spontaneously.

"Well that's quite a decision to make. But you can always ask," I reply.

The estate agent is located in Stellenbosch. We arrive there in our summer outfits, me in a short skirt and Vince in shorts. The salesmen are older than us and wearing suits. They look rather surprised when they see us.

As we are left alone for a while, I whisper in Vince's ear, "Maybe you should show them your company's website. They probably can't believe you can afford it."

They give us information about the property but they don't seem very eager to sell. We go home without buying it. To me, this doesn't matter. I don't give it any more thought. I loved our holiday.

When I am five months pregnant, my friend Saskia takes photos of me in front of our house. Saskia is a tall blonde woman. We have known each other since we were young. When people first meet her, they often say she resembles Meryl Streep. We became close friends and lived together



when we were both studying hotel management. She was with me when Vince and I met in Amsterdam for the first time.

“OK, this is fantastic, May. Can you look this way?” Saskia takes several photos. “We’re also going to take a classic photo of you. With your hand on your belly. OK?”

“Yes, sure I’d love to do that,” I say as I tenderly place my hand on my stomach to see if I can feel the baby moving. The baby is quiet. We have a lot of fun taking the pictures.

“You know what,” says Saskia, “You should get one of those maternity necklaces. They have a chime in them that hangs in front of your belly. Then the baby will become familiar with the sound.”

A little later I start wearing a necklace with a heart-shaped chime that sits on my belly. I hope the baby will be full of love.

On the night of 2 March, I go into labour. The midwife arrives at our home in the morning. She says that I have to go to the hospital. “Your baby will be born at lunchtime,” she says.

But it takes longer than expected. Throughout the day, Vince sits beside my bed, watching the monitors closely. Seeing this, the midwife gives him a short explanation about what the different devices are measuring.

Noah is born at 10.50 PM on 3 March, 2006. I feel a weight falling on my leg and realize an instant later that it’s my baby. The doctor quickly hands the baby over to me. I feel his warm skin against mine. But a few seconds later, the doctor takes him away to be checked and placed in an incubator to get oxygen. The nurse tells me that the baby has a terrible headache and a bump on his head because he needed help being delivered.

From my bed I can see snowflakes swirling down past my bedroom window. Once Vince has left to go home, I start to feel a bit lonely. Although I’m the mother of a baby, my baby is not with me. But I feel so fortunate.

The next day, I can’t wait for Vince to arrive. I am so excited about visiting our baby. When we see him in the incubator, he is asleep. I feel sorry for him, with all those wires attached to his tiny body. Luckily, it’s

not long before Noah can leave the incubator and stay with me. The first time he's with me in the room, Vince gives him a gentle kiss on his cheek. Noah responds by pulling a face.

"He doesn't like kisses," I say, slightly worried because he has just been born and is still very fragile.

"Then he'll have to get used to it. He'll learn that it means we love him." Vince puts my mind at rest. He's very comfortable with our baby. Vince gives Noah another kiss on his head.

I smile at them both and we are so very happy.

Vince is so overjoyed that he gives the medical staff bottles of wine as a present. The nurse writes us a letter describing Noah's entry into the world. We can go home soon. Vince puts Noah into the furry white bear suit my sister has bought for him. He looks so cute in it. When we arrive home, Noah starts crying.

"Why is he crying?" I ask, panicking slightly.

"Is he hungry?" asks Vince.

"No, I've just breastfed him. Where's the maternity nurse?"

"It's OK darling. I'll change his nappy."

I'm grateful and relieved that Vince knows how to handle a crying baby.

We often walk on the heath together. One day, I'm walking on the heath with Noah, and the song *The Circle of Life* pops into my head. I feel I'm part of a bigger universe. Whereas I was always terrified of dying when I was young, I realize now that my love for Noah is so pure and intense that I would give my life for him. Noah is more important than me. Life will be passed on.

When Noah cries because he has pain in his tummy, Vince places him face down on his arm. We joke that he's like a little monkey in that position. I'm so happy that we're a family and that Vince is so involved. In the mornings, Vince gets Noah out of bed for me and I breastfeed him. As Noah is lying beside me in bed and I smell his baby smell, I feel so happy. Sometimes, in the afternoons, we fall asleep together on the couch.

Since the beginning of my pregnancy, Noah has been my 'everything', the son I love unconditionally, although I have to get used to motherhood. We don't get enough sleep and sometimes we're late for

our appointments at the health centre because he pooped in his nappy just before we had to leave. My breasts hurt tremendously because breastfeeding isn't going smoothly. When I start working again, a female colleague explains that the body is like a little factory and that you need to breastfeed and pump milk at fixed times. After that, breastfeeding goes well.

Noah is five months old when Vince says to me with a serious look on his face, "You remember when we were in South Africa? I regret not buying that Cape House."

"Well..."

"I thought it was fantastic. Imagine us living in South Africa!"

"That would be exciting. You know that if we went abroad, I would want to live in a country..."

"Where you can help poor people, yes. So you'd be OK with me going over there and buying a hotel?"

"Vince, you've worked so hard to get rich. You can afford it. If this is what you really want, then you should go."

"You won't mind being left alone with Noah for a few days?"

Vince reads the look of hesitation in my eyes. Then he continues, "I can ask my mum to help out."

"OK."

"I'll take my father with me."

Vince's father is a retired accountant, but still does a few jobs here and there. He is a calm and thoughtful man. This makes him a perfect travel companion.

Vince is only gone for five days but I can't wait for him to get back. We phone each other every day and he tells me about the two hotels he has bought. When he gets back, he looks at me with a cheery face. I melt as I look into his green-blue eyes. I feel reassured. Our family is complete again. As I'm making him a cup of coffee, he suddenly produces a small box from behind his back and holds it up in front of my eyes. "From Noah for Mother's Day."

I open the little velvet box and see a delicate silver necklace with a sparkling, dark-blue gemstone in it.

“Wow, what’s this stone?” I ask.

“Tanzanite. It’s a very special gemstone.”

“It’s beautiful,” I answer truthfully, but I also feel a little disappointed.

Vince gives the box to me. I take the necklace carefully and put it around my neck. Vince closes the clasp. I’m not used to being given expensive presents. Was child labour involved? As if he can read my mind, he says, “The stone is fair trade.”

I smile and regain my composure. “Tell me about the hotels you bought.”

“I bought two. A villa with apartments overlooking Camps Bay, and a lodge in Somerset West which also has a superb view.”

“Wow, that’s fantastic!” I give Vince a hug. But I’m feeling overwhelmed. Our life now is so different to when we first met. Will Vince’s wealth not change us?

“Vince?”

“Yes?”

“Can you promise me something?”

“That is?”

“Will you stay the way you are now?”

Vince takes hold of me. He enjoys his success in business, but he also knows how worried I get every now and then. “Of course. Of course I will, darling.”

My thoughts go back to when we had just met. We were sleeping in Vince’s very simple attic with wooden beams and windows that had cracks in them. Vince had placed candles in empty soft-drink bottles and there was a beautiful chandelier hanging from the ceiling that his grandma had given him. The room was lit by candlelight. We made love all night long. The Clannad song *In a Lifetime* was on repeat. Our song. I realize now how the lyrics predicted our destiny, ‘In the future you and I get blown away’ and ‘Believe the light in you, so the light shines in you’. But we were young and innocent then, and totally in love.

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## THE MANIFESTO COMMITTEE AND A VISIT TO SOUTH AFRICA

Just a month after Noah's birth, I attend a meeting with all the members of the National Manifesto Committee of the Dutch Labour Party. I'm feeling special because I'm a mother now. Just before the meeting starts we all chat with each other. Another member of the committee tells me she's become a grandmother recently. She is a full professor of health and explains how important it is to have children at an early age because a woman's fertility starts to decrease after 30. I never knew this. In ads, we are always being warned about teenage pregnancies and told to use condoms. So it had never occurred to me that it might be hard to get pregnant when you wanted. Another professor, Ronald Plasterk, approaches me. I have known him since I became chair of the Dutch National PhD Council. He says he is pleasantly surprised to learn that I'm a member of the committee too. I smile, although I'm feeling impressed and therefore slightly intimidated by him – later he would serve as the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations – and some of the other committee members. This makes it hard for me to concentrate during the meeting.

Before the break, our party leader Wouter Bos shows up. I'd seen him in action at political forum meetings. He is a very kind man. Wouter gives a presentation for the Manifesto Committee with ideas on how the political party programme could be drawn up.

At the beginning of the break, as we are walking along the corridor,

someone makes fun of me. I'm at a loss for words. At home we never made fun of each other, so I'm not sure how to respond. Suddenly I hear someone defending me – he is replying to the remark – and I start to laugh. It's Wouter Bos. I'm relieved that he's helping me out and I'm proud that he is our party leader. He truly is a socially minded person, helping others in need.

After the plenary session, we work together in small teams, which suits me better. I enjoy working on political issues. Later, at home, I'm working on the manifesto when I see ads appearing on my computer. Ads featuring beautiful women looking for a relationship. *Does the secret service want to test whether I can also fall in love with women? To find out if I can be blackmailed?*

As I type on the computer, I have the feeling that a member of the secret service is monitoring my work, to find out what I am doing. I receive a survey about how we would spend government money for several policy issues such as health, international aid, education and so on. I fill it in and assume that if I were ever to hold a position in government, this survey would be sent to me again and the secret service would use it to check how my position influences my answers. By doing this, they can use it as one of the checks to determine whether my mental health is still stable. As usual, I don't tell Vince, maybe because it plays a role subconsciously or maybe because I assume that I'm not supposed to talk about the secret service with anyone. Not even with my husband.

People are trying to influence me continuously because I'm in the manifesto committee. As I walk from the supermarket to my bike, I see a peace sign chalked on the pavement. It contains lots of colours – yellow, green, blue, white, pink – and was probably drawn by children. It looks beautiful. But I ignore it, a peace sign is so 'flower power'. So soft. Taxi drivers cooperate with the secret service as well. Whenever I take a taxi, they will switch the radio to a news channel. In this way, they tell me what I need to know about certain topics.

We have a discussion in the manifesto committee about the so-called 'seigniorage' funding system for bachelor and master's students. I rather support the current system in which students are given grants. Our political party leader argues that it is not fair that people with low incomes have to fund the grants of students from wealthy families. I can understand his point of view, but in the programme committee, I

put forward that the government should keep on giving grants in order to make sure that the son or daughter of a baker, for example, can study too. Students from lower-income families may be afraid to borrow money to pay for their studies. A member of the programme committee supports my viewpoint. He even says that he will resign from the committee if seigniorage is mentioned in the manifesto programme.

During the summer holiday, Noah, Vince and I visit our hotels in South Africa. Saskia and her partner William join us. William wears glasses with thick lenses. I like him. When Saskia and I studied in Maastricht he was studying at Delft University of Technology. Once he came to visit Saskia. She told me that William leaned demonstratively against a tree on the freshly mown lawn wearing his shorts, goat wool socks and hiking shoes. This way, he stood out from the students of the Hotel Management School, who walked by in smart suits across the paths.

When we arrive in South Africa, and travel to Somerset West, I am amazed by the stunning landscape. The lodge lies in a valley full of green trees and is surrounded by the massive, rocky Hottentots Holland Mountains. Vince's sister Alice comes out to greet us. She runs the hotel with her husband. Vince's parents have already arrived. Vince's mother Dewi is enthusiastic and emotional. She used to run a day care, is fond of children and knows how to handle them very well. She gives me a big hug and says, "I met a lady who runs a soup kitchen. Her name's Pearl. She cooks meals for the children in the village, otherwise they'd have to go to school on an empty stomach. What Pearl is doing is so good. You should come and visit her and the children."

A couple of days later we are in Sir Lowry's Pass, surrounded by 20 children who are curious to know who we are, where we're from and what we have brought with us. Pearl is a woman with a heart of gold. "I'm glad you're here to help with the children," she says. "The children need help. God bless you. God bless you."

We bring out the shopping bags containing food that Pearl asked us to buy – soup with corn and beans. We help Pearl serve the food. This makes me feel good. Vince is very eager to emigrate to South Africa but I don't like the idea so much because I know I would miss my family and friends, and I want to become active in Dutch national politics. But

helping the people in need here and enjoying the beauty of the South African countryside appeals to me.

After our stay in Somerset West, we visit our hotel villa with apartments overlooking Camps Bay. It's a sunny day and we go for a walk on the beach. Vince walks on the edge of the blue and green ocean. I'm sitting on the beach with Noah. The strong wind whips the white sand against my back. It hurts a bit. I sit Noah down in front of me, "I will protect you, sweetheart."

That evening we dine in a pizza restaurant. I go to the toilet to breastfeed Noah. As I look out of the restaurant window, I see children begging for money. So I take the leftovers of my pizza with me in a pizza box. When we get outside, though, I can't see the children anywhere. We head for home, my husband pushing the pram with Noah in it, and me holding the pizza box in my hands. Maybe I can give the pizza to someone else who is hungry. We are walking over the esplanade with palm trees towards our villa apartment. The blue-green ocean where we sat this afternoon is to my right. Vince and I both drink in our surroundings.

"It's so beautiful here," I sigh.

Vince doesn't react. Sometimes he is a man of very few words.

Suddenly a bright red sports car races past, attracting his attention. "Look, the latest Ferrari," says Vince.

"That's strange," I say. "The enormous differences between the rich and poor. That's what all those fences are for. If only the differences weren't so big..."

"OK, OK, can you please stop it," snaps Vince.

Because I want to maintain the harmony, I keep my mouth shut. I recall that when we were in Paris once, Vince was impressed by the expensive carpets on the wall of the Louvre, whereas I said it was strange that they spent so much money on the interior while people were starving. Vince was angry at me for not being able to just enjoy it instead of talking about the poor. Nevertheless, I don't get angry at him, because he doesn't want to talk about the differences between rich and poor in South Africa. We have been together so long. I also know that he wants to support the children of the soup kitchen.

We are walking home with Noah in his buggy. There is a guard outside our hotel. He has been hired by a couple of residents to keep an eye on the surroundings. Vince goes inside with Noah while I stop to talk



to the guard. He is a bit taller than Vince. Although I have no clue how old he is, I think he is young. Somewhere in his twenties. He has dark skin and big brown eyes.

“Hello.”

“Good evening, Madam.”

“May-May, please call me May-May. What’s your name?”

“Charles, from the Congo. I fled because of the war.”

“Do you want some pizza?”

“Yes, thank you Madam.”

Charles seems very hungry. I give him the pizza. Politely he takes it out of my hands and puts it aside in his small wooden cabin. Such a small gesture of sympathy makes him feel good apparently and he starts to talk spontaneously, “I study during the day and work at night. I want to get my permit to stay here. Eventually, I want to go back to the Congo to unite all people for peace.”

I look at Charles. He looks determined and has an inspiring voice. It comes from deep within his heart. With people like him, peace will surely come.

“Wow, that sounds wonderful!”

“Yes, Madam. War is terrible.”

For a while, Charles looks into the distance. I wonder what his eyes have seen, but I don’t want to revive painful memories, so I don’t ask. We continue talking for a long time until my husband asks me when I’m coming in.

During our stay, we make several trips across South Africa. We visit Kirstenbosch – the National Botanical Garden near Table Mountain – as we did when I was pregnant, and we watch the sea lions in Hout Bay and the penguins in Hermanus. Alice invites us for a traditional South African *braai*, a BBQ. What makes me feel so joyful is being together, surrounded by my loved ones: our baby Noah, Vince and the rest of the family. Time flies, and soon our holiday is over.

Back home in the Netherlands, Charles is still on my mind. I call the Department of Home Affairs in South Africa to see what I can do to help him.

“Hello, my name is May-May. I would like to endorse someone.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m from the Netherlands and I recently visited South Africa. I met a refugee from the Congo, he is working in Cape Town. He was our guard and I want to help him get his permit.”

And then we both hear a clicking sound.

“There is someone else monitoring our conversation,” says the employee in South Africa.

I’m thinking, *someone else is monitoring our conversation? Who? Why?*

The employee continues. “I do not think it is possible to endorse someone. Goodbye.”

I assume that the secret service is tapping my phone.

The national manifesto of the Dutch Labour Party is being presented on 3 September, 2006 at the restaurant-café ‘De IJ-kantine’ in Amsterdam. We have a spectacular view across the river IJ. Wouter Bos gives a short and slick presentation of the programme. Being a member of the manifesto committee, I take my seat just behind him in front of the audience. I find it difficult to concentrate. The room is so big. There are so many people, so many voices, so many impressions. Ahmed Aboutaleb – who is now the mayor of Rotterdam – is sitting next to me. Although I know he’s a sincere man, nevertheless intrusive thoughts start popping into my mind. I notice that Wouter Bos is wearing a light pink shirt. It’s the same colour as my blouse. *How did the Dutch intelligence service get us to wear the same colour? Did they sneak into my house when I wasn’t there? How did they know I would pick this blouse and not another one? Does this mean they see me as the successor to the political party leader?* In a flash, I see that another female member of the political manifesto committee and chair of the Dutch Committee of Foreign Affairs is wearing a red blouse. *Red. The colour of our political party. The colour of safety for the Dutch intelligence service. She is probably getting high levels of protection from the Dutch intelligence service too.* No-one seems to notice that my mind is constantly busy with all these intrusive thoughts that I can hardly concentrate and have difficulty just speaking. I spend all my energy trying to hide it as best I can.

## STOP EAVESDROPPING ON ME

A couple of days later, I'm walking towards the university building of the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. Seeing the white office building come into view makes me feel happy. I love working in academia; during my doctoral research in the Department of Communication Science, I focused on political communication theories. I studied the effects of media coverage and advertising on corporate reputation. It fascinates me that 'the truth' can depend on the angle from which you look at it. I will never forget that first day as a student. The assistant professor drew a huge elephant on the blackboard. He mentioned that people would have varying views, depending on the position from which they saw the elephant. People standing to the side of the elephant may describe seeing trees – its legs – whereas people standing in front of the elephant would describe seeing a snake – its proboscis – and people studying the elephant from the back would say they saw a long stick – its tail. I still find this a fascinating notion.

After my work for the Department of Communication Science, I decided to work for the charity sector. Full professor Theo Schuyt is head of the team, the Working Group on Philanthropy. We investigate what and why people donate to societal causes. I study 'corporate donations' specifically. Theo is an inspiring professor. He is always one of the first to arrive in our building and starts his working day with push-ups.

I work hard because I love my work. Theo and other professors tell me that I may become a full professor one day. In order to achieve this, I will have to work hard and publish work in peer-reviewed journals which rank high in the Social Sciences Citation Index. The finance department asks me to keep track of how I spend my time.

“Play time is over,” I say to myself. “You have to work really, really hard. You are an assistant professor now.” I don’t take time to chat with colleagues anymore – not even with Theo – or to clean my desk, which looks a bit messy.

Today the symposium ‘Day of Philanthropy’, which we have organized, is being held in the main building of the Vrije Universiteit. After the opening by the chair of the day, Theo presents the summary of our *Giving in the Netherlands* study. There is a coffee break afterwards. While I’m standing in line waiting for a cup of tea, I notice a good-looking young male student with bright blue eyes scrutinizing me. His look is so intense that I wonder if the secret service is testing me to see if I’m faithful to Vince, or whether I can be blackmailed. I am a professional, so I don’t react.

A man with an imposing appearance in a black suit and a blue tie approaches me for a chat. It’s Professor Eijffinger. He works, amongst other things, as a full professor in Financial Economics for Tilburg University. When he learns that I’m a member of the manifesto committee, he tells me that he’s also active for a political party, the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA). The idea that politics and academia are intertwined enters my mind again.

After the coffee break, several people are due to lead a workshop. Professor Eijffinger is one of the workshop leaders. He asks participants to follow him to the room where the workshop is to be held. I know that the room is hard to find and it occurs to me that this is another experiment by the secret service. *Shouldn’t we go the other way? Professor Eijffinger is deliberately leading us the wrong way. Since I work for the Vrije Universiteit, I should know the route. Maybe all the participants know the right route as well. They are all waiting to see if I dare to stand up to professor Eijffinger and point out the right route. Or take the right route myself at least. Do I really know the right route? Do I? What should I do? Should I follow the group or go my own way? Or should I do something else? Where should I go?* The rest of the group leaves. I finally follow the group, probably walking in the wrong direction. My mind is not clear, I am confused and I feel

defeated. It seems to me like another test from the secret service, a real-life experiment by Solomon Asch, the scientist who conducted experiments in conformity.

On my way home, I pick Noah up from day care and breastfeed him. I am feeling exhausted. As Vince arrives, he wonders why I haven't prepared dinner yet. I say that I'm too tired and we decide to look for someone who can help us with the cooking. I tell Vince about the symposium, but I don't say anything about the secret-service tests.

The next day, I go to the university again. I share my office with Jane, who's also present. She's around 60 years old and has short white hair. I have an appointment with a female journalist from a Dutch magazine that specializes in advertising. I greet the journalist in the room I share with Jane. The journalist hangs up her coat. In order not to disturb Jane, we go to another room. I'm not feeling well but I try to conceal this from the journalist. I'm good in my profession and I know how to answer her questions. I get a strange feeling after the interview. It felt as though there was something 'unearthly' about the journalist. I try to hide this from Jane but at the same time I want to verify what I saw with her.

"Did you see the journalist's hat? The hat she was wearing was odd, don't you think?"

"A hat?"

"Yes, the colours and the shape of the hat were strange, weren't they?" I ask my colleague as light-heartedly as I can.

"Sorry, I didn't look at her. I didn't see the hat."

"Oh."

I suddenly wonder whether the journalist was in fact wearing a hat. Was she wearing an odd hat like I thought, or was she perhaps not wearing a hat at all? I take a five-minute break but I don't feel any better. On the contrary, I feel worse. Fear is creeping up on me.

"I... I..."

Jane is looking at me. "What's the matter?"

"I need to go home Jane."

"That's early for you. I hope you're OK."

I rush out of the room. *I have to go home. Now.*

"See you tomorrow," Jane calls out to me.

I'm in too much of a hurry and feel too confused to answer her. I'm feeling tense, as if I'm on the run.

When I arrive at the train station to go home, I see a man in a suit and a raincoat smiling at me. I had noticed him that morning when I got on the train. *He's probably working for the secret service. He's checking to see if I'm going home.*

In the train, I look outside and see billboards with the text: 'Need a Lawyer?'

I mumble to myself, "Need a lawyer? What for? Does this mean that Vince wants to divorce me?"

In the newspaper I read a short article about two babies in the children's ward of the medical centre of the Vrije Universiteit whose legs have been mysteriously broken. I assume that this is a message for me.

As I drive home from the train station, I see a black Porsche. *It's the secret service, they've followed me home,* I think.

Close to our home, my neighbour – who is the previous owner of our house – starts waving at me. He looks different, different from the way he normally looks. His hair seems fake, as though he's wearing a wig. His eyes also seem to have a more open expression and the colour of his face looks different. *Is he wearing makeup as well? Is the Dutch intelligence service surrounding me with actors?*

Nevertheless, I wave back at him.

The handyman is working in our garden when I arrive home. His face is glistening with sweat. My head is spinning with so many thoughts now. I'm feeling under pressure. The secret service is testing me. *If I don't listen to them, if I don't obey, they will break babies' legs.* They have warned me about this. I will not give in to their blackmailing, but the babies need to be protected. The handyman mustn't know about the secret service of course. I'm feeling weak, I need his help, but I'm also determined to protect the babies.

"Did you see the news about the babies whose legs were inexplicably broken?" I ask the handyman.

"Yes, I did."

"Can you call the local hospital to warn them against intruders?"

"Do you think that's necessary?"

"Yes," I answer.

“Well...” The handyman is not very keen to call.

I know he likes me.

“Come on. Do it. Please.”

I hand over my phone to the handyman. I wait until he calls the number.

He feels that he cannot resist and he wants to help me. Then he rubs his sleeve against his face to remove the sweat and calls the hospital. “Hello, there is a lady here and she’s concerned about the babies with broken legs. Did you read the news about it?”

There is a voice on the other end of the line. I wait for the handyman’s reaction.

“Oh, you did...”

The voice continues.

I am still looking at the handyman, I want to make sure that the babies are fine.

“You took measures. OK. Excellent.”

The handyman puts the phone down and goes back to work.

I go back to the living room. For months now, I have had the feeling that my phone is being tapped. In phone conversations, I sometimes stress certain words, like ‘stop’, to make it clear to the secret service that I don’t want them to eavesdrop on me. Suddenly, I have a brilliant idea. When I’m sure no-one can hear me, I call my own number and speak into my answering machine: “I know you are spying on me... Stop it!... Leave me alone!... Leave me alone, do you hear me?!”

At dinner, I hardly pay attention to Vince and Noah. My mind is racing. Thoughts are overwhelming me. It’s probably because I’m a political party member that the intelligence service is spying on me. I want them to stop.

“I want you to remove the cameras in our house, Vince.”

“Cameras? What cameras do you mean?”

“The cameras. The secret-service cameras. They are also tapping my phone and they’ve been spying on me for a long time now. A month, maybe?”

“We don’t have any cameras. Except the one at the beginning of our lane.”

“No. I mean the cameras in the house!”

“OK. Show me where they are.”

I walk to the window and look at the frame. "Here, I think they are here somewhere."

Vince's eyes are wide open. Then he regains his composure. He clears his throat and says, "Why don't you go to bed? Perhaps you're tired?"

"I haven't slept for the last two weeks. I can't sleep."

"Try, darling. We can go to the GP tomorrow."

I go to the bedroom, put on my aubergine-coloured nightgown and lie down on the large, dark-brown bed.

Vince enters the room. He still has his clothes on. He is worried about me, but I don't pay attention. He runs his fingers over my face from the top of my head, over my eyes, and down to my chin. I get very upset by this. "What are you doing?!" I shout and jump out of bed.

"Come on. It's OK."

"You were closing my eyes. It felt like you thought I was dead!"

"It's OK. Come on, darling. Just come back and lie down."

"I don't know."

"Come on."

I lie down on the bed.

Vince wants to comfort me again. This time he doesn't dare to touch me.

"Maybe you can become a member of the cabinet later on. In Wouter Bos's cabinet."

"Why are you mentioning his name?" I shout and jump out of bed again.

Vince follows me. "He's the leader of your political party, isn't he? I know you admire him."

I run downstairs. "The political leaders are being informed by the Dutch intelligence service. He's responsible for the cameras in our house! The cameras and this spying on me are driving me crazy. And you're cooperating with him!"

"Honey, come on..."

"Stop, stay where you are."

Vince continues to walk towards me.

"Stop. STOP, I said!"

Vince ignores me and continues walking towards me.

"Does this mean you want to kill me?!"

"I want to do what?"



“Are you cooperating with him? Do you want to kill me?! Stay away from me... STAY AWAY FROM ME!!!” I make defensive gestures with my arm and start calling the emergency services on my phone. I press the numbers very quickly. It goes wrong a couple of times because I’m so nervous, but I keep on trying until I reach the operator.

“Help! My husband is trying to kill me! Come quickly!!”

“Where do you live?” asks the lady at the other end of the line.

I give my address.

“What is he doing?”

“COME ON, HURRY!! HE’S GOING TO KILL ME!!!”

I also call my parents and my sister, shouting that I am going to die.

Vince doesn’t come near me now.

A few minutes later I hear our doorbell and Vince walks towards the door to open it. He mumbles something to the person standing at the door. Then I hear them enter the room, where I’m standing. Out of the corner of my eye, I see someone in a neon yellow-green suit enter the room. An ambulance technician! He walks slowly. He seems OK. Vince enters the room reluctantly and is standing in a corner watching us. Because he is at a distance, I am less frightened of him. I sit down on the sofa.

The technician kneels in front of me. He has kind eyes. “Your husband looks calm. Do you dare to trust me?”

“Yes.”

“I also work in a hospital. There are other people who feel the way you do.”

As the ambulance technician talks to me, I become less scared of Vince.

“It will be OK. It will be OK,” he continues while he is still on his knees in front of me.

“Your husband will not kill you. I promise you. OK?”

“OK,” I mumble.

Vince comes a bit closer and I recognize his relieved look. I see from the calm in his eyes that he knows I am no longer frightened of him. Things are still very fragile, but they are fine between us.

I’m feeling better and the ambulance technician suggests that I go to sleep. I go upstairs on my own. Vince stays away this time. Exhausted, I fall asleep.

When I wake up the following morning, I make breakfast for myself.

Suddenly my mum comes down the spiral staircase in the kitchen. This surprises me; I didn't know that she had slept at our house. She tells me that my father and Famke had come too, but that they had gone home when Vince told them that I was sleeping like the ambulance technician suggested.

I know the Dutch secret service, the AIVD, is still spying on me, but I also feel slightly ashamed when I think about the panic I caused the night before.

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## FEELING WOUNDED

After taking my mother to the train station, Vince drives me to our GP in his blue BMW. In the waiting room I try to ignore the headlines of a story in a magazine that the Dutch secret service, the AIVD, put there for me. The article is about the stories of people who have had to go into hiding. The AIVD wants to put pressure on me. If I don't do as they tell me they will make sure that I have to go into hiding. I will not let myself be blackmailed by the AIVD! My grinding train of thought is broken by the door of the office opening and the cheerful voice of our GP, who says, "May-May, it's your turn!" She listens to Vince's story and asks me some questions. The AIVD doesn't want me to say anything so I keep my head down and barely react. Taciturn and inward-looking, I watch her scribbling something on a piece of paper.

"This is a referral letter for the psychiatric hospital in Hilversum," she says in a gentle voice, more to Vince than to me. "I think that that is the right place for you."

As we walk through the waiting room towards the exit, I notice that an agent of the AIVD has opened the magazine on the page that is meant for me. I ignore it, letting it wash over me in silence and allowing Vince to take the lead. I trust him again and know that he wants to do what is best for me.

Directly after our visit to the GP, we drive to the Rembrandthof in Hilversum. It's my first visit to a mental hospital. The round shape of the

exterior and the soft yellow tint give it a friendly and welcoming look. The hall is full of light due to the enormously high ceiling and the glass dome. Two gigantic palm trees dominate the hall, extending up to the second floor. The reception desk looks luxurious. *Everywhere You Look You Can See Something* is written in silver letters on the white wall behind it. The woman at the desk refers us to the emergency unit. As we walk towards the emergency unit, we pass a glass staircase and an inner courtyard, where people are smoking. But I hardly notice this. I am feeling stressed and locked up in myself.

A male nurse of approximately 50 years old is waiting for us in the emergency room. He looks kind and has a dark blue signet ring on his ring finger.

“May-May, how are you?”

I keep my head down. I don't say a word. I can't, I really can't say anything. Although the secret service is driving me nuts with their spying on me – they have a lot of secret agents and look-a-likes following me, they tap my phone, they installed cameras in our house – they are doing it to protect the country. Future politicians need to be tested and controlled. Therefore I need to protect the secret service as well. If I protect them, I protect my country. I help to protect the world order, maybe. No-one must know about how the secret service works. I can't tell anyone about it.

After a while, the nurse looks to Vince. Vince looks at me. I still don't say anything. So Vince finally says, “May-May has the feeling that she is being spied on by the secret service.”

“Is that so, May-May?” asks the nurse.

I nod slightly. I'm not supposed to say anything about the secret service, but I'm also relieved that Vince has mentioned what is bothering me. The nurse keeps asking me questions, but I don't answer them. *I have already revealed too much.* I stare at the ground. After ten minutes the nurse goes away and comes back with a male psychiatrist. He is a tall man about the same age as the nurse and looks kind-hearted. “May-May, can you tell me what you think?”

I don't look at him. I want to protect the secret service so I cannot say anything. No-one must know how they work.

“She thought I wanted to kill her,” says Vince with a tremor in his voice.

“Oh, and what do you think about that now?” the psychiatrist asks me. His kind-hearted appearance calms me down.

“No, no... that’s not the case,” I mumble.

“Ok. Good,” says the nurse.

“And can you tell me something about the secret service?” asks the psychiatrist.

My mood changes immediately. I didn’t expect that he would mention the secret service and test me as well, put pressure on me. *I will not say anything about the secret service. State secrets. I am strong.* The minutes are ticking away. The nurse twists his signet ring around on his finger. Finally, the psychiatrist breaks the silence. “It’s OK, we’ll come back later,” he says.

The nurse and the psychiatrist go to another room to discuss my needs. I feel that they want to test me, too. *Why aren’t we allowed to join them? Have they been hired by the secret service?* While the psychiatrist and the nurse discuss my mental health in another room, I look through the open door and see a colourful and diverse group of mental health caregivers walking along the corridor. *The AIVD probably selected them because our political party manifesto took the theme ‘diversity’ into account! They want to see if I notice. Apparently, the AIVD won’t leave me alone, not even when I’m in hospital.*

After a while, the nurse and the psychiatrist return and the psychiatrist says to me, “We think you are experiencing psychosis.”

I do not answer.

Then the psychiatrist continues, “We suggest that you get treatment here in the Rembrandthof. Then you will get a psychiatrist assigned to you...”

I hear his words in the background. I stare at the door to see who else the AIVD has selected to walk by.

Then the psychiatrist continues, “You had better take antipsychotics. One milligram per day to start with. It takes approximately three to four weeks for the medicine to work.”

Because I still don’t react, he concludes, “I hope you get well soon, May-May.”

Vince shakes hands with the psychiatrist and the nurse.

I follow him as he walks out of the building and towards his car.

. . .

That evening, Vince encourages me to take my medication. I go upstairs. I don't like taking medication. I look in the mirror and swallow a pill. I walk around in our bedroom and look through the window over our green lawn and the enormous red beech tree in the corner of the garden. Underneath the red beech tree is a wooden bench where Vince and I love to sit. After a while, I feel as though a little explosion takes place in my head. I can't stand on my feet anymore and lie down on the bed immediately.

The next day I plan to take the 8.21 train, but I oversleep. As I arrive at the train station at 9.30, I smell alcohol. When I turn around I see a man with a flushed face and an almost empty bottle of red wine in his hand. The AIVD probably put this man there to show me how I could end up. A shiver runs down my spine.

Then the train comes rolling in. As I board, I catch sight of the *Metro* magazine lying on a table. My eye is attracted to an article about saving the human brain on digital software so that people can live after their death. An incredible fear takes hold of me, because this would mean that there are not enough bodies. *Will they kill poor people in order to make sure that there are enough bodies for rich people? Will I be murdered?*

While I'm in shock, a woman sits down opposite me. She has a long blonde ponytail and draws my attention to another article in *Metro* about the sunken city Atlantis. I ask if her predecessors come from Atlantis. I make a joke about it. We laugh about it. I laugh very loudly. As I walk to the university, I wonder if somebody had actually been sitting in front of me on the train. *Did I imagine it all? Had I been laughing on my own on the train?* There is no-one I can talk to about it and my phone is being tapped by the AIVD.

When I arrive at the university, the idea that people will be killed because of the lack of bodies pops up again. I try to hide this as best as I can from Jane. I mention to Theo that I need to take my medication and that it makes me feel drowsy. I cannot concentrate and invent some jobs to help me get through the day.

After work, I pick Noah up from day care. As soon as I enter the day care, I nearly stumble over a knee-high toy police car. The association with the police – even if it is just a toy – makes me think of the AIVD. The AIVD probably parked that toy car there to show that they are watching me.

I keep on having these kinds of experiences, but not so often. Gradually, the medication starts to work.

After three weeks of taking my medication I say to Vince, “If I’m being spied on by the secret service, Wouter Bos knows more about it. Or he should know, and I could ask him. He is our political leader.”

“Darling, you are not being spied on by the secret service.”

“I am going to e-mail Wouter Bos.”

“Darling...” then my husband suddenly gives up. “OK, if it helps you, why not.”

I e-mail Wouter Bos, asking him if it is possible that the secret service is monitoring me without being too explicit. Instead of simply denying or confirming it, he responds quickly along the lines of: “What can I do for you?”. Suddenly – probably in combination with the medication – I realize I’m wrong.

“Vince, Wouter answered immediately.”

“What did he say?” asks Vince.

“He wondered if he could do something for me...”

There is a moment of silence between us. Vince looks at me with hope.

Then I softly say, “I am... I am not being spied on by the secret service.”

“Yes, that’s what I was trying to tell you,” says my husband gently.

“My mind just played tricks on me.”

“It’s OK, my darling.”

He gives me a hug. I settle down in the warmth of his arms. We are both very relieved that the psychosis is over.

Despite the medication, powerful images in newspapers sometimes strike me, such as the photo of the execution of Saddam Hussein. *You wanted this*, pops into my mind. In fact, I was against Saddam Hussein because he had killed some 5,000 Kurds in a chemical-weapon attack. This is why I had advocated for regime change at political party meetings. But seeing images of his execution doesn’t give much pleasure either. The thought enters my mind that the newspaper wants to tell me that I cannot bear the burden of being responsible for violence.

Due to the medication, and maybe also due to my illness, I'm not as lively and active as I once was. I lack energy and become very quiet. Although I used to sing for Noah when he was a baby, I hardly have the energy to do that anymore, or to let him go 'horse-riding' on my back. I can hardly run. So I stop running with Vince – we used to go on long runs in the forest together – and I start running on my own. I need to stop ten times along the path we used to run as a warm-up. This makes me feel sad. Because I am so ill I don't notice that Vince is having a hard time too. He needs to look after me, and I am vaguely aware that he calls me 'darling' less often than before. One morning in bed I feel my husband softly shaking me, saying, "Come on, wake up May-May. It's eight o'clock. You're late for work!"

"What?"

"Wake up! You're late."

"I feel so sleepy."

This type of situation starts occurring more often. I can hardly read anymore, so I can't do my academic work. I have a room on my own now and lock the door. The whole day I literally stare out of the window, waiting for inspiration to come. I'm feeling too ashamed to tell my boss. Since I have submitted a lot of articles, and because it takes a long time before they are published, my colleagues don't notice this immediately.

One day I'm staring out of the window and my boss Theo comes in. "Hello, can I come in?"

"Yes."

"Are you feeling OK?"

"Well..."

Theo looks at me intensely.

"Not so well."

"Why don't you go on sick leave? Have a break?"

"Well. I don't know."

"I see you, along with René and Pamala, as our future professors, you know. You may need some rest."

"No, no. Thank you. I'm not ill," I answer quickly.

I stare at my screen. I feel honoured that Theo sees me as a future full professor. At the same time, I doubt whether this will ever happen. I have no energy. I feel sleepy the whole morning and I can't concentrate. My head doesn't 'bubble' with ideas anymore, and I don't know if that will ever change. I think back to my youth. When we were young my



mother always said, “If you are not lying in bed, you can’t be ill.”. I am not in my bed, therefore I can’t be ill.

I had hardly ever heard of mental health issues before I became ill. Deep down I know I am ill, but I feel so ashamed that I don’t even dare to talk about it with Theo.

One day, Theo sends me to the company doctor, who asks me why I am so vague. I explain that this is due to the side effects of the medication.

I start to feel useless at university. It hurts me a lot to realize this. After staring out of the window for 18 months, it occurs to me that I can no longer do my academic work and that I need to find a more practical job. I have to throw up at the idea of having to quit my job. I had worked there for ten years and leaving academia is hard for me. I enjoyed working with theories, applying statistics, the discussions with colleagues about the world around us, and the international contacts with colleagues who are working in another part of the world on the same topic as myself. Additionally, I feel a bit as though I have let my father down. I will not become his successor. I know that he doesn’t mind. He said to me and my sister when we were young that we could choose any job we liked. It was fine wherever we chose to work, whether this was in a bakery or in the open air, as long as it made us happy.

The dynamic world of television attracts me. I apply for a job as an editor on the television programme *The Lie Rules* at the VARA broadcasting company. The television programme investigates complaints about the media. I get the job, and I’m excited and ready for a new challenge. I buy a new outfit, a fancy sky-blue shirt and a miniskirt with a fine blue pinstripe, leaving my dark suits and blouses for what they are. The editorial office is located in the VARA building at the Mediapark. I have a new position: I will be visiting events which may be interesting for our programme.

The television world is as dynamic as I imagined. I work in a team of enthusiastic editors, with phones ringing constantly. Felix Meurders, the anchorman, is an amiable man who is well respected. When he enters the editorial office for our Monday editorial meeting, people get a chair for him immediately and offer to get him a drink.

I follow the news with great dedication. I have never watched so

much television in my life. I enjoy my work, but I suffer from headaches every day. I don't dare to talk about it, afraid that I will get fired. One of my contributions is to invite an internationally renowned AIDS expert to the studio. During our pre-interview discussion he asks me how I ended up in the television world after being in academia. I appreciate his interest and tell him in brief about my switch to the television world. During the television programme, he makes an interesting statement about the coverage of AIDS. He debates with the chief editor of the *NRC Handelsblad* newspaper under supervision of the anchorman and argues why he thinks that the opinion editorial piece *AIDS epidemic in Africa is deceit* shouldn't have been published in *NRC Handelsblad*. The 25 million AIDS victims in Africa touch his heart. The spirited debate between the two gentlemen ends up in reconciliation. The programme's editor in chief and the other editors are enthusiastic about this item at the evaluation and I glow with pride. The rest of my contributions to the programme are modest: my ideas do not fit with those of the rest of the editorial team. At the end of the season my position is abolished, and my contract is not renewed.

During this period, I often eat out with my family at the local pancake restaurant. I love being there with them. One beautiful sunny evening we are having dinner outside with Vince, Noah, my father and his wife. Noah has his own pancake, but he grabs the fries off my plate instead.

"Noah fries," he says. He is so cute.

"Yes darling, I see. You're stealing my fries."

We are all laughing. At these moments I feel intense love for my family. I may not be good at my work and I may not have much energy and I may have gained weight thanks to the medication – I'm feeling wounded – but I love my family with all my heart.

What I do not realize is that slowly – without me being aware of it – the very tight and intense love bond between Vince and myself has been ripped apart by my illness. I'm so busy fighting my illness that I don't notice at all how my strange and unpredictable behaviour, my quietness, my absence and my weight gain are driving Vince and me apart. We have known each other for 15 years and love each other so much, but we are gradually blown away by the enormous storm.

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## FOREST FIRES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Luckily, I quickly find a new job as PR consultant at an Iranian news organization. Shahrzad News is an Iranian news organization giving Iranian women a voice in the media. Mina Saadadi is the editor in chief there. She is from Iran. I admire her courage and the efforts she is making for Iranian women. I get tasks such as writing press releases, maintaining external relations and the distribution of the glossy magazine *Iran* that is published by Shahrzad News. We work in the building of Radio Netherlands Worldwide. I share a room with another colleague. There are times when there is no work, however.

I have been taking medication for two years when I visit my psychiatrist. I visit her regularly, and have told her everything about my thoughts about the AIVD in Cuba and then later at home. She is a kind, smart woman, approximately 45 years old. She has brown hair in a long bob and kind brown eyes.

“May-May, how are you feeling?”

“Bad. I have headaches.”

“They may be due to something other than your illness or the medicines.”

“I also can’t wake up in the morning. When I’m awake I feel dizzy. I’ve

gained a lot of weight, 40 pounds... I have no energy... I can't do any physical exercise anymore."

"The good thing is that the medicine helped you out of your psychosis. This is a tough period for you, May-May."

"How much longer do I have to take these pills?"

"If we take into account your first mild psychosis in Cuba, this is your second bout of psychosis. I would say for another five years, maybe ten."

"What?! That long?"

"Yes, otherwise the psychosis may return."

"I can't cope with the pills. I want to stop."

"That means that your psychosis could come back."

"I have no other choice."

My psychiatrist wants me to continue taking the medication, but because she knows how I'm struggling with the side effects, I lower the dose with her permission.

Before I got ill, I used to work in the evenings. In order to stop me getting ill again and to give myself some rest, I don't do much in the evenings any more after putting Noah to bed. I usually just lie on the couch. One evening, Vince walks towards me from our home office.

"Jay and Ivy want to join us when we go on holiday to South Africa," he says.

Jay is an old student friend of his and he is married to Ivy. They have a son who is approximately the same age as Noah.

"That's an excellent idea. They're very kind. I'm looking forward to going to South Africa again and meeting Alice and Pearl. Pearl is doing so much good work for kids in the soup kitchen."

"And I've got good news... We've got our permanent visas for South Africa! Once I sell my company, we're going to live there, honey."

"OK," I answer cagily. I'm not too happy about this. I don't feel well and will miss my family and friends. Vince doesn't seem to notice, however. Or he doesn't want to notice. He's already thinking about our holiday again.

"I know your nurse said that you may develop psychosis again and that it might not be such a good idea, but I really want to go to South Africa."

"Oh... Let's watch *Searching for Evita* together."

"No, I have to work." And he walks back to the office.

I stare at the television on my own. On the screen I see a blonde

woman with her hair tied in a knot. I miss Vince's company, and a tear runs down my face. I vow to talk about 'us' as soon as his business has been sold.

Vince is determined to go to South Africa and I will follow him. I'm too sick to reflect upon my situation. Moreover, I know Vince has to work hard. One evening, just before we are due to leave for our holiday, I try to pack my suitcase. I try for an hour, but I just can't concentrate. My head's too busy.

*What do I need to take when I go? Socks? Where are they? What else do I need? Socks? Socks? More socks? Underwear? These knickers, the white ones, the blue ones? Socks?"*

I'm tired. *"Do I need socks? I already have socks. I'm tired. So tired. It costs me too much energy. What do I need? Socks? What else?"*

My husband comes home.

"Why haven't you packed your suitcase yet?"

"I need some help," I say, embarrassed.

"You need some help?"

"Yes," I mumble.

"Let me help you," says Vince as he starts packing my suitcase. In a quarter of an hour he's finished. I'm grateful to him.

Just before we fly out to South Africa, I attend a political party meeting in which the politicians all seem to me to be actors. It's as if they are not real and are performing to see how I will react. I address a question to a Dutch Member of Parliament who has written a report about integration. I point out to him that we shouldn't speak about Moroccan youths as "little pests". His reaction is assertive – aggressive almost – and I assume he's putting on an act. Another Member of Parliament, whom I know, seems so sleepy that I'm convinced he's a look-a-like, an actor. Deep down I know that I need to call the Rembrandthof, but I'm afraid that my medication will be increased and that I will suffer from the side effects, so I don't. At least I have got some more energy now and I'm feeling some emotions again.

. . .

Days after that strange political party meeting, we are due to leave for South Africa. I reason that Vince's old student friend Jay planned our holiday. Seeing that it is just after the strange political party meeting, I assume that Jay was involved in it and that he is working as a secret agent for the secret service.

I suspect that Frans, my mother's partner, is also working for the secret service. My mother had been on her own for a long time. She started dating when I was being spied on in Cuba. Her partner at that time would talk about "his wife" when he meant his former wife. I reasoned that he was still actually married and that he was dating my mother so that he could watch me because I'd found out about the secret agents in Cuba, which was top secret. After they split up, my mother found a new partner, Frans. He is a real estate agent and an insurance agent, but I decide that he probably works for the secret service, too, as an informant.

Just before we leave for South Africa, my mother gives me a green watch and a wooden puzzle for Noah. "From me and Grandad Frans," she says.

*From Grandad Frans, I think to myself. This means that Noah has been given a watch from the secret service. The puzzle is probably for mental training, so that he can become a secret agent later too.*

When we arrive at Cape Town airport, Vince, Noah and I are allowed to take the customs route for residents of South Africa. Ivy, Jay and their son follow the route for tourists. Although I'm happy we don't have to stand in line, it makes me aware of the fact that one day we will be living in South Africa. I'm already missing my family.

Vince's sister Alice greets us when we arrive at the airport. "How are you?" she asks.

"Yes, we're good," says Vince, giving her a kiss on the cheek. "Good to see you again. How are you?"

"Fine. But there are a lot of forest fires at this time of year."

I become suspicious. Does this mean that I am going to be trained to respond to a fire? No-one seems to notice the expression on my face.

"We would like to visit Robben Island and the soup kitchen," says Ivy, touching her chest with her hand, a habit of hers. "Is that possible?"

“Yes, of course,” says Alice. “We’ll go to the soup kitchen this afternoon.”

This time we are not staying in the main house but in one of the bungalows, which is situated among low bushes. Jay, Ivy and their son Jerry, Vince, Noah and me are all staying in the same bungalow. After we’ve taken a moment to enjoy the view of the hills and the distant sea, we unpack.

In the afternoon we visit Sir Lowry’s Pass village, a township. We take Noah with us, while Jerry stays at home with Alice. We are now approaching Pearl’s house. There are loads of children outside. Their clothes aren’t very clean, and many of them have no shoes. But they seem happy and they are inquisitive. As soon as she sees our car, Pearl rushes outside and gives me a hug. “Vince, May-May, how good to see you! Noah, you’re such a big boy now!!” says Pearl, gently squeezing Noah’s cheek with her fingers. Meanwhile, the children of the village are getting their food. Vince has Noah on his arm in the soup kitchen while he dishes up food for the children. Jay is taking photos, and Ivy is handing balloons to the children, sending them into ecstasy.

“May-May, I know you do a lot for the children too.”

“Thank you Pearl, thank *you*. You are the one who is doing the work. Taking care of the children. Vince and his parents and sister are also doing a lot.”

“Yes, God bless them.”

I look at the children. An older girl is helping her younger brother to eat. All the children make sure that they finish their food. When they are done, we help Pearl with the washing up.

As we get back from Pearl’s home and drive to the main lodge, Alice walks towards us. She’s always very calm, but I can see that something is worrying her. “The forest fires are coming closer,” she says, her hands on her waist.

“Well, let’s see how long we can stay here,” says Vince.

We continue to our bungalow.

Alice warns us that we should be careful where we walk because there are snakes around.

I'm standing outside with Jay. We can see pieces of soot floating in the air. Jay smiles at me as if he is used to this sort of situation and says, "The fire is coming really close. What do you think?"

I get the feeling I'm being tested. They want to see if I can keep cool while facing the fire that's approaching. But I'm tough. I answer light-heartedly, "Time to have a Diet Coke."

We go inside for a drink. Jay has a beer and I have a Diet Coke. We raise our glasses and toast to our holiday.

During the afternoon, the fire gets closer. I'm having a psychotic episode. I assume that it's important that the other guests of the lodge stay. I go to the nearest bungalow and knock on the door.

An elderly man answers the door and invites me to come in.

"Hello, I'm May-May," I say.

"I'm Mr. Green," says the man.

An elderly woman, Mrs. Green I assume, is watching television and I'm distracted by the flickering of the screen.

"Can you please turn the television off?" I ask politely.

The lady walks towards the television – she walks with some difficulty – and turns the television off.

"Are you from the park?" asks Mrs. Green.

"Yes, I am. Well in fact, I'm Alice's sister-in-law."

"Ah. I see," says Mr. Green.

"You can stay in your lodge."

"But the fires are coming so close," says Mr. Green.

"Yes, but that's normal at this time of year."

"Are you sure?" asks Mrs. Green.

"Yes," I say.

Then I leave. I can hear the noise of the fires in the background and see black clouds of ash getting closer.

In the evening, around 8.00 PM, the flames of the forest fires start getting extremely high – about five metres – and moving quickly in our direction. I go to Noah and the first thing I do is put his green watch on his wrist.

"This special watch will keep you safe, darling," I reassure myself.



*Mum has to rescue the people. A special helicopter team will rescue you if needed. They will trace you via the watch.*

“Do you think we are safe here?” asks Ivy.

Maybe because I’m a mother, too, she’s looking to be comforted. I am fearless, however. “Yes, we are,” I answer calmly.

But Vince and Jay insist on moving to the main lodge. We follow them. Noah and Jerry are in a deep sleep. We can see and hear the fires coming closer. The flames are getting dangerously close. We hear the sound of a branch snapping nearby. Vince starts screaming, “The fires are getting higher. We have to move. Move! Get out of here! Let’s go to the main house!”

“But Mr. Green and his wife are still in their cabin. I’ll call them!” I say, wanting to go to them.

“Are you crazy? We all have to go now before we get burned alive!” Vince seems to be losing control.

Just then, a car pulls up outside. I see Mr. and Mrs. Green inside and heave a sigh of relief. Mr. Green rolls down his car window and shouts. “Someone told us to go. The fires are getting really close now. We’re leaving!” And they drive off.

“We’re all going as well!” shouts Vince.

Alice and her husband get their computers from their office and we all drive off.

We go to a hotel near the bay and quickly go to bed. The next morning, when the six of us are having breakfast, Vince says, “I phoned Alice. The fires came very close to our cabin. It nearly caught fire.”

“Luckily, no-one was hurt and the buildings didn’t burn down,” says Ivy.

“Wow, that was close,” says Jay with a sigh and a slight smile on his face.

I don’t say anything. I am tough. I can stand these secret-service tests. It’s a shame they’re risking people’s lives and burning forests just to test me. To see if I am suitable to fulfil a position in Dutch national politics. How do they dare to do this? I think to myself.

That afternoon we visit Stellenbosch, a lovely town, famous for its carrot cake and for being home to the oldest university in South Africa. On one of our holidays, I had an appointment at Stellenbosch. They were

surprised that I had brought my doctoral dissertation for them. “Books are expensive,” they said. However, on this particular day there are six of us. Vince is holding Noah and we are holding hands. A dark-skinned South African man is sitting on the pavement. He doesn’t look as if he has a lot of money. He laughs out loud and says, “Wow, you are the future!”

I need to think about what he means. Then I realize that a fair-skinned man (Vince) and a half-Indonesian looking woman (myself) walking hand in hand may be a remarkable sight in South Africa in view of its history of apartheid and the fact that it wasn’t so long ago that mixed-race relationships were forbidden. I feel happy to show that love is always beautiful, to ‘be the future’.

In the middle of Stellenbosch, we visit Oom Samie se Winkel – ‘Uncle Sammie’s Shop’. The shop sells tea and sweets and has hardly changed since it was established in 1904. As we continue to walk around in Stellenbosch, we see a statue of a black panther. Jay points at it and says, “Look, a statue of a black panther. They are rare.” I look at the statue. *This is a message for me*, runs through my mind. I have done amazingly well in dealing with the fire... Jay works at the secret service and by pointing at the statue he means that *I* am a black panther with the secret service. I don’t consider how odd it is that, on one hand, the secret service spying on me drives me mad, yet at the same time I feel very proud to have been assigned one of their highest ranks. Some things are fluid when you are suffering from psychosis. Once everyone has walked away from the statue, I growl just like a black panther. “Grrrrrrrrrrr.” It’s a deep sound at the back of my throat. No-one hears it.

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## CLEANERS HAVE A HIGHER MORAL STANDARD

The following day we move on to our villa hotel apartments close to Cape Town, in Camps Bay. Jay and Ivy are amazed by how luxurious it looks: the swimming pool in the garden, the deluxe 'master bedroom' as Vince calls it, with a bubble bath, all overlooking the beautiful garden and Lion's Head mountain. "Wow," says Jay. "Well done, Vince."

Jay came along with us because he is a friend of Vince, but it's clear to me that Jay also has another task. I am still being tested by him, regardless of the fact that he also assigned me the highest rank of 'black panther'.

One day, we are about to leave for the beach. Jay, Ivy and Jerry are waiting outside, and Vince is in the corridor looking for his sunglasses. I am standing in front of the mirror, when I hear a voice saying, "*Panther, this afternoon we are going to train you a bit more.*"

"Are you coming?" asks Vince.

I am confused and need to clear my mind. "I... I... need a moment."

"OK, we'll go to the beach. See you later," says Vince. He goes off to the beach with Noah, Jay, Ivy and Jerry, leaving me on my own.

The voice in my head is gone now, but I can't concentrate on what I need for the beach. I pace up and down in the villa. Time passes. It's getting later and later. I'm scared that Vince, Noah, Ivy, Jay and Jerry will

be back before I have left. I recover and cram a white towel into a plastic 'Pick n Pay' shopping bag. I forget my bikini.

*I must not leave Vince and Noah on their own*, constantly runs through my mind as I walk out of the door.

When I get to the beach, I feel very tense. The secret service is watching me all the time now. *I am a panther. I can't find Vince and Noah. Where are they?*

The deckchairs have black painted signs on the back, a black circle with a stripe through it. *The secret service is warning me*, I think. *They want me to return*. I see more signs. A lot of signs. Every chair has a sign on its back. Every chair is warning me to go back. *"I will not return. I will not. I will find them."* I tell the secret service. *"You, you cannot keep me away from Vince and Noah. I will find them!"*

I fight my way through the chairs, the signs warning me all the time to go back. But I keep on going. I feel relieved when I see the faces of Vince and Noah among the other people sitting on the beach. I've made it. But for how long? Vince seems to notice that something is not OK.

"There you are. What took you so long? What's the matter?"

As usual, I do my very best not to reveal anything about the secret service or about how the secret services are pressuring me. I can't say anything.

"Nothing. I'm OK," I mumble.

"We're going home in a few minutes. We just bought some drinks. You can get one at the restaurant or from the man on the beach."

All kinds of thoughts are running through my mind now: *"We can easily put poison in your drink, you know that. You have to choose between getting your drink from the waiter in the restaurant and the poor man with his cool box on the beach. Who are you going to choose?"*

"OK," I say to Vince. And then I go to the man on the beach.

He looks very poor. He has a dark skin and is very likely a refugee.

"Can I... Can I have some water, please?"

He gives me a bottle of water. I notice he gives me a kind look. I know my duty. I will drink the water. Find out if it's poisoned or not. I bring the bottle to my lips. I take some gulps and feel the water glide down my throat. It's fresh and cold. It is not poisoned. It feels like the beginning of the Earth. The source of existence. I smile to myself. I will not die this time.

The man's eyes tell me that he has been through a lot. But he has

kept his heart for humanity. He is not bitter and still wants the best for everyone. Including rich people who could easily help him. He is selling his drinks in the hot sun, carrying his heavy cool box. He has no money for sunglasses and is often ignored or sometimes even chased away.

I smile at him again. We share a certain understanding.

Vince walks towards me. “We’ll go home now, take a shower and go out to do the shopping.” I follow him home. I’m glad he is carrying Noah because I’m feeling too weak to do it myself. I can’t concentrate either.

In a few moments we’re all back in our apartment and sitting in the living room. Alice and her husband Ivan have come over to join us. Dahlia – an older lady – and another cleaner are cleaning the villa. Dahlia once told me that she and the other cleaner came from the Eastern Cape province. They needed to leave their children behind with Grandma in order to be able to work in Camps Bay. While Dahlia and the other lady are working very hard, Alice, Ivan, Jay, Ivy and Vince look happy, and the children are crawling across the floor. I am feeling uncomfortable. I am keeping a big secret from them. We have a drink and we all toast each other – but I feel I don’t belong here. I feel alienated, as if I don’t deserve to be in such affluent surroundings. As if I am not really part of the group. While the rest of the group are taking a shower or going for a walk, I visit Dahlia, looking for support. I walk towards her. She lays her cleaning cloth aside and calmly looks at me. “Hello, May-May.”

A voice in my head is talking to me now. *“May-May, you know that you must keep silent about your work for us. You also know what will happen to you if you don’t.”*

“Dahlia, Dahlia... I feel so... so...”

“So?”

“So frightened.”

Dahlia’s big dark eyes look anxiously towards me. “What’s the matter?”

*“Be silent!”* shouts a voice from the AIVD.

“I cannot tell you.”

“Does Vince know?”

“No, he doesn’t.”

“Come on, go and tell him... He’s your husband, my dear.” Dahlia touches my arm gently.

“I can’t... I can’t,” I mumble.

I leave Dahlia and go to the bedroom. I ignore the stunning view over Lion's Head and the white satin sheets of our freshly made bed. Vince is in the shower. I notice that there are a lot of coins lying beside the bed.

"Vince?"

He turns the shower off.

"These coins. These coins. Vince, please pick up the coins."

"Why?"

"The cleaners... They are so poor."

"Don't worry. They know that if they steal anything they'll get fired."

Vince walks away.

I mumble to myself, "The cleaners cannot be with their children. Can't raise them. They don't steal. Not even one coin... Not even one coin... We are so rich compared to them. They have a higher moral standard than we have. A higher moral standard..."

The secret I wanted to share so desperately still lies deeply hidden. I shiver and go to the kitchen to make myself a cup of tea to get some warmth. I am cold due to my lack of sleep. The secret service is instructing me all the time. Via telepathy, via what other people say, via television, via newspapers, via the people in the street spying on me, via billboards, via the signs on the beach chairs, via trucks. Via everything. I can't tell anyone about it. It is more than exhausting. Without realizing it, I am very scared and struggling on my own all the time to survive.

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## HELICOPTERS ABOVE THE VILLA

I stand in front of the mirror and look at my face. I see dark brown hair and brown almond-shaped eyes. I see a birthmark by the left corner of my right eye. I comb my hair straight back and tie it in a ponytail with a black organza elastic. Then I look in the mirror again. *My face, is this my face?* I am thinking of the statue. *I am a black panther.*

Vince is standing in the doorway. He says, “May-May are you coming? We’re going shopping.”

I didn’t realize we were going out. I reply, “I... I’m not coming. I’m not feeling too well.”

“OK. Jay and Ivy are waiting. They have Jerry with them. I’ll take Noah with me. We’ll be home soon.”

The door closes with a bang, and they’re gone.

I would have preferred Vince and Noah to stay at home.

I pace up and down in the living room as I hear the cars drive off, tyres screeching. I’m on my own and even more frightened. My fears grow as I hear the noise of helicopters. It’s as if they are circling above the villa. The whirring sound is loud and constant.

*The helicopters. The helicopters are coming. THE HELICOPTERS WILL BOMB THE HOUSE!!* I am petrified. Instinctively, I sit down on the floor in the middle of the room with my knees under my chin and my arms

wrapped around my knees. This way I have the smallest chance of getting hit if a bomb is dropped on the house. I wait and wait for minutes which seem like hours. Finally, I hear the whirring sound of the helicopters recede into the distance. A while later Vince, Noah, Jay, Jerry and Ivy return. As soon as I hear them arrive, I get up. I don't want them to know that there's something wrong with me. *I am strong, I am fine!*

Nevertheless, Vince notices that there is something wrong. "Are you OK?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine."

"We're going home tomorrow."

Vince gives me another look. I return his look, wide-eyed. I'm scared.

"You should see your psychiatrist again."

Vince walks to our bedroom. "Take your pills! Take them!" he shouts, holding the medication up in the air.

I lower my face.

That evening we all go out for dinner. There are men standing outside the restaurant dressed in black. Black, the colour of death. *They will kill me if I say the wrong thing.* The waiter seats us at a table near the window. I can see the men in black standing outside. *If I give a wrong answer to one of the questions that Jay asks me, I will get shot. In front of everybody.* I feel so terrified that I can't say anything. The waiter is wearing a white shirt with black trousers, with a white apron. This means I will be safe with him, until he takes off his apron. That is probably a signal. The men outside are walking up and down and Jay is talking to Vince and asking me questions.

"What did you do when we were shopping, May-May?" Jay asks kindly. He is a master secret agent.

"I... I... can't answer," I mumble.

"Oh," he says.

Vince, Jay and Ivy continue their conversation.

*Will I be shot?* I think to myself.

"What do you want to do tomorrow?" Jay asks.

"Tomorrow. Tomorrow. I don't know," I mumble. *Is this the right answer? I wonder. Or will I be sh...? Will I...?*

Apparently, Jay has asked me another question, because he seems to be waiting for an answer.



“Need to go to the toilet...” I murmur.

As I enter the toilet, I see that all the doors are black. It puzzles me, it is too much.

Luckily, in the toilet, Ivy comes up to me.

“Are you OK?” Ivy looks truly worried, she shows that she cares about me.

“I am not... not.”

“What’s the matter?”

“The secret service. Outside.”

“What?”

“Can’t answer... Can’t answer... Afraid.”

“Afraid? Are you afraid?”

I nod slightly in confirmation.

“Do you want to go home?”

“Yes, yes. I want to go home,” I say quietly.

“No problem, we’ll all go home then,” says Ivy.

I feel slightly relieved.

When we are all back in our villa, I can relax a bit. But the AIVD keeps on chasing me. On the flight home the next day, I close my eyes and hold my breath as we take off.

Vince snaps at me, “There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Before we land, I have the idea that our plane is being accompanied by two F16 fighter jets, as a tribute to me from the secret service. I don’t say anything about it to Vince, he won’t understand.

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## MISSION WORLD PEACE

As soon as we arrive home, Vince encourages me to visit my psychiatrist again. Vince's mother, Dewi, accompanies me. Back at the Rembrandthof, I study the inner courtyard as we go up the glass staircase. It's empty this time.

The psychiatrist invites us into her office. She looks at me reassuringly. "I heard you have been having these ideas about the secret service again?"

"Well. Sort of," I reply. I don't want to talk about it.

"Yes, she was very frightened again when they were in South Africa," says Dewi.

"I propose that we scale up your medication again." My psychiatrist looks at her computer to see what my current dose is and how much she will increase it by.

"But they make me feel sick," I say, with a tremor in my voice, feeling weak.

"I think the side effects are mainly in your head. It's better for you," my psychiatrist says firmly.

The rest of the conversation I hardly reply. I know that Dewi and Vince are on the side of my psychiatrist. They don't understand me. I sigh. I feel so alone.

. . .

Back home, Dewi takes care of us. We go to the supermarket in the neighbouring town where she lives to do shopping for dinner. She makes our dinner because she knows that I am too weak. I'm grateful she's helping us. After that she goes home to her husband.

I am waving her goodbye from the window in the living room, as the thoughts in my head are saying: *"Go upstairs to find your new mission."* I obey and go upstairs to the room above the kitchen. Right in front of me I see the calendar we were given as a present on our wedding day. Every guest decorated a page with their birthday. When I pick up the calendar it opens at 31 January. I see the photo of William in his diving suit in the sea.

*"William. Saskia's boyfriend. His wish is to have world peace. Is that my mission?"*

"Yes," answers the voice in my head.

I go downstairs, and pace up and down in the living room. Achieving world peace will be my new mission.

That night, when I'm in my nightgown alone in my bathroom, I take just half the prescribed dose. No-one really understands how the medication makes me both better and terribly sick at the same time. It's a lonely journey. I feel isolated from my loved ones both by my illness and by the medicine.

The next morning, Vince, Noah and I are sitting at the table. I am reading the newspaper. I see an article about a Dutch minister, Bert Koenders, accompanied by his photo. I know him a little, he has a passion for Africa and we belong to the same political party. I once interviewed him on the theme of development aid when I worked at the university. The interview mentions that he is single.

The voice of the secret service in my head says, *"You should fall in love with him."*

"No," I say to the voice in my head. "I love Vince and Noah."

*"You should save the world with him."*

"No, I won't."

*"He is your fellow secret agent partner. You must leave your family."*

Vince takes Noah upstairs.

The voice in my head keeps repeating that I must leave my family in

order to save the world. This makes me so sick that I have to throw up in the sink. I shout, “No. No! I will not leave my family! I will not!”

I clean everything.

When Vince comes down he doesn't notice anything.

I make tea for myself because I feel so cold all the time.

Over the next couple of months, the voice in my head keeps on repeating that I should look for my fellow secret agent partner Koenders.

One day, Vince's parents come by. Vince's father, Kees, is wearing an orange winter scarf.

*Orange. The colour of the Dutch royal family... Kees belongs to the secret service too, I think.*

“We went for a walk to the Nature Monuments Foundation,” says Kees.

*Nature Monuments Foundation, I puzzle. Kees wants me to meet my fellow secret agent at the Nature Monuments Foundation.*

“It was lovely there. We had a coffee and saw the visitor centre,” continues Dewi, Vince's mother, but I hardly hear her.

“Tomorrow, Saturday, Adrian and Selma will be visiting us,” continues Kees.

*OK, so Kees wants me to go to the Nature Monuments Foundation on Saturday to meet Bert Koenders, I think. I am not in love with Bert, but I will be there. We will work on our mission to achieve world peace.*

On Saturday, as soon as Vince and Noah have gone out, I head out to the Nature Monuments Foundation. I am wearing my dark-blue suit with a thin white pinstripe. They have their headquarters in the forest close by. I feel too shaky to go cycling or by car, so I call a cab. As I am browsing through the Yellow Pages, I wonder, what cab shall I take? When I see the word ‘Speed’ I decide to call them. The secret service will know that I travel fast.

A while later I arrive at the stately grey office of the Nature Monuments Foundation. I am impressed by the building. At either side there are two smaller grey buildings. The main building is probably the building in front of me. I cross the round forecourt and enter through the dark-green door.

“Hello, can I help you?” asks the lady at the counter. She is wearing pearl earrings and a dark-blue scarf around her neck.

“Yes. I have an appointment. Can I come through?”

“Can you give me the name of the person you want to talk to?”

“I have an appointment with Mr. Koenders,” I say.

“Mr. Koenders? I don’t see his name here.”

“Oh, OK. I must have made a mistake,” I say and walk away.

I wonder why Bert is not there. I don’t have the energy to ask in more detail, and I doubt that he is actually there, which is why I leave quickly. Luckily, my taxi is still waiting, and the driver doesn’t ask any questions about my short stay. On the way back I see a truck drive by with the name ‘Bos’ (‘forest’ in Dutch). I assume that the leader of my political party – whose family name is Bos – is supporting me. This makes me happy. He knows that I’m doing my best.

When I go to sleep that night, from my bedroom window I see a truck with the word ‘Goodnight’ driving by. How sweet, I think. Bert is wishing me goodnight.

A couple of minutes later I see a truck on the other side of the road with the text ‘Shhh’. This means that I have to keep silent. “*I will obey,*” I say to myself.

I don’t remember how, but during those months, Vince found out that I was starting to like Bert. I probably just told him. It’s not a problem for Vince; he is used to my innocent infatuations. During our holiday in Belize a couple of years earlier I was attracted to a young man from Norway. I spoke to Vince about it. I was a bit scared about how he would react, because I didn’t want to hurt him. I was surprised that he made fun of it. “Your Norwegian Viking” he called him, and I had to laugh about it too. It made our bond even more intense. It seemed that nothing could come between us. Our love was so deep, it could withstand my occasional superficial attraction to other men easily. However, this time it was different...

One day, Vince comes into the living room and says, “Let’s go to the garden centre.”

I’m still feeling sick. The secret service is still telling me to leave my family and save humanity with Bert. I get so sick that I throw up in the sink again. As before, I clean everything up so that no-one notices.

Vince, Noah and I are in the car driving towards the garden centre when we pass a field. We hear the noise of propellers in the air and as we look up we see a fluorescent yellow helicopter in the process of landing.

“Heli...opter,” says Noah.

“Wow,” says Vince. “There’s been an accident. It’s a rescue heli.”

“Heli,” repeats Noah.

Vince parks the car along the road and for a few seconds we watch the helicopter. The voice in my head says, *“This is because of you, you want to stay with your family. People are dying you see. You need to save people, save the world.”*

I get the message. I want to save humanity.

As soon as we are home, I go upstairs to the bedroom and pack my suitcase.

“What are you doing?” says Vince.

“I am leaving you,” I say as firmly as I can.

“Leaving us?”

“Yes.”

“But...”

I walk downstairs, open the messy drawer of our white rustic-style closet and move my sunglasses out of the way. I quickly find my passport.

Vince follows me, leaving Noah alone for a little while. Then he says with a trembling voice, “What about Noah? Can he stay with me? That’s all I want, OK?”

“Yes, that’s OK,” I answer determinedly.

“He can stay with me?” asks Vince, just to be sure.

“Yes, he can stay with you... I am going to my dad.”

I call my father to ask if he can pick me up.

Vince goes away with Noah so that they don’t have to watch me leave.

Before they go, I give Noah a kiss on his head. “Bye sweetheart, I love you. I must go. I will see you soon.”

Noah stretches his hands out towards me.

I give him a kiss on his hand. “See you, sweetheart.”

## FALLING IN LOVE WITH BERT

Gerard, my father, picks me up in his car. My father and I have a strong bond. He always encouraged me to take part in discussions at home with my sister when we were teenagers. We talked about all sorts of issues, things like: ‘are there more planets in the universe with life on them?’ and ‘how will it be possible to create peace between the Israelis and the Palestinian people?’ Although the piles of papers with their complicated formulas which were always littering his desk did not attract me to technology, I am sure that my father’s curiosity, his open attitude and his interest in ‘the truth’ aroused my interest in the social sciences.

Perhaps one of the most important lessons my father taught me was when I was around seven years old. We were visiting my father’s father. There were other visitors there. One of them was a young boy with Down syndrome. My sister and me noticed that he was different. But within minutes, my father and the boy were playing ‘being at the hairdresser’ and my father asked the boy how he wanted to have his hair done and started ‘cutting’. Without saying it directly, it became crystal clear to me that everyone deserves to be treated with love and respect. I deeply love my father. He is the best father I can imagine. That is why I appreciate him coming to pick me up at such a difficult moment in my life.

. . .

The journey to Delft, where I was born and where my father lives, takes an hour and a quarter. He's driving, and I'm sitting next to him. He is shocked by the news that I want a divorce but, as always, he is calm and understanding. "I didn't know that you were considering a divorce."

"No," I answer, while I see a car passing us with '24/7' written on it. I assume that I have to be on duty 24/7 as a secret agent.

"What about Noah?"

At the exact moment my father asks me this question, we overtake a truck with the family name 'Bos' on it. He understands my decision and encourages me in my aim to achieve world peace. Although it is very painful, I think getting a divorce is the right decision, if this can bring about world peace. So I answer, "He'll be fine, his father will take care of him."

A few minutes later we arrive at my father's apartment. His wife Rumiana is just back from Bulgaria, where she used to live before she met my father. She speaks Dutch with a Bulgarian accent, "How are you, May-May?" she asks me.

I just walk straight by.

Rumiana heaves a sad sigh and walks to the kitchen.

"We have prepared the guest room for you," my father says quickly, as we walk through the corridor to the guest room, where he removes the music stand for his saxophone. Their house is full of paintings because Rumiana is a painter. Her work expresses themes such as 'Mother Love' and the 'Connection of Human to Human'. They also have work from other artists hanging on the wall. My eye is attracted to a painting of a fat businessman eating a live duck. The painting hangs above the bed.

"What does that painting mean?" I ask my father suspiciously.

"I think that it criticizes people who only think about themselves. Like in the song *The Lonely Biker* by Boudewijn de Groot. He's singing that he wishes his son will not become a businessman with a thick skin."

He doesn't notice my suspicion. Thoughts are raging in my head. *They have put me in this room to show that Vince is on the wrong track. It is criticism, because he got rich... How unkind. Vince will always have a special place in my heart. Even if I have to fulfil a peace mission with someone else now.*

When I go to sleep, I hear the voice of Kees, Vince's father, in my



head: *“May-May, are you really willing to serve the Kingdom of the Netherlands? Save humanity?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“What is the code for me?”*

*“Iristambul.”*

*“Explain.”*

“I danced to the music of this Irish and Turkish band in Bulgaria in the amphitheatre in Plovdiv. Vince didn’t like it.”

Kees’s voice goes away. After a while it returns. *“Yes, I have checked it. There is a CD in your house with that title. In that case I declare the marriage of Vince and May-May dissolved. You will contribute to save humanity, save the world. I am also proud to serve the Kingdom of the Netherlands.”*

Kees’s voice disappears and I feel the presence of Bert. I start talking to him. “Now we can meet, Bert.”

*“Maybe you should ask me for my passport.”*

“Yes, so that I know that you are really Bert. Do you want to see mine?”

We both laugh.

I whisper to the couch, because I assume that there is a microphone in it.

“I hear your voice so clearly. This is an excellent system. You do not have to worry about losing a USB key. How does it work?”

*“I cannot explain it to you. That is top secret, darling.”*

I kiss Bert by kissing the couch. I feel his passionate tongue through the couch. After that I make love and have fun – with a person who’s not physically there – all night long.

As the first rays of sun peep through the window, and I hear a door bang shut, I realize that morning has come. My father’s neighbour is off to work. He probably belongs to the secret service and contributed to me being able to hear Bert’s voice.

I look down and discover that my tights are torn.

At breakfast in the living room I still feel that Bert is here. I try to conceal his presence. Sometimes I try to answer my father’s questions, but most of the time I am in my own world communicating with Bert. My father seems undisturbed. “I’m going to the university and Rumiana is going to her studio. What are you up to?”

“Clean your apartment. Then maybe go into the town centre,” I mumble. I can hardly concentrate.

My father leaves.

I talk to Bert and the secret service while I am cleaning the apartment. I am happy to do this for Rumiana, because she is allergic to dust, but it costs me a lot of energy. After hours of cleaning I go to the city centre in Delft where I spot a gift shop with the sign 'Gifts from the heart'. I want to give Bert a present from my heart and enter the shop. A lovely smell of roses floats towards me. There is a carousel full of cards, and a card with the picture of a deer with big Bambi eyes attracts my attention. I buy two presents for Bert. One is a painting of a red poppy in a black frame. The intense colours represent the secret service. Red stands for safety and black for the willingness to die in order to save humanity. Bert is willing to risk his life too. The other is a massage product accompanied by a green stone, 'Chinese Jade'. The voice of Bert's mother says to me, *"Oh darling, that is so sweet of you to buy presents for Bert. He is sensitive to rheumatism. That's an ideal present."*

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**POLICE!**

My father is in his office – which is adjacent to the living room – and Rumiana is preparing dinner in the open kitchen. We are eating stuffed aubergines with rice and salad. I am walking around in the living room, reading a comic featuring a man from The Hague, ‘Haagse Harry’, as its main character. I am enjoying it and laughing out loud.

“Funny?” asks Rumiana from the kitchen.

I don’t react to her question and start laughing even louder. I laugh incredibly loudly. I lean forward and the tears run over my face. My father and Rumiana don’t say anything. Suddenly I stop laughing. I get up and walk up and down the room. From the corner of my eye, I notice that Rumiana is watching me.

Then the doorbell rings.

“Ah, that’s Famke,” says my father as he walks to the door.

“Hi Dad. How are you?” says Famke.

They are in the hallway and I can hear them. My head is full of all kinds of thoughts like bees in a beehive.

“Hi Famke.”

“How is she doing?” whispers Famke to Gerard.

“Not OK.”

“May-May, shall we sit on the couch for a while?” asks Famke, as she enters the living room. I do as she says, seeking her comfort.

Then a while later, the AIVD pushes me to speak to her. “Maybe I will commit suicide,” I say to Famke, quietly.

Famke is shocked. “Oh,” she says and strokes my head. She pushes my head gently against hers.

I am forbidden to say anything more by the AIVD, so we sit together in silence for a while. Then a voice in my head says, “*May-May and Bert, come to the bedroom.*”

I obey and go to my bedroom.

I hear the voice again. “*Say: ‘I am a panther trained by the AIVD and I will protect the Kingdom of the Netherlands.’*”

I do as I am told and repeat out loud, “I, May-May Meijer, am a panther trained by the AIVD...” I feel that I have to pee, but since I am doing an assignment now, I decide that I can’t leave my spot. “... and will protect the Kingdom of the Netherlands,” I say, and pee on the floor.

Rumiana walks into the room. She is startled when she sees the wet patch on the carpet. “Oh, no. What did you do?!” she asks in her Bulgarian accent.

I hear her voice in the distance. I’m proud that I’m doing my job as a secret agent so well. The outside world doesn’t have to know anything about it. As a secret agent, I work behind the scenes. Rumiana cleans everything up while I go back to the living room. I don’t notice at all that everyone is having a very hard time with me. I am in my own world.

After a while, Rumiana calls us for dinner.

“Did you see your friends in Plovdiv, Rumiana?” asks my father.

“Yes, I Alexander see. Good time. And I Petra see. She two paintings of me sell to...”

Everyone holds their breath as I walk to the sink in the kitchen. I drink a lot of water. Every time I drink a glass of water I get an instruction from the secret service. “*If you can achieve world peace by drinking this glass of water, which we may have poisoned, will you drink it?*”

I drink the glass of water in one gulp and put it down with a loud bang. I am not afraid.

“*Do it again. We can poison you.*”

I know that I can easily be killed but I drink it again. I walk to the toilet, like a police officer. I have a goal. I am a panther, which is the highest rank in the secret service. I can kill and I will kill myself in order to achieve world peace. I go back to the dining table with the same determination as that of a secret agent. Famke goes outside, where I see

her making a phone call with a serious expression on her face. Once in a while she looks through the window towards me.

My father, Rumiana and Famke are sitting at the table in the living room. They look worried.

I hardly notice their presence, I am alone with the horrors in my head.

“I visited the market last Saturday,” says my dad, reaching for some nuts, which are his traditional dessert.

“Oh, how lovely,” says Famke.

“The man at the market asked me if I could guess how much the nuts weighed that I had scooped up. If I got it right, I could have them for free.” At this moment my father picks up his glasses case with ‘Jaguar’ written on it. He makes a sign with his hand as if he is weighing the nuts in his hand and counting how many handfuls he takes. To me his hand seems like a paw and it’s as though my father is a panther as well. The secret service is testing me, to see if I dare to attack my father to protect people.

“How did you do?” asks Famke.

“I guessed it was 300 grams. I was nearly right.” My father laughs. “I counted them. He’d asked me the same question the week before. That time I lost, but when I got home I counted the number of nuts and weighed them. This time, I counted the number of nuts in my hand – I took four in one hand – and counted until I had 24 nuts. That’s how many I’d had the previous week.”

They all laugh because my father estimated the correct weight. He is special.

The voice of the secret service says in my head, “*You see. Your father is a panther too. Do you dare to attack him in order to save people?*”

I immediately attack my father like a panther.

“Grrrrrrrrrrrr,” I growl and squeeze my fingers into claws and jump on him.

My father is shocked and pushes me aside. He looks confused.

Rumiana looks at him and strokes his head. He is not bleeding.

I hardly realize what’s happening. I am a panther, fighting to save humanity.

Famke grabs her phone and rushes outside to make a call.

I go to the toilet and hear the voice of the secret service in my head,

*“Show us that you are a panther. Do you dare to die to save the world, and how?”*

“Yes. Through him,” I say as I hit the wall with my fist. “That is the sign made by the man I saw on TV last night. He lives in a township in South Africa and mentioned that he can kill a child easily.” If I have to be killed, I would prefer to be killed by a ruthless stranger and not by someone I love.

I walk back to the living room. In the corridor, Famke is standing in my way.

The voice of the secret service in my head says, *“Your sister is getting in the way. What are you going to do?”*

I push my sister hard to pass her, she nearly falls on the floor. I walk on.

The secret service says, *“We trained you like a panther, didn’t we?”*

“Yes,” I answer firmly. I start drinking more water and throw the empty glasses on the floor. Then, with my arm, I brush all the glasses off the shelf in front of me to the floor. I hear the sound of glass shattering.

Famke is very alert and has her eyes wide open, with all that glass on the floor, the situation is getting dangerous.

Then suddenly the doorbell rings. A policeman and a policewoman enter the house.

I quickly scan the policeman and woman. They are wearing their uniforms and weapons, radiating alertness and power. The policeman has his eyes wide open. That’s a signal to me. He is challenging me. He asks if he can sit next to me and I say that he can, but I can’t really hear him anymore. I’m too distracted.

The voice of the secret service in my head says, *“You know what to do now.”*

I attack the policeman with all my strength, and growl at him.

The policewoman jumps backwards shouting, “Wow, just like a tiger!!”

The policeman frees himself.

The voice in my head says, *“Why do you do this; the police are your best friends.”*

As soon as I answer, “Yes,” the voice of the secret service shouts, *“Attack!!”*

I growl again and attack the policeman with all my force this time. I am a black panther going for the kill. Fighting to save humanity.

The policeman wrestles to get loose and finally succeeds in pushing my face hard against the couch. They handcuff me, and put something over my head so that I can't see anything. I have been arrested. The police officers take me outside and put me in a police van. My wrists and left arm hurt.

*"Don't resist, you belong to us, the Dutch intelligence service AIVD. Police officers are our colleagues and we are professionals."*

I am tough. They leave me alone for a moment. I use that time to tell my colleagues in the secret service my name, "May-May Meijer, born 14 February, 1972. My first name comes from the book *Tai-Pan* by James Clavell. My mother is Gaby van de Linde, she lives in Delft at Breeweg 67." The last two comments are an extra check to prove it is really me and not someone else who wants to use my identity. That is what we like at the secret service. Check, check, double-check.

I have just finished stating my identity when the police officers return to take me away.

The police van drives off at speed.

In a quarter of an hour we arrive at the police station in Delft. The policeman once again pulls something over my head and I have to walk backwards into the police station. This convinces me even more that I am a panther of the Dutch intelligence service. I need to be unrecognizable.

The police officers lead me to a cell. I meekly walk with them. The door slams shut as the officers walk away. The police cell looks just how you would imagine: concrete walls, a concrete bench and a toilet made of concrete.

It doesn't matter to me. I am tough, calm and professional. I work for the secret service. I lie on my back on the hard bench. The back of my head rests upon my folded arms and I have one leg across the other. In this position I stretch my stomach muscles. I feel good, lean, fit like a panther. I am wearing my beige sleeveless T-shirt which stretches around my breasts and a pair of tight jeans. Elite, tough and a woman.

The secret service says, *"You have to be strong."*

"I am strong," I answer. "I will stand up and fight. Like a man."

All of a sudden, I have to pee and decide to do it standing up in my cell. I am a man, a fighter. I am strong and tough even when I am locked up. My jeans get wet.

The voice of the secret service in my head says, *“Show us you are a panther.”*

I walk to the door and growl as hard and intensely as I can, using my right arm like a claw. “GRRRRRRRRRRR!” I am a black panther out to kill. I go back to the bench and lie down again.

Suddenly reality peeps through my psychosis. I realize that there is no way back and mumble, “My normal life will never come back. I used to be so good and now, look at me... locked up in a police cell.”

A policewoman comes in. “You’re probably cold with those wet jeans on. Shall I give you new ones?”

I gratefully accept her offer.

“A psychiatrist will come to talk with you,” she says, after she has given me a new pair of jeans. Then she leaves.

*“Psychiatrists, we don’t give them any information,”* says my boss at the Dutch intelligence service.

“Do you know what happened?” asks the psychiatrist a while later.

I look at him.

He is a middle-aged man with remarkably neat hair. He doesn’t look like a psychiatrist, more like a banker. He looks friendly.

“I attacked my father and a police officer.”

“Why did you do that?”

“It was my duty.”

“Who gave you this duty?”

“I can’t say.”

The psychiatrist continues to look at me, but I keep my mouth shut. Finally, he goes away and the door of my cell shuts with a bang.

I lie on my back again on the concrete bench and wait.

At 2.00 AM two officers come in. “You will be taken to GGZ Delfland Mental Hospital. The mayor has signed the document for you to be placed under detention.”

I realize that things are going seriously wrong. The mayor of Delft has signed a document which can be used to take me into custody!

*“Don’t worry, you are with us, the AIVD,”* says my boss.

Meanwhile, two ambulance staff lay me down on a stretcher. They strap me in completely. Three police officers watch as I’m loaded into the ambulance. My eyes search for the police officer I attacked, I wonder how he is doing. He isn’t there anymore. There are so many people



watching that I wonder if I am a serious danger to the public. Why are they staring at me?

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## HIGH CARE AT GGZ DELFLAND MENTAL HOSPITAL IN SCHIEDAM

It is the middle of the night.

“We have arrived at GGZ Delfland Mental Hospital.” The ambulance technician opens the doors of the ambulance and wheels me into the hospital. Ward 17. ‘High Care’.

It is quiet. Everyone is asleep, apart from the doctor on duty and two nurses. The doctor, a dark-skinned man, accompanies me to the office. He asks me a couple of questions. He also asks if I remember what happened.

“It was a bit stupid what I did,” I answer. I mean it, but it is also an expression used by Princess Maxima of The Netherlands. I assume that the psychiatrist will recognize this and that I am serving the Dutch intelligence service and that I had attacked my father and the police officer in order to save humanity.

“She can go to her room,” says the psychiatrist to the nurse after our short talk. Apparently, I gave the right answers despite my sleepiness.

Before I go to my room, a very friendly young male nurse gives me my medicine.

“*You know that this can be a suicide pill,*” says the boss of the secret service to me. “*A panther should always be prepared to die, even now.*”

I take a good look at the nurse. He is bald and has a kind face. He reminds me of my brother-in-law. I am a panther. I take the pill, look at the nurse and swallow it.

“Well done,” says the nurse. “You can go to sleep now, you must be tired.”

I go to my room. It’s a simple room containing a bed with a yellow-orange blanket on it, a small desk in the corner, a simple wardrobe and a sink with a mirror. It has a clinical look and it’s not much, but enough for the moment. I don’t dare to go to bed, afraid that I will die in it. Nevertheless, I’m so tired that I lie down and quickly fall asleep. When the nurse wakes me up, I realize that I’m still alive. Fine, so they didn’t give me a suicide pill. I know that it’s part of the secret-service training, but it makes me extremely nervous to think that they train your willingness to die at every moment.

I look in the mirror. I can see two large, dark-blue bruises – a result of my arrest. That is part of the work, I am a panther. That is why I am happy with my body. I developed ‘wings’ as a result of rowing on the ergometer. Position 10, maximum load, 20 minutes. I beat men regularly in the gym. Of course. My legs have been trained by running on the treadmill. 19.5 kilometres per hour, sprinting. It’s as hard as a running belt can go. I have a female-shaped body, however, with large breasts and a small waist. This is what my body looks like, but the most important thing is how it feels, and it feels right. I feel lean and strong like a panther. I am being trained by the AIVD. I get dressed and walk towards the nurses’ office.

“Hi, I’m Jarel.” In front of me stands a young man of about 25 years old. He has grey eyes, dark-blond hair and acne. He has his hands deep in the pockets of his faded jeans.

“Shall I show you around?” He shows me the rooms, the nurses’ office, which I had already seen when I came in, and then he takes me to the living room next door. There’s a patio outside, which is surrounded by halls, and there are two rooms in which smoking is allowed. They are full of smoke.

“Have you been here for long?” I ask.

“Yes, about 12 months,” he says. “I’m gay.”

“Oh,” I say. I feel comfortable with him.

I sit down in the living room on a dark-brown faux-leather couch. As Jarel walks away, a man who could be from Surinam approaches me. He is wearing a tracksuit and a white sweater. “Do you want to see my drawings?” He holds them out in front of him. It’s hard to work out what they’re supposed to be. They contain a lot of colours, in any case.

“Are they abstract?” I ask.

“No. Look at this drawing here, it is a man and a child. And I painted a bird here, don’t you see it?”

Not really, I think, but I don’t want to disappoint him. He looks kind. “Oh, maybe I should look at it in a different way.” I don’t want to lie, but I don’t want to hurt his feelings either. That is one of my strongest points. Telling the truth without being offensive. At the cutting edge.

The man with the drawings disappears onto the patio and lights a cigarette.

“That’s Sam, he killed two people,” says Jarel when he comes back.

“What?” It vaguely gets through to my busy mind.

“You can ask him about it, he doesn’t mind,” continues Jarel.

“Uh,” I answer, a bit shocked. “Maybe later.”

Although I am a bit shocked, I am too ill to say anything about it.

A dark-skinned young man walks into the living room. He walks with flair and makes me think of Tubs, Sonny’s partner from *Miami Vice*. He looks like a police officer, although he may be walking too casually. A detective, perhaps. He’s wearing a leather jacket and trainers which are slightly tattered. “Hey, who are you?” he asks.

“May-May. I arrived here yesterday.”

“Welcome, May-May.”

“I don’t feel so good here. I’d rather leave as soon as I can.”

“That’s what we all want, honey. Jarel has been here for a year now, I’ve been here for six months, so it can take a while. We’ll be seeing each other. I’m Carl.” He throws his leather jacket over his shoulder and leaves just as casually as he came in.

“Hey, are you still here?” Sam walks up to me, he’s finished his cigarette. “You know what I want?”

“No,” I answer.

“To go to Surinam. That would be so beautiful, man, the nature over there.”

“So you haven’t been there?”

“Far too expensive, but I’m saving money for a ticket.”

“Say, why are you here?”

“Killed two people. But they raped my sister you know. That’s why I killed them.”

I get up off the couch and move to one of the simple wooden chairs.

Sam lies down on the couch. He keeps his eyes open and looks relaxed. It's obvious he doesn't want to talk anymore.

I'd never met anyone who had killed someone. Now I have. His drawings weren't very good, but showing them to me was a kind gesture. He did it to protect his sister, I tell myself. My mind is too bruised to let it sink in any further. The boss of the AIVD keeps quiet.

A young lady with Moroccan roots starts laying the table. She has a long, black skirt on and a white scarf with gold stitching. Dark-brown curls peep out from beneath her scarf and she has remarkably big, beautiful brown eyes. She is very young. Twenty, at most. She lays down the cutlery with care. Fork, knife. Fork, knife. Her body language suggests she isn't open to contact. I help her lay the table, cautious in the beginning so as not to scare her. We place the sandwich toppings on the table. Chocolate sprinkles, jam, peanut butter, cheese and butter. A nurse enters the living room. She has short, coarse blonde hair and looks rather strict. She looks a bit like Annie Lennox from pop duo the Eurythmics.

"Ah, you've laid the table. Kim and Amir. Are you coming to eat?"

Kim is a sturdy woman. She has long blonde hair, wears a black sweater, jeans with trainers and a cap. The cap gives her a tough, boyish appearance. She walks to the table quietly, takes a seat and looks down at her plate.

Amir is of Moroccan descent. He's wearing a white tracksuit made of a smooth material with black stripes down the sides. He has a gold chain around his neck. He takes a seat and gives Jarel a slap on his shoulders.

"Doin' alright?"

"Yeah, thanks," says Jarel.

"I would like to have a moment of silence," says the nurse with the coarse hair. During the moment of silence I look around me. There are ten patients and two nurses. I remember that we used to pray at home and decide to join in. I make the sign of a cross and mutter, "In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, thank you for the food. Amen."

The blonde nurse waits till everyone is finished and says, "Enjoy!"

After breakfast I go to my room and look in the mirror. Not to look at myself, but to communicate with my boss. Or his or her subordinates. I can't see who I'm communicating with, I can only hear them via telepathy. They want recordings of me because they want to perform

checks. Checks and balances at the AIVD. I don't know if they keep the tapes. Everything is top secret. I look in the mirror and command, "Get me out of here, May-May Meijer, panther, Knight in the Order of Orange-Nassau. Code Red."

I use 'code red' to underline that it is an important message. It is always difficult to find out who is talking to me. I use my energy to work it out. Ah, it's Ivy. Good, I know her. I've never seen the boss of the AIVD.

*"May-May, take care, we'll make sure that you get out of there."*

"When?" I ask calmly.

*"We can't say. There are a lot of people involved. We are doing our best."*

Hopefully they will hurry, but there is nothing I can do except wait.

After brushing my teeth, I walk into Jarel's room. "Hi Jarel, is it OK if I sit here?"

His room looks the same as mine. Jarel sits on his bed with the yellow-orange blanket on it.

"Yeah, sure," he says. He smiles and puts his hands in the pockets of his jeans. "I'm leaving this weekend, to my parents'."

"You're still living with your parents?" I ask, hoping at the same time that Jarel doesn't feel insulted by my remark.

"Yes, but when I'm better I want to live on my own. I'm really looking forward to it."

I sigh. Good, he didn't feel insulted. "Do you have a job?"

"No," he mutters while staring out of the window. "That'll come, later."

I do hope so for him. I really do. "Yes, I'm sure that will come, Jarel," I say gently.

I suddenly realize how important it is for people to have a job. Not only to guarantee an income, but also to make a contribution to society. Work also gives you the opportunity to meet and work with other people. It occurs to me how much I appreciate my work and my activities in politics.

Jarel is still staring out of the window. He is probably planning in his mind how he is going to get a job. Then he jolts me out of my contemplations.

"And you? What do you do?"

"Before I came here I worked as a PR consultant for an Iranian news organization. I'd just started. I've worked in science for ten years." I wait a while to see if he's satisfied with my answer.

But he's looking at me with a question mark on his face. "Oh?"

"Yes. First as a PhD employee in the Department of Communication Science, and later as assistant professor at the working group of Philanthropy at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. PhD employee means that you are working on a book. It takes about five years. Or scientific articles, that's fine as well. I also used methods and statistics. Samples and so on. Did you ever hear about that?"

"Yes, I did. What is it again?"

"A sample means that you interview part of the population. Imagine that you want to know what the Dutch population thinks about psychiatry. It costs too much time and money to ask everyone. You can instead just ask a part of the population. As long as you make sure that your sample is representative for the Dutch population, it works just as well. Using that sample you can say something about-"

"May-May, the psychiatrist wants to talk to you." The nurse with the coarse blonde hair is standing in front of me. 'Ann' is written on her name tag.

The psychiatrist is wearing a dark-blue jumper and jeans. He has short brown hair, a long face and glasses with a black frame. He smiles a lot. "Come in May-May, I'm Sean Kingsley."

I am ushered into his office.

Ann takes a seat next to me.

"Well, May-May. You arrived yesterday I see. Did you get a bit of sleep?"

I nod.

"Good, good," he says while studying my file.

I look around his office. It's small. It has just enough room for the table and six chairs. Everything is a cream colour.

"I heard something about the AIVD from your father and sister. Can you tell me more about it?"

A voice from the AIVD warns me not to.

"I'd rather not," I answer with a broken voice.

I wait to see how the psychiatrist reacts. He smiles. Good, he's not pushing me.

"Can you tell me what you've been doing these last few days?"

The AIVD commands me to stick to the factual information.

I think for a few moments, then I respond cautiously, "Yesterday I

cleaned my father's apartment. The days before I slept at my father's place because I had just left my husband and child."

"Can you tell me some more?"

"I'm married, we have a son and live in Bussum."

"Bussum, that's quite far away, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Why did you leave?"

"Because, I, uh, because..."

Sean Kingsley doesn't say anything, but he leans forward and looks at me.

"Do I really have to tell you this?"

Kingsley waits patiently.

"Because I'm in love with another man!" I say, raising my voice.

"That's not so bad, is it? It happens quite often."

"It is!" I shout. I kick the chair away and walk out of the office.

I'm fed up. Damn it, he found out! I wanted to keep it to myself. I'm feeling ashamed of my love for Bert. I have been faithful to Vince for 15 years. Vince is the love of my life. That's what I wrote in the foreword of my dissertation:

*Vince, love of my life, you have supported me despite the crazy working hours, and Saturdays and Sundays at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam.*

The AIVD blackmailed me to fall in love with Bert. They succeeded. Now Kingsley knows it too. He's a good psychiatrist, a bloody good psychiatrist. I run into my room, close the door behind me and say out loud in front of the mirror. "Kingsley knows I am in love with someone else. No name. Code Red." The boss of the AIVD doesn't respond. I don't feel any 'energy' coming from the mirror this time, but I know that the secret service will record everything I say in front of the mirror.

In the evening, Famke, Walter – my brother-in-law – and my father visit me.

"Hi, May," says Walter, putting his hand on my arm for a moment. He has his sleeve rolled up, so that my eye is attracted to his tattooed underarm.

I vaguely realize that my father is alright. My mission is the most important thing, protecting humanity. The secret service talks to me constantly. I have to hide that from everyone. Before I speak, I have to ask



the secret service for permission. This means that I have to think about all my thoughts before I can speak, because I need to ask their permission, which means that it is hard for me to express myself. When I'm allowed to say something, it's mainly facts. It's like living in two separate worlds.

"Actually, there are more of us here than is allowed," says Famke.

"Normally only two people can visit, but this time they don't mind one extra," my father says.

Ann is standing in the doorway and gives us a wink. "Precisely," she adds.

I appreciate her relaxed attitude.

I'm thinking about what to say. Facts are often allowed. "I'm happy you're here," I say to Famke in a shaky voice. "It's not easy being locked up. The idea that I can't go outside is very strange for me."

"Did you go outside today?" asks Walter.

I check with the AIVD whether I can answer this question. I'm allowed to. "No, no. Not really," I answer. "It would be nice to go jogging outside."

"We'll go outside," says Walter. "Next time we're here, we'll take you out for a run."

"Mum and Frans want to see you, is that OK?" asks Famke.

"No, no... Not Frans," I say. I avoid looking at her.

"Why not?" Famke asks kindly.

"Because Frans... He works for... No, no I don't want to see him," I mumble.

"Ok, then Mum will come on her own," says Famke, reassuring me.

"And Vince is waiting here outside for you, do you want to see him?" asks my sister.

"*Think of your mission!*" commands the AIVD.

"No, no. I do not want to see Vince," I say quickly.

"He hopes you're fine," says Famke with compassion in her voice.

"I am fine," I answer bluntly.

I stay silent. Achieving world peace together with my fellow secret agent Koenders is my mission. Vince does not fit in with it. That's why I left home. Top secret.

. . .

On the third day, after breakfast, I get fed up with being indoors. I walk towards Carl and Jarel, who are in the living room: "I want to go to the beach. Do you ever do that?"

"No. We never go on a day out," says Carl.

"Probably too much hassle. I've been here for a year now, but we've never been out," adds Jarel.

"Let's go to the patio and imagine it's a beach," I suggest.

Jarel goes outside to the patio. Kim is already there, smoking a cigarette. Jarel is standing next to her. "Yes. I'm already here!" he laughs.

I go outside as well and say, "Shall we keep our clothes on?"

"Yes," says Carl. "Otherwise they might think we're crazy."

We all laugh out loud. Amir comes towards us.

"Hey, is there something to laugh about?" he asks.

"Yes, come and join us," says Jarel, "we're pretending we're on the beach."

"You may make a wish now, May-May," says Jarel.

"Why?" I ask.

"Because you're in between two men," answers Jarel.

"Ah, in that case Kim can make a wish as well," I say.

"What shall we wish for?" ponders Kim. She inhales her cigarette.

I haven't heard her talk much.

She seems to be relaxed. She seems to feel comfortable with Jarel, like I am.

"I wish I was healthy again," says Kim.

"What do you wish for, Mia?"

"Her name's May-May," corrects Jarel.

"I wish for world peace."

"World peace?" asks Amir. With a bang, his chair falls back on its four legs. "World peace?" he repeats.

"Yes, why not?" asks Jarel laconically.

"Come on Mia, act normal," says Carl, raising his voice.

"Don't you want world peace?" I ask.

"I do," says Jarel.

"Yes, world peace for me too," says Amir.

Carl gives up. "OK, we do world peace for Mia."

We sit in silence next to each other in the sun. We enjoy each other's presence. I feel comfortable with Jarel, Kim and Carl. They don't ask me questions about the AIVD. I need to go, because I want to work on my

mission with Bert. The AIVD wants me to go on a world peace mission with him, which I now want to achieve with him indeed. The AIVD also got me into this closed ward of the hospital, in which I can't do anything that contributes to peace. Therefore they have to get me out. I go to my room and instruct the AIVD loud and clear again in front of the mirror: "Get me out of here. Code Red."

## THE COURT SESSION IN GGZ DELFLAND

I hear a knock on my door.

“Good morning, May-May,” says Ann. “Your hearing starts soon and your sister’s here.”

Famke enters my room. “I’ve talked to Mum, she wishes you the best and she’ll come tonight..”

I don’t respond. No-one is allowed to know about my mission.

Famke continues, “Dad’s here now. We would like to attend the hearing.”

“No. No, you can’t.”

“Why not?”

I don’t say a word. I stare into the distance.

“We want to support you, we want to *help* you,” says Famke with tears in her eyes.

*“Don’t let yourself get distracted. Focus on your mission,”* says the AIVD.

“You can’t,” I say curtly.

Famke gets a white handkerchief out of her handbag and wipes away her tears. I stare motionlessly in front of me.

Then there’s a knock on the door and Ann pops her head around it. “Are you coming, May-May? Your hearing’s about to start.”

My lawyer is an elderly lady with her hair tied in a grey knot on her head. She was held up in a traffic jam so we don’t have time to speak before the hearing begins. We sit down in the office where I usually talk

to Doctor Kingsley. Just after my lawyer arrives, the judge, the clerk, Doctor Kingsley and two nurses take up their positions. The small room is overcrowded. Due to the presence of the judge, a clerk and a lawyer I feel as if I'm in court. It's an unpleasant feeling, as if I've committed a crime. Luckily, they're not wearing gowns.

"What is your opinion about the health of Mrs. Meijer?" the judge asks my psychiatrist.

"Mrs. Meijer has been here for a couple of days now. We have not been able to make an accurate diagnosis of what is happening. We do, however, think that there is a psychotic decompensation."

I look at my lawyer, but she does nothing but follow Doctor Kingsley's argument.

"Outside the hospital she will probably be a danger to others and/or herself. Therefore, it is better that she is transferred to her own hospital, the Rembrandthof."

"What do you think about this?" the judge asks my lawyer.

My lawyer turns to me and asks, "I think that what your doctor is saying is reasonable, don't you?"

I don't know what to say. I had hoped for a passionate appeal in which she would convince the judge how important it was for me to go home. But all she does is agree with the doctor's proposal. I decide to defend myself. "I would rather go home. I have been through a lot, such as two forest fires. At home I will be more comfortable than here."

The judge looks at the doctor, who shakes his head. "Good," says the judge. "This is it. On the basis of the Mental Health Act, I propose that the custody of Mrs. Meijer in a mental hospital be extended until 11 April, 2009."

The judge and her entourage walk out, completely ignoring my father and sister, who were still waiting outside the room.

I am alone as I prepare sandwiches for lunch.

"I'll join you," says Jarel, bringing his chair across to my table. "How did it go?"

"Bad," I answer. "I have to stay here, but I want to go home."

"Hey Mia, what did I hear, you're staying with us?" says Carl, walking towards me with his leather jacket draped over his shoulder.

"Yes."

“You’ll be fine,” he says, wrapping his arm around my shoulders.

“Yes, everything will be OK,” says Jarel.

I feel an urge to rush to my room and ask the AIVD why they won’t get me out of here, but I resist it. Then I look outside. There are two pigeons walking on the patio. Pigeons of peace. They symbolize Bert and me. It’s our task to contribute to peace. We need to have patience; our time will come. I open the door to the patio and throw them some breadcrumbs. They flap their wings before they feast on the food.

In the evening my mother visits me. She brings freshly squeezed orange juice and flowers from her garden. They’re all kinds of colours – purple, red, white, pink – and put together with love. She lists the names of all the flowers effortlessly: lavender, viburnum, sweet pea – my favourite flower because it was in my wedding bouquet – and lilac.

“Next time I’ll bring columbine, lady’s mantle and roses for you,” she adds.

I’m grateful to her and I think she’s very smart for knowing the names of all the flowers. Somewhere deep inside I realize that she shows her love by pampering me, without asking what is going on in my mind and what keeps me busy.

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## SATURDAY NIGHT AT GGZ DELFLAND

When I wake up and look at my watch, I see that it's already 9.30 AM. I get dressed and rush to the breakfast room. As I enter the room, Carl is standing at the kitchen counter, his leather jacket hanging from a chair.

"Carl, where are the others? Why didn't they wake us up?"

"Because it's Saturday, Mia, that's why," says Carl, preparing a sandwich with chocolate sprinkles.

"Oh, and what does that mean?" I ask drowsily. "Is there a different schedule or something?"

"It means that there's no schedule. On Saturdays, everyone who can go home, goes home. The ones who have to stay here, stay here. Were you sleeping during the morning meeting yesterday?"

"I wasn't there. I had the court session, so I was preparing what to say."

"Oh that's right, Mia, of course. I forgot about that," says Carl while he takes a bite out of his sandwich. "Let's eat together."

"Who else is here?" I ask.

"Kim and Amir are here, Jarel went home."

"So there are four from our club," I say.

At that moment Kim enters the room. "Yes, we're just like the five musketeers, aren't we?" she says.

"That's the way it is," says Carl.

What a pity that Jarel's gone home, I think to myself. He's the one I

feel most comfortable with. Probably because he's so calm. Then I take a good look at Kim. "Hey Kim, you're wearing your hair loose and you're not wearing your cap!"

"Yes," says Kim, looking away shyly.

"You look good!"

Gosh, I think to myself. She looks completely different now. What an attractive girl she is.

Saturday is pretty much like all the other days. We hang around and talk. The others smoke a lot. We are inside one of the rooms where you are allowed to smoke, 'the smokehouse'.

Carl lights a cigarette. "You want one?"

"No, thanks," I answer.

"May-May doesn't smoke," explains Jarel.

"You know what it is, Mia, we're here and we just hang around, so that means we're just going to smoke more and more," says Carl.

"Yes, when I came here, I smoked barely a pack a day, and now I'm smoking two a day," says Kim. She lights a new cigarette with her old one.

"Don't you think it's dirty?" asks Carl.

"Oh," I answer. "I'm getting used to it. The first few days I didn't like it, but I'm OK now."

"Yes, and you wouldn't want to miss us, would you, May?" asks Kim.

"No," I say, as we smile at each other.

The four of us sit close together. We are real mates. Everyone has their problems, but we don't talk about them. As if we're soldiers waiting for the next battle. As if we have had several losses. We support each other by sitting close to each other. By making jokes. By being silent sometimes.

"Psychiatrists should follow our example," I say out of the blue.

"What example?" asks Kim.

"Us. We're supporting each other by sitting in silence. Most psychiatrists want to get everything out of you. It's almost cruel."

"You finally get it, Mia," says Carl.

"I think she's quite right," says Kim.

"Yes, me too," says Amir, who is walking towards us.

"Did you hear what she said?" asks Carl.



“Yes,” answers Amir. “May-May thinks that psychiatrists should shut up sometimes. Then you start talking without being prompted. I agree.”

“Oh,” says Carl, looking first at Amir and then at me.

We sit like this until we are called for dinner. The peas, boiled carrots, mashed potatoes and vegetarian burger are overcooked, but I try to be well-behaved and eat my food as best I can. At least they fixed a vegetarian meal for me. I’m grateful for that.

After dinner, when our visitors have gone, we’re in the living room together. It’s a sterile room with a table, the couch with its smooth, brown faux-leather and a sitting area.

“Hey guys, we’ve got Coke and orange juice and crisps, what a surprise!” I say after taking a look in the kitchen.

“Yes, May, it’s Saturday night,” says Kim, giving me a wink.

“Saturday night, time for some music,” I say and turn on the radio.

Kim and I are dancing and singing along with Gloria Gaynor: “I will survive, as long as I know how to love, I know I’ll stay alive...”

“Hey, good lyrics,” Kim says to me as she dances.

“Yes, it’s good, isn’t it?” I shout and smile back at her.

Ann walks by. “Hey, turn it down. It’s a hospital here, not a disco.”

I meekly do as she suggests and turn it down.

“It was so good to relax,” giggles Kim.

“We can sit in my room and listen to music,” says Carl, who just happened to drop by.

Soon we’re sitting on Carl’s bed.

“The door has to stay open,” he says.

“Huh?” I say in surprise.

“Those are the rules here. To prevent intimacies, you know? OK, Mia, what do you want to hear?” he asks, sitting at his laptop.

“Gloria Gaynor again,” I answer.

Just like in the living room, we start singing along and dancing.

When the song is over, Carl asks Kim what song she would like to hear.

“Jan Wayne,” answers Kim.

“What do you think of it?” asks Kim while she is dancing.

“Good song, beautiful lyrics. What’s it called?”

“*Because the Night*. It’s quite old.”

As I’m dancing to the song, I think about Bert. The chorus reminds

me of our telepathic love night. The song talks about the night belonging to lovers and lust.

Just at that moment, Ann walks by. “Guys, can you turn it down a bit please?”

“Alright,” says Carl, and he turns down the volume.

“OK, guys, it’s ten-thirty on a Saturday night, and I’m going to bed. Goodnight,” I say as I walk to my room.

“Haha, yes it’s pretty late. Goodnight,” says Kim.

“Sleep well Mia,” Carl calls after me.

When I’m at the office to collect my medication, Ann drops the pill, which falls underneath the table. “I’m sorry,” she says.

For me, the pill seems less dangerous now.

*Would Kingsley have instructed Ann to do this?* I wonder.

Fortunately, I don’t have the feeling I have to complete another test for the AIVD, and I manage to swallow the pill without too much difficulty. Then I walk back to my room and stand in front of the mirror. “AIVD, I repeat, I want to get out of here. Bring me to Bert as soon as possible. Code Red.”

Then I get into bed, relieved that I don’t have to undertake a suicide assignment this time.

On Sunday morning I stay in bed for a little longer than usual. I feel terrible because I’m imprisoned within the walls of the mental hospital in Schiedam.

*Did I do so badly?* I ask myself. *When are they coming to get me?* As I walk to the living room for breakfast, I see Kim smoking a cigarette on the patio. We wave to each other.

After finishing breakfast, I go to her.

Kim’s phone rings and she takes the call. “The Horny Goldfish Sex Shop, can I help you?”

I laugh out loud.

Kim is happy to talk, she sounds cheerful. “Yes, I’m here with May-May, the Chinese girl I told you about.”

Funny, people sometimes think I’m Chinese. My mother’s grandfather was Chinese. My mother is primarily Indonesian and also

Dutch. My father is completely Dutch. It doesn't matter, it's certainly not worth interrupting the phone conversation for.

"Yes, yes I'm fine," she continues. "Tomorrow, yes fine. Bye."

"Haha. You answer the phone with 'Horny Goldfish Sex Shop', and it's your mum!" I laugh out loud again. "How long have you been here, anyway?"

"Here? Four months."

"And do you work?"

"No, I'd love to, but I never did."

Although Kim is sharing a lot, considering her personality, I don't want to spoil our interaction, so I keep my mouth shut for a while.

Together we sit next to each other, like good mates.

Carl and Amir walk by.

"Are you going to do anything?" I ask them.

"No, just hang around a bit," says Amir.

"A friend of mine's coming to visit," says Carl. "What about you?"

"I'm staying here," answers Kim. "Not doing anything."

"My sister and her boyfriend are coming, we're going for a run," I say.

"Running? Are you serious?" says Amir, not sure whether to believe me.

"Yes, running's good for you," I reply.

"You know, I don't know why you're here, you're so normal," Kim says to me.

"Well, if it was up to me, I'd go home."

"Do you know that Loesje poster?" asks Kim.

"No," we all say.

"Hurray, we can all go home, the psychiatrist's better now."

We all laugh about it.

In the afternoon, my sister and Walter suddenly appear in front of me, in their sports gear.

"Hi May, we've come to get you," says Famke.

"It's lovely to be outside. I haven't been outside for such a long time," I say as we leave.

"But you do have an inside patio, don't you?" asks Walter.

"Yes, OK, I didn't think of that," I answer.

We run past the buildings of GGZ Delfland. Then we cross the road

and pass a wooden shack displaying the Heineken ad 'Have a Beer?' This means that Bert is thinking of me. This is our private joke. When I'm tired, he says 'beer' to me via telepathy. In the army you drink beer when you need to relax.

"So, May's got some new energy," says Walter, doing his best to keep up with me.

We run a while until we get tired.

Walter is an informant of the Dutch intelligence service, there's no other explanation. He chose the route we took, and we passed the shack so that Bert and I had an opportunity to communicate. I'm dying to ask Walter when I will be allowed to leave, but I don't know how much he knows about the master plan, maybe he's only involved in minor issues. So I keep my mouth shut.

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## DAVID AND HEDDA

One day I walk into the living room for breakfast and see two new patients. A man in his mid-forties and a woman some ten years older. The man is making coffee. He has long, brown hair down to his shoulders and a brown beard. He's skinny. From a distance he looks a bit like Jesus. The woman is small and sturdy. She has short grey hair. She looks a bit run down. They both have their eyes wide open and give me an aggressive look when I approach them.

"Hello, I'm May-May," I say, extending my hand to the man.

"David," the man says, ignoring my hand. He has a glazed look in his eyes.

"Hedda," snaps the woman, as she quickly gives me a hand.

Although I don't know them very well, it feels as if David and Hedda are intruders. They stick together and don't mingle with the group. Nevertheless, I let it pass. I am not feeling strong enough to really care about it.

At breakfast, David sits diagonally opposite me, with Kim next to me. I notice how she's trying to avoid David's gaze. Jarel is sitting directly opposite me. David hardly says a word, but there's an enormous field of tension around him.

When Jarel almost chokes on his bread, David says, "Choke on it!"

We all look in surprise at David. He acts as if he didn't say anything and continues eating his bread, unperturbed.

"May I leave the table?" Kim asks immediately.

"Yes, that's fine," says Ann.

Kim rushes off to the patio, leaning with her back against the wall. Her eyes are hidden under her cap.

I look at Jarel out of the corner of my eye. He seems to have lost his appetite, chewing for what seems ages on the same piece of bread. I wink at him. Jarel smiles faintly, David's remark has obviously shocked him.

When Ann asks for a moment of silence to close the breakfast session, David hisses, "Pagan, die."

Ann doesn't react.

After breakfast I go to the nurses' office.

"David's very aggressive," I say in a tense voice.

"Yes, he is aggressive. We noticed it as well. You'd better stay out of his way," answers Ann.

Outside, Kim is still on the patio and I decide to go to her.

"So, phew... I need to blow off some steam," she says as I sit down next to her.

"Steam, why?" I ask.

"That man, David. He's driving me nuts. I really restrained myself, otherwise I would have hit him. He really makes me aggressive."

Then David comes outside. He walks towards us.

I see the tension rising in Kim.

David heads off in another direction and goes to the other corner of the patio. He starts muttering, "Do you remember, you and me. Together at the riverside. We were so young. You and me."

Carl, Jarel and Amir come outside to join us, ignoring David.

At lunch, David wants to sit next to me.

Luckily Ann stops that from happening. "David, would you go and sit somewhere else?"

I'm relieved when Amir sits next to me.

"He's an aggressive little bugger, that bloke over there," says Jarel, nodding in David's direction.

"Yes, he bothered us at breakfast this morning," says Kim.

Amir gets up. "Oh yeah? Well, if he does it again, I'll beat him up."

"Hey Amir, take it easy," hisses Carl.

To calm the situation, I decide to change the subject. “Hey guys, the Horny Goldfish Sex Shop has a customer.”

“Who?” asks Carl.

“My mother’s coming to visit this afternoon,” says Kim.

Then David gets up and walks through to the kitchen behind us. He starts tinkering around in the cutlery container. *Are there knives in there?* David carries on. He does it agonisingly slowly to provoke us. I’m feeling vulnerable. Carl’s probably also wondering what he’s doing; he raises an eyebrow. Amir and I are sitting with our backs towards David. All he needs to do is pick up a sharp object and start stabbing. David moves the cutlery over and over one by one. From where I am, I can’t see if there’s a bread knife in it. The noise of the moving cutlery gets on my nerves. Ideally, I would like to turn around to see what he’s doing, but I don’t want to give him that pleasure. That’s why I just look straight ahead. Out of the corner of my eye, I see that David has turned around to observe our reaction. I can sense that Amir’s getting angry. I see by the expression on his face that he wants to jump up. Right at the moment that Amir wants to jump up, David closes the drawer of the cutlery container and walks back to his seat.

“Just in time,” says Carl laconically.

When we are clearing the table, David comes up to me. “There on the riverside. You and me,” he mutters again while he pierces me with his eyes.

Amir walks towards me. “Is he bothering you, May-May?”

At that very moment, David walks away.

“No, no, thank you, it wasn’t that bad this time. I’m going to my room for a while,” I say. David’s words echo in my head: “there at the riverside, there at the riverside”, and “you and me”.

I close the door of my room and sit down on the floor. Somehow, my fellow patients remind me of animals. Good, vulnerable, honest and direct. Horses and ponies to be precise. I have been horse-riding for a long time and start thinking of the ponies I’ve known.

“David resembles Lady,” I say a couple of times, so loud that the AIVD can listen in. Maybe they can help. I explain what kind of pony Lady was.

“Lady was a black mare with a small, white star on her head. She was

very aggressive because she was taken away from her foal. She kicked everybody out of the stable. Except for me. They always called me if the pony needed to be calmed down.”

I wait a while, but I know I’m right. “David, David is Lady. He’s in pain. A lot of pain. I feel his pain.”

Tears are running down my cheeks. “Something terrible happened in his youth. Something with that woman. He loved her a lot.” I feel David’s sadness so intensely that I have to get up and wash my face in the sink.

“David is Lady,” I repeat in front of the mirror. “Lady was a pony at the Bergse Bos stables in Bergschenhoek, owned by Barbara van Buren.”

With my face still tear-stained, I walk to the patio. David comes up to me. I’m frightened and want to step aside. He reaches for me with his hand. I see that my fellow patients and the nurses are watching.

“Easy,” David says to me, as he grabs my hand. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I don’t want to hurt you either, David,” I say gently.

“We’re all having difficulties,” I hear Ann say behind me to the other nurses. “And she just does it like that.”

I’m confused by David’s mood change and walk back to my room, where I’m again overwhelmed by an intense feeling of sadness. His sadness. I want to give him a chance to let go of his sadness. I walk to the patio again to see if I can find him. Suddenly he’s crossing the living room from I don’t know where and walking towards me. His eyes seem to be asking permission to stand next to me.

“Hi David, are you doing OK?” I ask.

Carl comes and stands next to me.

There are two nurses standing in the corner.

David looks at me.

I can see that he’s looking at me to determine my mood. I want to show him that it’s OK to talk about his feelings.

Then, suddenly, he leans forward, spits in my direction and walks away.

Ann intervenes immediately. “That’s not allowed here.”

“What an asshole,” Carl says.

I don’t say anything. I think I was right. Apparently, a woman hurt him. It’s all too recent for him. When I see David later in the corridor, I decide I have to put him in his place. I ignore him.



The atmosphere in the closed ward at that moment is quite hostile. Since I am suffering from psychosis, I can't really address it properly and just try to deal with it as best as I can. Sometimes I feel like a panther of the secret service, not afraid of anyone. The top leader. At other times I try to communicate with my fellow patients via 'telepathy', the voices in my head.

The next day, we're at the breakfast table. There's an empty seat next to me.

David walks towards me. "Can I sit here?" he asks, pointing at the empty seat next to mine.

"Well, uh..." I say hesitantly.

"No, that's my seat," says Kim, hearing the hesitation in my voice. She quickly sits down next to me.

"How are you, Kim?" I ask.

"Bad," she says. "I woke up last night and I was lying on the floor."

"Did you fall out of bed?"

"I think so."

Ann walks up to me. "Today you're going to the Rembrandthof. Are you looking forward to it?"

"I'd rather go home," I answer.

"Can I join you?" asks Kim.

"Yes! A day out!" yells Jarel.

"Yes, that'll be fun. Let's all go to the Rembrandthof," says Amir.

"Where's the Rembrandthof?" asks Kim.

"In Hilversum," I answer.

"Have you been there before?" she continues.

"No, not hospitalized. I went there as an outpatient."

I don't want to go back to Hilversum. I have just moved away from home to fulfil my mission. I look at Jarel. I'm happy he's back. It's great to see him again.

He takes a bite of his sandwich with chocolate sprinkles. Twelve months. He has already been hospitalized for twelve months.

After breakfast, I help clear the table with Nadia. Today she's wearing a pink scarf with silver stitches.

"Why do you always help, Nadia?" I ask. "I really appreciate it, but..."

Nadia puts a plate in the dishwasher. Then she looks straight into my eyes. She has beautiful dark-brown eyes with long eyelashes. "I am Iblis."

"Iblis?"

"Yes," she says softly while looking at the rest of the plates. "The devil. I am the devil. I am evil, the evilest of evil."

"Why do you think that?" I ask.

"Just because it's the truth, I am the devil."

"Can't you imagine that you're normal, 'normal' just like me?"

I have to laugh a little, but Nadia isn't laughing. Either she doesn't think it's funny, or she doesn't get the joke. It's none of these.

She answers, "I don't deserve to laugh."

And I've never seen her laughing.

"I know what you want to say, but I don't deserve it, I am Iblis," she continues.

There are a thousand things I want to say to her. She's such a nice, very kind young lady. It's too bad! But I don't say it. I know what her answer will be. I hope the psychiatrists and nurses can help her.

While I am still in the kitchen thinking how Nadia might be helped, the nurse Minou approaches me. She is small and slim. Her fragile face is framed by chestnut curls.

"May-May, can I talk to you? You've got a conversation with Doctor Kingsley planned very soon."

While I'm talking to Minou, Hedda rushes over to her, "I want to make a phone call now."

"Wait a while, Hedda, I'm talking to May-May," says Minou, trying to keep Hedda at a distance.

Hedda keeps on asking and steps in front of Minou. She keeps on saying, "I want to call now," looking at Minou with piercing eyes.

Minou seems a bit confused.

Hedda's obtrusive behaviour is irritating me, I've seen her doing it before.

I step between Minou and Hedda and say, "When does Doctor Kingsley want to talk to me?"

Hedda takes a few steps back.

Minou seems to relax a little and says, "In five minutes."

My thoughts are wandering and I wonder how the nurses can defend themselves against aggressive patients. The book by horse expert Klaus Hempfling about training wild horses pops into my mind and I want to

apply his approach to humans. Klaus Hempfling uses body language and other non-violent techniques to train horses. In the case of Minou and Hedda, I intuitively calmed the situation by stepping in between them. Maybe I could also strengthen the position of a nurse if I stood behind them. To literally back them up. I am still thinking about how to deal with aggressive patients as I walk into Doctor Kingsley's office. Minou is also sitting in on our conversation.

"Well May-May, how are you?" asks Doctor Kingsley.

"I would like to go home. I get the feeling that I am being bothered too much by the problems of my fellow patients."

"Yes, that's what we observe, too. Today, you're going to the Rembrandthof, you know that don't you? The staff over there will see when you can go home. We also get the impression that this is not the best environment for you." Doctor Kingsley looks at me intently to see if I have got his message. Then he continues. "Last time we talked about your feelings for another man. If you've come to the conclusion that you want a divorce, you may want to think about it. People fall in love quite often with someone else when they're married. That doesn't necessarily mean you have to do something with your feelings. You have a young boy. How old is he?"

"Three and a half."

"OK, well think about it carefully, that's my suggestion. I wish you all the best."

"I wish you the same, Doctor, thank you."

I leave his office, relieved that he didn't ask me anything else about my new love. Doctor Kingsley apparently didn't find out that my new love communicates with me via telepathy, via the media and via signs.

As I walk to the living room, I see Hedda close to the kitchen. I'm fed up with her intimidating behaviour. Also, I'm a panther of the AIVD so I can tell her how to behave. I walk to the kitchen to get some tea, all the while staring at her fiercely.

"Are you from the police or something?" she asks, looking at me with her big eyes.

"Something like that," I answer, staying close to her with my arms crossed. "I want you to behave normally to everybody, to us, to the nurses. Got that?"

"Yes," she says, and walks out of the room.

Then I see Kim sitting on the couch and walk towards her.

“Hey, Kim, I didn’t see you there. How are you?”

“I don’t feel well,” she answers.

I look at her, she looks pale. “Oh, this morning you didn’t feel so well either,” I say.

Kim doesn’t answer. She slips from the couch to the floor.

“Kim?”

She doesn’t react.

I rush to the nurses’ office.

Minou and a nurse come running out to take care of Kim.

“Are you alright? Just stay where you are,” says Minou.

It’s terrible to see Kim lying on the floor like that.

After a while, she opens her eyes. In the meantime, Jarel has joined us.

“I wasn’t there for a minute,” she says.

“Luckily, you’re here now,” says Jarel, wrapping his arm around Kim.

Seeing that Kim is doing well now, Minou and the other nurse leave.

“I need a cigarette,” mutters Kim.

“Let’s go to the smoking room,” says Jarel, helping her up.

On our way to the smoking room, as we pass the toilets, Kim says, “If you’d like to excuse me, I have to defecate. Yeah, that’s the medical term for having to poo.” She laughs as she says this.

“Oh, I never knew that ‘excuse me’ was the medical term for having to poo,” I say.

Kim and Jarel exchange looks, then they start laughing.

“Well, Kim’s feeling better I believe,” laughs Jarel, relieved when Kim is in the toilet.

“Yes, you can say that for sure,” I add.

We decide to go to the smoking room together. We greet Carl, who’s already there.

“Shall we do something?” I suggest.

“What?” asks Carl.

“Let’s write a poem,” I say.

Amir sneaks in. “Yes, a poem. Excellent idea.”

After half an hour the three of us have written a poem. We enjoyed writing it and put it up on the wall in the living room.

Amir wrote his own poems:

*I am in love with you,  
Without you wanting it,  
Please excuse me for loving you.*

*I lie on my bed,  
I hear your voice,  
I don't see you,  
You should know how much I am in love with you.*

“You’re a real poet, Amir,” I tell him.

“May-May, can I talk to you?” whispers Jarel. He winks at me and I follow him.

When we’re outside the smoking room, Jarel says, “Do you finally get it? Amir is in love with you.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize.”

“You know, it’s hard being locked up in here all the time. Without uh... intimacy. It’s hard, but no-one talks about it.”

Then we hear Carl’s voice. “Hey Mia, Jarel. Are you coming?”

“Yes, otherwise we’re going to stand outside too,” adds Kim.

“I’m definitely going to miss you,” I say, when I go into the smoking room again.

“Let’s exchange e-mail addresses,” says Jarel.

He goes to his room and comes back with his diary.

“How can I reach you?” I ask Kim.

“Via Jarel, that’s fine.”

We have just exchanged e-mail addresses when Ann approaches me. “May-May, the ambulance is here.”

I say goodbye to everyone and put my stuff in the ambulance. I can’t see Amir. David and Hedda are nowhere to be found either. I take a seat in the ambulance. As we are driving off, Doctor Kingsley drives past. He smiles at me.

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## MY ENCOUNTER WITH CHRIST

I'm sitting next to the ambulance driver and we chat until we reach the Rembrandthof. The ambulance driver rings the bell at the side entrance. A nice-looking young nurse with ginger hair in a ponytail opens the door. I'm familiar with the Rembrandthof from my previous visits to the outpatients' ward, but this time it's different. I'm going to be locked up in the closed ward. Ward A. I'm feeling very embarrassed about it as I follow the nurse, although at the same time I'm still too sick to really let it sink in.

"Here it is," the nurse says, opening the door of the closed ward.

I look around. Immediately on the right is the nurses' office. If you walk straight on you come to the living room. The accommodation looks similar to that of GGZ Delfland. There's a lounge with a television, two couches and a chair. There's also an open kitchen. Next to the kitchen are four round tables, where you can eat or play games.

"I'll walk you to your room," says the nurse as she walks in front of me.

We walk along a long corridor. In contrast to the mental hospital in Schiedam, all the rooms are off one long corridor. I have the last room but one.

"This is your room, room seven. Look, here are the shower and toilet."

*Room 7... 007, AIVD*, flashes through my mind. That's top secret.

The nurse looks at me, she's waiting for an answer.

"Well, I've made some progress," I say. "I had to share a bathroom in the previous hospital."

"Oh, well at least you could take a shower over there," laughs the nurse.

I don't think it's funny. My thoughts are wandering. I wonder why the AIVD arranged for me to get this room.

The nurse continues, "OK, you can unpack, and when you're finished you can see the doctor."

When the nurse is gone, I study the room more closely. There's a bed with a yellow and orange blanket. The white sheet is folded over the blanket, so that you can see the white edge. There's a small desk in the corner of the room. The window overlooks the inner patio, where two simple wooden couches are located. The patio is surrounded by the patients' rooms, the common living room and a large fence. The outside of the patio is covered with low, dark-green shrubbery. A little further away, but still visible, is the St. Vitus Church. A lovely church with a tower that's approximately 100 metres tall.

After seeing the doctor – she weighs me and checks my balance – I undress. It's late. I'm tired. Being tested all the time, and always being alert is tiring.

But I can't sleep. I go to the mirror in the bathroom and wait for instructions from the secret service. It's clear to me that the AIVD are here as well. The AIVD are everywhere. Their message is clear, "*Meijer, state that you are ready to die here.*"

I think about it for a few seconds. I didn't undergo a tough training for nothing, I can do it.

"I, May-May Meijer, Knight in the Order of Oranje Nassau, am prepared to die," I answer.

*"Drink the water from the tap to see if it is poisoned."*

In order to show that I have everything in control I shout "five" and then I take five slugs of water. I drink like a panther, drinking with my tongue. Then I hit the tap.

"Five," I repeat.

I go to bed. I can't sleep. Will I die? While I lie in bed, eyes still open, I suddenly see God in the right corner of the door.

God, runs through my mind. I don't see him, but I feel that it is him. I feel his energy. Telepathic.

*"So you are prepared to die for the good cause,"* he says.

"How do you mean?" I ask. I'm petrified. I have never believed in God.

*"Every time you had to choose between staying alive or dying for the good cause, you chose to die if necessary."*

"Yes," I say dazedly.

*"I am alone, I am looking for company. Come to me."*

Help, I think, while I jump up on the bed. I push myself into the corner of the room. I realize that if I go to Him, I will leave everyone behind.

My hesitation does not please God. *"You waited too long, I will let you die anyway!"*

I realize that I will die now. I sit in a knight's pose, with one knee on the ground. I see myself lying in bed in the white sterile room and feel my spirit rise.

I hear my parents say, "May-May died in the Rembrandthof."

*"I will let you live,"* says God suddenly.

I raise my head. "Why will you let me live?"

*"Why would I let you die?"*

There is a moment of silence between us. I had really thought I was about to die. I had seen my body lying on the bed, and my spirit leaving it.

*"Get up."* By insisting softly, God makes me get up.

*"I want you to think about heaven and Earth. I am considering letting the Earth vanish."*

"What!" I cry. "What about all the people?!" I start pacing up and down the room. "I don't want the Earth to vanish! Why does the Earth need to vanish?"

*"Because I am tired of deciding about life and death all the time."*

"I would like to help you. But I am just an ordinary person. I grew up in Berkel en Rodenrijs. I do not know why you chose me. I did not believe in you. I do not know anything about the Bible."

*"You can call me Christ. You did well. Every time you chose to die for the good cause. That is how you found me."*

"Why don't you go to President Obama?"

A silence falls. Then I murmur, "This is surreal. Surreal."



Christ tries to calm me down. *"It is OK. Let's walk a little bit. Let's walk in the garden of Eden. Do you feel the green grass beneath your feet?"*

"Yes," I say, as we walk up and down the room.

*"Here is a lion. You can stroke him."*

I stroke the lion and feel his mane through my fingers.

We are walking together.

I am starting to feel a bit more comfortable.

"Why are we talking in English?" I ask him.

*"I can understand English very well. Keep on talking English,"* says Christ.

Although I won't realize it for some time, from this moment on I suddenly start speaking English whenever I talk to my sister, despite the fact Dutch is our native language.

*"Can you show me what that is?"* asks Christ, pointing to my watch.

"A watch. It is a watch." I show him the watch and drop it on the floor. I can't feel the presence of Christ anymore. "Christ, Christ?"

*"I had to get used to the gravity. I forgot. It is a long time since I was on Earth."*

I point to a dead mosquito on the wall. "Can you please show me that you are God. By bringing that dead mosquito back to life?"

*"No. I do not like tricks. You have no idea how many times a day people ask me."*

I don't insist any further.

*"I am going. Talk to you tomorrow,"* says Christ, leaving me behind in complete astonishment.

I walk up and down my room until it is morning. Then I hear a nurse walking in the corridor and opening the rooms one by one. I lie down in my bed immediately.

"Good morning, May-May," he says while he opens the door without knocking.

"Good morning," I reply.

I'm glad he doesn't notice I stayed up all night.

Before I go to have breakfast, I make love to myself. While I am doing that, I hear a young girl saying the Lord's Prayer on the patio.

*Our Father, Who is in heaven,  
Holy is Your Name;  
Your kingdom come,  
Your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
and forgive us our sins,  
as we forgive those who sin against us  
and lead us not into temptation  
but deliver us from evil.  
Amen.*

God exists, I'm sure of it. God is love. I think back to last night as I open the red curtains.

Outside, I see a beautiful young woman walking on the patio. She has stopped praying. She has the aura of an angel. She is serene, tall and slender, and has her blonde hair tied back in a ponytail. Her long skirt with dark and light pink stripes reaches down to her ankles, and above it she wears a sleeveless brown fur jacket. As the tower of St. Vitus Church peeps above the fence, I look at her a little longer, and then hurry to breakfast.

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## WHITE LIGHT

There are nine patients for breakfast in the living room, divided across three tables. I choose a table with a fellow patient who seems to be open to conversation. She's quite skinny and pale, with big, dark-blue eyes accentuated with blue eye liner. Her black hair falls lank around her face.

"Hi, I'm Mary," she says, as I sit down at her table.

"Hello Mary," I answer.

"I'm from Ireland, but I'd appreciate it if you spoke Dutch to me." She's shaking a bit. She's a bit older than me, I would guess.

"Do you have any children?" Mary asks me.

"Yes, I have a son who's three and a half years old, his name is Noah. And you?"

"Yes, a daughter, Caren. She's ten."

"Do you like it here?"

"No. You can't go out unless you've got 'liberties'. Every time you want to go out, you have to ask."

"Liberties'? What are they?"

"They're arrangements, that you can go to the patio for example.

"It's like a prison here!" shouts an elderly man at another table. He has several red scaly spots on his face.

"Do not complain, accept it," a nurse shouts back to the elderly man.

I'm feeling displaced. Not that long ago I was working for a

university. Most importantly, I am a mother. Now, I have to make arrangements to get 'liberties'! And I have talked to God. The nurse sitting next to me notices I'm upset. He has a very friendly face and smiles a lot.

"Are you OK, May-May?"

"Uh, yes, sort of." I don't know if he is familiar with my file.

Playing it down, he says, "Anyone can experience psychosis. Even the queen."

Then he takes a bite out of his sandwich, a brown sandwich with cheese, and gives me a friendly wink. Mary doesn't eat a lot. She leaves half of her sandwich and drinks her milk. On the chair to my right is a man wearing a soldier's jacket. It makes me think of the army. He seems to come from Egypt, or somewhere close by, and doesn't say much.

At another table is the young woman who was praying out on the inner patio. After breakfast, I go up to her.

"Hello, I'm May-May."

"Hi, I'm Valerie."

"I heard you praying this morning, that helped me a lot," I say.

"That's what I want, glad it helped you."

"You contributed to my belief in God," I whisper.

"God is with you, May-May," she says, taking my hands in hers and looking intently at me. She has big, light-blue eyes.

"God is with you," she repeats. Then she walks away to clean the tables.

On the couch is a young woman with dark hair. She is sturdily built and has a remarkably fine face. She doesn't say anything but simply stares outside.

I introduce myself.

"I'm Ava," she says. Then she looks down at the floor again. She is an introvert. Her eyes are almond-shaped and her thin eyebrows are perfectly groomed.

I look to see if I can clean the tables but everything has been done already. The nurses didn't help. I don't know why. They're probably too busy and spend their time on other things. While the rest of the patients are away, I clean the tables with a cloth. Mary puts the last dishes into the dishwasher.

Suddenly, Ava gets into a crouching position on the couch. "The demons, they are coming, they are coming!"

Mary and I run towards her. "Take it easy, Ava, it's alright, it's alright."

"No, they are coming, I have to cut myself."

At that moment, two nurses emerge from the office and take her away.

"Isolation," says Mary.

*Oh, isolation.* Kim told me a bit about that at GGZ Delfland. About the disgusting situation of having to do your 'business' in a cardboard chamber pot.

I walk across to the patio. When I get outside, I can hear Christ very clearly. I'm not scared of him any longer.

"*Good that you're taking care of Ava,*" He says.

"Thank you. I would like to think along with you about heaven and earth, but I don't know the Bible that well," I whisper.

"*That is not necessary, you are able to think freely,*" says Christ.

"You know what stands out to me?" I ask. "That in a clinic like this, there are all kinds of people. Poor, rich, black, white. All people are united."

Christ smiles. "*That is true,*" He says. "*Is it an idea for you to go into politics?*"

I am silent for a while. "That is not possible any longer... They think I am ill."

"*Ill?*"

"Yes, I am suffering from psychosis."

"*That used to be different. People who spoke with me were honoured.*"

"Times have changed," I say gently.

I walk very slowly and mumble softly. I only talk back to Christ when I'm sure that no-one can hear it. I am happy that He accompanies me.

Suddenly the door of the living room opens. "I'm going out to the shops, who wants to join me?" asks the nurse who sat at my table during breakfast. Apparently, his name is Bob.

"I would like to join you," I say. *Wonderful, going out, away from the Rembrandthof.* I've just arrived but I'd love to go outside.

With a small group of patients, we leave the Rembrandthof and walk towards the centre of Hilversum. From a distance we can see the impressive St. Vitus Church, and the Ice Café opposite.

"Look, there's the Ice Café, May-May. Maybe you can ask the evening staff to have an ice cream with you," suggests Bob.

"I certainly will."

We walk to the shopping street De Groest.

I love to walk past the shops.

We turn left into Church Street. When we pass the shopping centre, I ask if I can try on a pair of jeans.

“Yes, that’s fine, as long as it doesn’t take too long, because there’s a small group of us,” says Bob.

When I enter the shop, a kind saleswoman helps me.

I choose a pair of dark-blue jeans with white streaks on them.

“They look great, May-May,” says Mary.

I buy them.

On our way back, Mary says to me, “It’s nice to be outside, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sure,” I answer. “I’m not used to being locked up.”

“No, I know, it’s horrible.”

We walk back to the Rembrandthof. I look intently at the surroundings. The trees and their leaves. The magnolia close to the buildings of the Rembrandthof. The flowers of the magnolia are still in bud, the underneath is bright pink and the top is light pink. It’s different, very different, if you can’t decide to go out yourself.

As soon as I walk into my room, I hear someone cursing in the room next to me, “Hey, damn it, you have to do everything yourself here.”

I walk into the room next door.

My new neighbour is the older man with the red scaly spots on his face.

“What’s the matter?”

“Hein, my name’s Hein. I just arrived here. Look at my bed! I can’t sleep on that, I need a new bed.”

I look at his fitted sheet. It has bloodstains on it. “No, you’re right, I’ll take it off for you,” I say, as I pull off his fitted sheet. Together with the rest of the bedding, I take it to the laundry room. I put it in the appropriate cart and get clean bedding for Hein from another laundry room.

“Can you make my bed as well?”

I hesitate for a moment. I think he should do it himself but then I realize that he is rather elderly and has difficulties walking. There’s a walker in the corner of his room.

“Alright, because you’re my new neighbour,” I say, and I make his bed.

“After lunch, the music therapist is coming, would you like to join in?” asks Bob, who happens to be walking past.

“Yes, please,” I answer. I’ll take any distraction going.

After lunch, I wait in the ‘comfort room’ for the music therapist. It looks like a living room. The walls are an ochre yellow. There’s an anthracite-coloured couch, a table and a home trainer. It’s a pity you have to ask permission to enter this room. I’m the only one interested in music therapy this time.

“Hi, I’m Martin,” the music therapist welcomes me. He has three CDs under his arm. He looks very kind and has a friendly face. I guess he’s the same age as me.

“Which CD do you want to hear?” I see the CD by the Dutch singer Marco Borsato.

*White Light* is the title of the CD. I choose the title song.

“I’ll put it on for you,” says Martin and turns the CD player on.

We listen to the song together. The lyrics remind me of my meeting with Christ. As the music fades out, I’m still thinking of last night. Then the music therapist brings me back into the present.

“What did you think of the song?” asks Martin.

“It was... good. So good. Phenomenal,” I say.

“What part of the song did you like especially?”

“Carried by the white light... I reach out above myself,” I softly say.

I get to choose two more songs but *White Light* made such an overwhelming impression on me that I hardly hear them. What a coincidence that Martin had this song with him just when I had met Christ! I am also aware how lovely it is to hear music. I immediately have a soft spot for Martin. I also decide to buy a CD player and CDs myself, as soon as I get the chance.

Back in my room, I start picking up hairs from the floor with my hands, because Christ does not like them. I don’t know exactly why.

A nurse knocks on my door, which is open. “I have a card for you.”

The card shows a drawing of a teddy bear sitting on a wooden bench on the beach with a pink sky. It says:

. . .

*Dear Sister,*

*You will get better. When you are out of the hospital we are going to eat ice cream together on the beach. Your darling sister, Famke xxx*

I stick the card onto my notice board, happy that my sister has faith in my recovery.

In the afternoon, a young trainee arrives. He has dark hair and dark eyes, quite exotic-looking. He walks into the living room while I am colouring in a mandala.

“Anyone want to go out?” he asks.

“Yes, I do,” I say.

As in the morning, there’s a small group of patients who want to go for a walk.

“My name is Zafir by the way,” he says. “We’ll wait for the others and then we can go.”

I ask Mary if she’s coming. I can talk with her. The others seem so distant at times.

“Yes, I’m coming.”

I breathe a sigh of relief.

“Valerie, are you joining us?” asks Zafir.

“No thank you, I’m staying here.”

*What a pity*, I think. I would have liked it if she had joined us. She has a special place in my heart because she believes in Christ too. Valerie radiates a certain softness and sweetness.

“I’ll ask Hein if he wants to come too,” I say to Zafir. “Hein, are you joining us?”

“Yes, I am,” he says. He shuffles to the exit with his walker.

“Good,” says Zafir as he unlocks the door of our ward with his key. “Off we go.”

As one group we walk along the same route as in the morning. Past the Ice Café, turning onto De Groest and then left to the shopping street, Church Street.



“I want to buy a CD player and a couple of CDs, is that alright?” I ask Zafir.

“Yes, that’s fine.” Zafir is very kind and easy-going.

I suddenly feel that I want to take care of him properly because he’s a young trainee. I feel an inner strength rise up in me. I am a panther. Trained by the AIVD. Protect Zafir. Protect!

“GRRRRRRR,” I growl, like a mother panther protecting her cub.

“What’s that?” asks Zafir, surprised. “Why are you growling, May-May?”

“Oh... uhhhm, I was just imitating a panther.”

“You scared me!” shouts Hein when he stops walking. “Please don’t do it again.”

“Ah, I can buy a CD player there. Are you coming with me?” I ask, to change the subject.

“Yes, that’s fine,” says Zafir.

A while later I’m standing outside the shop with a simple CD player in my hands. On our way back, we pop into the music store. It’s been a long while since I bought music for myself. At home most of the music is Vince’s. I feel like a child in a sweet shop.

Mary seems to notice, “How are you feeling, May-May?”

“Time to buy CDs!” I shout enthusiastically. Then I feel guilty. It crosses my mind that Mary probably doesn’t have the money to buy a couple of CDs spontaneously. But she doesn’t react to my remark.

I intend to watch my words more closely in the future. I buy ten CDs, they’re discounted. I buy CDs with good memories like Robbie Williams (*Let me Entertain you*), Joe Cocker (*Summer in the City*) and Shakira (*Whenever, Wherever*). I also buy CDs which my inner voice tells me to, such as an Elvis Presley CD and an Enya CD. On the way back I revel in my purchases in silence.

I pause by the magnolia to look at it before we go inside, but I make sure that Zafir doesn’t have to wait for me. He’s so kind, I want to do everything to make it easy for him.

As soon as we arrive at the Rembrandthof, I go to my room and play the Marco Borsato CD. With all my passion, I dance to the music of the song *White Light*. A choreography comes into my mind of how I met Christ. At the beginning of the song I dance with grace. At the line ‘My eyes are burning like hell, but I’d rather go blind than die here now’, I kneel like a knight. The music sounds just like a beating heart at that

moment. That's how my heart was beating when I had to do all those suicide tests. The moment the song *Carried by the White Light* starts, I meet God. Frightened to death, I jump into a corner and discover that he has my interests at heart. I dance to *White Light* until I am satisfied with the choreography. Then I dance to the other songs as well. I have an enormous amount of energy, but it feels as if it is burning my body.

In the evening the tables are all laid when I enter the room. Valerie and Mary are already seated. But now they're sitting at different tables. Mary is sitting at the same table as Hein. I decide to sit at the same table as Valerie. There's another man at our table, he looks quite pious. He has long brown hair and doesn't say a lot. Bob, the nurse, joins us. He has short hair and wears a necklace with a small charm hanging from it. It looks good on him.

"How was the shopping trip?" asks Valerie after the moment of silence. She has a calm and peaceful air about her. Her light blue eyes attract attention easily.

"I bought a CD player and a couple of CDs."

"Oh, which ones?" she asks.

"I don't know if you know them, I'm a bit older than you," I laugh. "Although Shakira, you may know her?"

"Yes, I know Shakira. *Whenever, Wherever.*"

"Exactly, that one. I went to the music therapy session today and I got to choose a couple of CDs, that's why."

"I had 'creative' today."

"Oh, what did you make?" asks Bob.

"I made a plaster cast of a small bear, which I'm painting now, and I made something for May-May," answers Valerie. She looks at me. "I'll give it to you in a moment."

Bob understands it's something personal between us and doesn't ask about it. After dinner Valerie walks away from the table. "I have to get something from my room," she says.

A little later she comes back and gives me a loving glance. "Here, for you," she says, giving me a hand-made card of green cardboard. On the outside are pink roses. Inside, it says:

. . . .

*Dear Mémè,*

*Those who share have friends. Don't ever lose faith in the human being and in yourself. You too are a child of God. Love, Liselotte*

On the left side of the card she has drawn a lot of hearts.

“How beautiful, thank you,” I say, and give her a hug. “I don’t understand, though, your name is Valerie and not Liselotte?”

“Liselotte is my real name, but I hardly ever use it. I want to use it again sometime.”

“Oh,” I answer, but I don’t fully understand. I don’t want to keep on asking, because I’m too grateful for her gift. “Thank you very much,” I repeat.

Some patients are really caring, even although they are ill themselves. Valerie is one of them.

In the evening my sister and Walter come by.

I’m so happy to see them. I’m allowed to sit with them in the comfort room.

“Good evening, sis,” I say to Famke.

“Good evening, sister.”

“Hi May,” says Walter. “So this is where you hang out all day?”

“No, only when you have an appointment unfortunately. This afternoon I met the music therapist here, he brought CDs for me. I enjoyed it so much that I went shopping and bought a CD player and ten CDs.”

“Wow. You really bought a lot, didn’t you?” says Famke.

“Yep. I often forget that my financial capacity is better than that of many of the others here. My mental capacity is something I should look after. But I need to be careful that I don’t mention what I bought to the others.”

“Yes, I understand,” says Famke.

“How are you?” I ask.

“We’ve been working hard,” says Famke, running her fingers through her hair. “And, well, Walter is glued to his computer of course.”

“Yes, Walter, I’m surprised you didn’t bring your laptop,” I say, laughing. Then I continue in a more serious tone: “I think I believe in God now.”

Famke looks surprised, as I have never believed in God. “How come?” she asks.

“I saw him all of a sudden, above my door. I felt his enormous energy, and realized it was Him. I bought Marco Borsato’s CD, with the song *White Light* on it, to remind me.”

“In case you forget God,” Walter smiles.

“Gosh, it seems scary to me,” says Famke.

“Yes, it was. I was very scared. I thought I was dying. That he wanted to kill me.”

“Couldn’t you call anyone?” asks Famke, concerned.

“It didn’t occur to me,” I say. “Plus, I just let it go. It just happened.”

“What about now, are you scared?”

“No, not really. I, uhm, have the idea that He is still here.”

“What? In this room?” my sister sounds a bit anxious.

Walter raises an eyebrow.

“Yes, can’t you feel him? He’s sitting there,” I say, and point to an empty space above a chair. “Well, when I say ‘sitting’, I mean his energy is there. You don’t see him, I mean, you don’t feel him?”

“No, I don’t feel anything, do you?” Famke asks Walter.

“No, me neither,” says Walter.

“What a pity,” I say. “Then you could have met Christ, I would have appreciated it if more people than me saw him as well. Now, you don’t believe me...”

“It doesn’t matter May,” says Famke.

I get a cuddle from her.

“We love you anyway.”

Not long after Famke and Walter’s visit, I realize that I have to choose. *Do I choose humanity or not?*

I throw my wedding ring in the bin. I have chosen world peace. My choice is Bert. Then I go out to play volleyball with the rest of the patients. I don’t mention to anyone that I have thrown away my wedding ring. Saving humanity is my secret mission.

That night I decide to go to bed early. As I’m lying in my bed, the AIVD is angry with me because Christ is my friend, that’s why they don’t let me sleep in my own bed. I have the feeling that there are thorns in my

bed. I also feel magnetic fields, negative energy coming from the bed. Nevertheless, I need to keep on cooperating with the AIVD because I want to get out of here. That's why I repeat in front of the mirror: "Get me out of here. May-May Meijer, Knight in the Order of Orange-Nassau. Love for God." I use the code 'Love for God' as the highest code, to show that I am serious about it. Then I go back to bed.

But I can't fall asleep.

After a while, I go to the night nurse in the office to ask if I can have another mattress.

"You can't, May-May, all the beds are occupied. You will have to use your own mattress."

Disappointed, I go back to my room.

I lie down in my bed again, but the negative forces seem to be even stronger. They're exhausting me. I really can't sleep on my own mattress and decide to sleep on the floor. I take the bedding off my bed and lay it down on the floor. I lie down under it. The floor's hard. After half an hour I try to lie in my bed again, but the negative energy is just too strong. So I decide to pick up my blanket and lay my blanket on the floor in the corridor, close to the glass emergency door. Through the glass I can feel a little breeze, it is as if I am closer to Christ in this way. I am looking for his support.

Suddenly, my neighbour's door opens. He comes out and looks sleepy. He's wearing a red T-shirt and no boxer shorts. Because he is wearing the colour red, I assume that he is from the secret service as well. He probably wants to test whether I am distracted by seeing his naked cock. But I am not. He asks me where the nurses' office is and I make a gesture in its direction. My neighbour walks through the corridor. I pick up my blanket and go into my room again. The negative forces are still there. They are very, very angry with me. They want to kill me. That's why I lie on the floor all night. I put a chair between my bed and myself to protect me from the negative forces.

"*We'll help you,*" says a very kind but unfamiliar voice.

"Who are you?" I ask.

"*I'm Bert's mother.*"

"Thank you," I mumble softly. I don't have any energy. The negative forces are exhausting me.

"*Yes, we will protect you,*" adds Bert.

"*Bert is so in love with you,*" reveals his mother.

Their voices comfort me. Christ supports me as well. Together they help me get through the night.

Eventually I hear a knock on the door. “Good morning May-May, did you sleep well?” asks Zafir.

How lovely to see such a friendly face.

I hesitate for a moment. Shall I tell him? “Quite alright,” I answer. Confidentiality first.

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## DEMONS ARE COMING TO AVA

I'm looking at the photo of Noah in the white wooden frame on top of my desk. Famke got it from Vince and she gave it to me. Noah's sitting cross-legged and smiling. He looks so sweet and cute. I miss him terribly. When will I finally get out of here? I can't see Vince, because I have to work with my fellow secret agent partner, but Bert hasn't shown up. I have to hide my love for Vince, it's my sacrifice for humanity. I am in a sort of shock, but I don't realize it. I let myself be led by the fantasies in my head.

In my room I dance to various songs. I play *Because the Night* because the song reminds me of Bert. I dance as sexily as I can. I wish he would come. In my thoughts I see him walking towards me in the hospital corridor. After *Because the Night*, I walk nonchalantly up and down my room to the song *Summer in the City* by Joe Cocker, as if I'm walking in New York City on a sunny day. The song reminds me of President Obama because he often seems so relaxed and easy-going. In order to maintain the balance in the world and because we are both familiar with the secret service, I also play *License to Kill* by Gladys Night for President Putin. I dance with full devotion, as an ode to love and death.

Then I go to the living room. The breakfast is the same as usual. I take some brown bread with peanut butter, and tea. I can hardly swallow because I don't want to be locked up like this. I am imprisoned, like a bird in a cage. The food seems to have been made without any love.

Mary and I are cleaning the tables after breakfast when Ava suddenly starts muttering. She's in the middle of the room.

"They are coming, they are coming," she says, her eyes wide open.

"Shhh, Ava. It's alright," says Mary, trying to calm her down.

"The demons. They are coming!" she screams while running to the kitchen and smashing a glass into pieces.

Mary and I run to the nurses' office and bang on the door. There's nobody there. Then we run along the corridor. "Nurse, nurse, nurse!!" shouts Mary, as she runs into the smoking room.

I run to the end of the corridor. "Nurses, nurses!!"

I can't find anyone, so I run back to Ava.

She has started cutting herself on her lower left arm.

"Easy, easy," I say.

Mary walks towards us. We wrap our arms around Ava, each of us standing either side of her.

"We are in the Middle Ages. Knights. Fire, fire everywhere. I am at the pyre!" she shouts. "I am at the pyre." She continues cutting herself.

I can see blood seeping from her arms. Normally, I can't stand the sight of blood, but I have no choice, I do what I have to do. "Ava, do you have a pet?" I ask, in an effort to distract her.

Ava doesn't answer and keeps on cutting.

"Ava, do you have a pet?" I ask again. I bring my face up closer to hers.

She sees me. "Yes, a cat." Ava thinks for a while and stops cutting herself.

Meanwhile, Mary and I are trying to gently grasp Ava's arm to stop her from cutting herself again.

"What's your cat's name?" I ask.

"Leopold."

The more questions I ask, the calmer Ava gets. Mary keeps her arms wrapped around Ava.

"What kind of food do you give your cat?" I continue.

"Meat chunks," says Ava.

Mary pulls the piece of glass out of her hand and puts it in her pocket. Gently we try to get her to walk to the patio.

"How old is your cat?" I ask.

Ava stops to think. "Eight."

"Do you know where you are?" I continue.



“In the Middle Ages? No... I’m in...”

“You’re in the Rembrandthof. It’s 25 March, 2009.”

“Oh. Yes, yes.” Ava answers, slightly dazed.

In order to make her feel more secure, Mary adds, “We’re in Hilversum.”

Looking at Ava’s lower arms, we see dozens of cuts. Two cuts are new and are bleeding gently.

“I’ll see if I can find a nurse,” says Mary, jumping up.

I look at Ava. She looks tired.

“I’ll leave you alone for a while,” I say, and go to my room.

What I didn’t tell Ava was that I was going to talk with her demons. At first I hear the same as she had been hearing: “Middle Ages! Fire! Fire!” I get to my room and open the door quickly, because it’s obvious to me that this spirit wants to tell me something. “I am standing on a pyre and I am getting burned. I fought like a lion for my fatherland. Fire!”

“Jeanne d’Arc, Jeanne d’Arc”, I mumble, as I lock the door. “You have been very important to us, you are in our history books.” I keep on talking to Jeanne. I walk up and down in my room as I did with Christ. “You fought against the English for the French and were burned on a pyre.” Jeanne knows I understand her, I can sense it. “They made a video clip about you, a song with a female knight on a horse.” I mimic the motions of riding a horse to show Jeanne which song I mean. I also make combat movements with my imaginary sword.

*“Aaahh, the flames are flaring around me! The heat of the fire is unbearable. Betrayed. You felt betrayed.”* I feel a wave of energy being released from Jeanne. Relieved that someone understands how tragic her end had been. That’s why she didn’t want to leave this world and upset Ava. Her mind was not at rest.

“We do understand each other, don’t we Jeanne?”

“Yes,” says Jeanne.

I walk to the living room and continue communicating with Jeanne.

*Jeanne, there are films about you,* I communicate via telepathy.

“Oh, that’s nice,” says Jeanne. Her voice sounds happy, but less happy than when I told her about her place in history. It becomes clear to me that fame doesn’t interest her, it’s about justice. She wants to be understood, that’s why her spirit is still in this world. I return to my

room. I ask Jeanne what music she wants to hear and let her choose between Enya, *And Winter Came* and Evanescence, *Open the Door*. On the cover of the Enya CD, Enya is wearing a white dress with a train. The bridle and saddle of the horse make it look like it is a horse belonging to a knight. On the cover of the Evanescence CD stands a woman with a strapless white dress and a long train. She has long, brown hair that reaches to her waist. She looks over her shoulder to a monumental door behind her. Jeanne wants to hear Enya's song. Because of the horse. I choose the song *Journey of the Angels*. I don't know it, but the title seems to fit. I dance gracefully to the song. I see Jeanne is calming down.

"May-May, there's a dance session starting now, are you coming?" asks Bob.

I forget about Jeanne and walk to the nurses' office.

Ruby, the dance teacher, is waiting for us. She's a tall woman, with short spiky hair and an elegant posture, just like a real dancer. She comes from Australia but has been living in the Netherlands for a long time.

Mary joins us. We go up to a circular room located on the second floor of the main building. Everything in the room is white, so I get a bit disoriented sometimes.

"We'll start with some free movement as a warm up," says Ruby, as she turns on the music. She's wearing a black, tight T-shirt and black trousers with small tassels on the sides. She dances lithely to the music, moving around the room to make us feel free to move.

"Now, I want you to make some very strong movements," says Ruby, putting on some Indian music.

It's fun, and Mary and I do our very best. Then we dance with different-coloured long scarves. I choose a white one, the colour of peace. I dance as elegantly as I can and imagine I'm performing in front of an audience. I express my love for nature and the world. Finally we do a dance for the rising and setting sun. Then Ruby guides us back to the ward.

Mary and I go to the inner patio.

Ava's sitting on the wooden bench. She mutters softly, "Oh, no, oh, no. They are coming."

"It's alright, Ava," I say, wrapping my arm around her.

“They are disguised as tarantulas this time.”

“It’s alright, Ava, it’s alright,” I repeat. “Jeanne has to get used to the idea that she mustn’t visit you anymore.”

“Tarantulas as big as rats. Help, they’re coming!”

“OK. Let’s talk about your cat. What was his name again?”

“Leopold.”

“What colour is he?”

“Ginger.”

“How long have you had him?”

“Since he was six months old... Oh, oh... OK, I’m feeling a bit better now. Thank you,” she says. After five minutes of silence she asks, “What did you say about Jeanne?”

I look at Mary. I decide that there’s no point in keeping any secrets from her, and we’re alone on the patio. “I meant Jeanne d’Arc,” I say. “I don’t know if we should talk about her, it’s been quite an intense day for you already.”

“That’s OK.”

“I have to go for my... you know,” says Mary, standing up and pointing to her belly.

I understand immediately what she means.

She told me earlier about her colostomy bag which she needs to change regularly.

I nod and Mary goes to her room.

I look at Ava, who is staring in front of her. “Ava? I think those demons, the ones you talked to, were the spirit of Jeanne d’Arc.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Yes, do you remember I was holding you this morning? I talked with your spirits. In the beginning I heard: ‘Middle Ages, knights and pyre’. Later it occurred to me that Jeanne talked to me. I performed for Jeanne as if I was a female knight riding a white horse, you know like in the song *Maid of Orleans*. Later I danced for her to Enya’s song, *The Journey of the Angels*.”

“I... I...” Ava starts shivering, “My mother said that I talk French sometimes. But I can’t speak French.”

“Then it makes sense,” I say softly. I didn’t expect to get any proof.

“What did she want to do with me?”

“She was burned on a pyre even though she was innocent. I guess her mind didn’t find any rest. She must have felt very betrayed.”

“It’s good to know. Brrr, I think it’s scary too, I got goose bumps,” says Ava, bringing her knees to her chin.

After lunch, Ava has a meeting with the doctors. She’s elated when she comes back. “They say I’m fine. I can go home in a couple of days!”

Secretly I wonder if our intervention helped.

As if she can read my thoughts, Ava says, “It’s all because of you!”

“And Mary,” I add.

“OK, also partly because of Mary,” Ava admits.

When I return to my room, I notice it has been cleaned. The waste bin has been emptied. There’s an empty, clean rubbish bag in it. And my wedding ring has gone. I want to get it back. I feel weak. Vulnerable. I can’t concentrate. I am sad. Can’t cry. Pain.

## LOCKED UP IN THE ISOLATION CELL

The days are passing by without anything seeming to happen. There are moments that I need to cry because I miss Noah or when I listen to Elvis Presley singing his song *In the Ghetto* about the immense sadness of a mother in the ghetto who cannot feed her child. At these moments I close the red curtains of my room and sob uncontrollably in silence. Sometimes I wait till I hear Bert's footsteps in the corridor. I wait endlessly for him to pick me up so we can work together on peace. I try to survive, minute by minute. I don't plan anything. I'm glad that here – in contrast to GGZ Delfland – there's a day programme with activities. We have dance, music, creative therapy, sport and drama. But I still feel locked up. I often lean with my head against the emergency exit. It's a glass door with a green light above it. Behind that door, freedom awaits. The gravel path, the blossoming shrubs. Behind these are white villas, monumental buildings. There's just a fence between us, but they are two separate worlds. The inhabitants of the villas are free, free to go wherever they want.

When I'm in my room, I hear the voices of scientists.

*"We're going to do some tests with you, you are special."*

"No, no, please don't."

*"Come on."*

"No, no tests. Tests remind me of *Splash*."

I lie down on the floor as if I am the mermaid from the film *Splash*. I

am a mermaid, I am locked up in a cage. The scientists are observing me. They don't take my needs into account. As if I'm just an object they have to study, and not a living, loving creature. My tail is losing its colour. I need to get out. I start waving my arms. I'm nearly dying because I need the sea. The scientists are killing me.

Then I hear the voice of Pamala, a former colleague from the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam.

*"Come on," she says. "You're a scientist yourself, so you trust us, don't you?"*

"Well..."

*"You trust me, right?"*

"I, I... I know you," I say with hesitation in my voice, because I don't like the idea of doing tests at all.

*"Get up,"* instructs Pamala.

Slowly I get up.

*"Go to your bathroom. Now."*

I go to the bathroom.

Then she continues, *"Try to get a connection with energy outside the earth. Think about the Suske and Wiske comic Minilots of Kokonera."*

I do as I am told although I don't want to do any tests. I'm standing with the palms of my hands open to see if I feel radiation. "Minilots of Kokonera," I say out loud. "Ummmmmm. Ummmm." I feel as if I am producing an enormous amount of energy. After a few seconds, I feel a soft type of moss touching my leg. Surprised, I brush the floor of the shower booth with my hand until it's gone. Then I feel an enormous amount of energy coming towards me. It's the size of a bucket, but it contains a lot of mass. I crouch down in a squatting position, so that I am on the same level as he is. He is the chief captain!

*"Good day,"* I say to him via telepathy.

He doesn't reply.

I assume he's from Mars.

On the one hand, I'm very scared of him, and on the other hand I'm not, because he's so small. Then he suddenly leaves without saying anything. Again I feel moss on my knee, but this time it's softer than before. It leaves me puzzled for quite a while.

*"Well done,"* says Pamala. *"We're finished for today. I'm very satisfied. Never expected to reach Mars."*

Pamala's spirit leaves, and I am alone in my room with the feeling that I contacted the chief captain from Mars.

After dinner I'm in my room again. In front of the mirror in my bathroom, I ask once more if the Dutch secret service can come and release me. "Get me out of here. May-May Meijer. Panther. Knight in the Order of Orange-Nassau."

Nothing happens.

"*Shall I help you?*" asks a female voice.

"Who are you?" I ask, terrified.

"*I'm Ramona. You met my husband, Peter, this afternoon.*"

Oh, from Mars, I think. "I am... I am scared of you."

"*I heard you have a friend called Bert?*"

"Yes."

"*Where is he? Can't he help you?*"

"They will arrange a meeting between us."

"*Tell them to hurry. It's important for my husband and me that we can trust the people on Earth. You are important because you are communicating with Christ.*"

"It's different. They think that I am psychotic."

"*I don't care. We communicate with the strongest couples. Bert should be here in ten minutes, or we will let the Earth disappear!*"

It's Thursday, 9 April 2009. I look at my watch. It's 7:20 PM.

"Christ, Christ, what should I do?" I ask, but Christ is gone.

"Where is Christ?" I ask Peter and Ramona.

"*He's gone, he's scared of us.*"

At 7:25 PM I pace up and down in my room. "I don't know what I should do to get Bert here. Please don't let the Earth disappear!"

"No," says Ramona adamantly.

I continue to walk up and down my room. At 7:30, Ramona shouts, "*It's time. We will let the Earth vanish!*"

"No. NOOOO!!" I throw my mobile phone out of the window so that the people from Mars cannot trace me. I stand on the window sill and start trying to break the glass with a dish.

"Air. WE NEED AIR!!" I shout, as the dish smashes and my finger starts bleeding. Dark red blood trickles down my fingers. I open the door of my room.

“May-May, what are you doing?” asks Bob. “Come with me, we’ll get a bandage for your finger.” He walks with me to the office and puts a bandage on my finger.

Ramona keeps on nagging me. “*We are going to attack Earth! Attack Earth!*”

As soon as I am back in the living room, I grab a chair and smash it against the glass door to get some fresh air. I’m convinced that fresh air will save humanity.

“AIR. WE NEED AIR!!!” I shout, and smash the chair against the door again. I wait to hear the sound of breaking glass, but I don’t hear anything. I smash the chair again, harder this time.

“AIR. AIR!!” I shout. The glass still doesn’t break. In blind panic I smash the chair against the window one more time.

Then Bob grabs me by the back of my jumper. “That’s enough, May-May,” says Bob. “I think it’s better if you sleep in the isolation room tonight.”

Four nurses take me to the isolation cell. I feel like a prisoner being taken away. Before entering the isolation cell, I need to take off my belt and remove my contact lenses. The walls of the isolation cell are white and there’s a bed with white sheets in the middle of the room. In addition, there are plastic cups with drinking water on the floor and a paper pot I can relieve myself in, and that’s it.

One of the nurses calls a psychiatrist, who says I have to take 15 mg of Zyprexa.

The nurses leave, and I’m really in solitary now. I’m totally dependent on the nurses. If they forget me, I will die. I start walking on my hands and knees as if I’m a panther in a cage. I walk close to the walls and over the bed.

Then I hear Ramona again. “*We have started by killing professor Porter.*”  
“No. NOOOO!!!”

If he’s been murdered, more killings will follow. I ring the bell in my cell three times. But no-one comes. Meanwhile, the sheets on the bed start moving. I take one sheet and beat the other sheets to stop them from moving. I start banging my hands on the door.

“Let me out of here! Let me out of here! THE EARTH WILL VANISH!!”

The door remains closed.

How many people have died? I don’t know. I need to talk to someone!



Again I bang my hands against the door. I wait a while, but I don't hear anything. Then I lie down on the bed. The earth is about to vanish and I'm lying on my bed. Away from Noah. I lie on my bed the whole night. Occasionally I get up and walk up and down the cell like a panther.

In the morning I hear Ramona's voice, "*That was a joke about letting the earth vanish.*"

"What about professor Porter? Was that a joke too?" I ask with a quivering voice.

"Yes, *you're not ready for us obviously.*" And Ramona is gone.

I'm totally confused. I lie in bed for some minutes. With my eyes wide open, I stare at the ceiling.

I wait and wait. I am awake. What would the time be? I wish I could look at my watch. How many minutes have passed? Then suddenly the door opens with a big swing and a nurse comes in.

"May-May, are you comi... Oh, we forget to turn off the light," she observes.

"Yes, you did."

"I'm sorry about that."

"Well. It's... it's OK," I say, as the nurse hands me my clothes.

I put on my clothes, my lenses and my watch. A while later Bob asks me to complete an evaluation form about my stay in isolation. One of the questions is how I would express my experiences with forced medication and my stay in isolation. I write down that it seems to me like *One Flew Over the Cuckoos' Nest*, the film in which a psychiatric patient is in forced hospitalization. I also write that the nurses do not seem to be able to imagine what it is like to stay in an isolation cell and that they should sleep in it as part of their training. In addition, I remark that it is terrible to only have one paper pot to relieve myself in. What if you have to pee and poo? At the bottom of the paper I note that they got me out of the isolation cell at 10.30 AM. I felt really forgotten.

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## I WANT TO GET OUT OF HERE

After I've filled in the evaluation form, I'm allowed to attend creative therapy. We work in a room with a big window and two large white tables in the middle, set against each other. Some patients are painting, some are cutting cardboard. I look helplessly around me. It's so different to my academic work. The kind therapist has twinkling dark-blue eyes and blonde-red hair. She wears a pink beaded bracelet. Encouraged by her passion for her work and the patients, I start making a bracelet. I use a stone with an eye in it, which reminds me of my encounter with Mars. Two light-blue beads surround the stone with the eye, which symbolize the moss I felt before and after the encounter with the chief captain. I hide the symbolic meaning of the bracelet from everyone.

My father and Rumiana come to visit me in the evening. I don't feel very awake. It's as though I'm living in two separate worlds. The world everyone else is living in, and the other world, which consists of a thought stream in my head with my work for the AIVD and my mission to achieve world peace, together with my fellow secret agent. This other world has to be kept secret from everyone. Top secret. Which is why I'm very careful about everything I say.

"Hi," I mumble, kissing my father and Rumiana on the cheek.

"Hello, shall we have some tea?" asks my father.

"Tea... ? Tea? Yes," I say, puzzled. "Oh... I need to go. Wait a moment." And I walk out of the room to talk with the secret service. In the corridor,

I start pacing up and down. No-one must know about the secret service and I can hardly concentrate, so I mumble to myself. I tell myself, "I want to get out of here. I want to fulfil my mission. Code love of God." When I come back, I see that my father and Rumiana are looking at each other. I can't talk to them.

My father goes to the open kitchen and brews tea for himself and Rumiana. While he is drinking it, he says, "May-May, I think you need to rest."

As soon as my father and Rumiana finish their tea, they go home.

That night I sleep in my own room again.

The following morning I flip through the pages of a brochure about compulsory admission I was given by the confidential counsellor for patients. I insist on going home and I read about the rules to repeal compulsory admission. Famke visits me during visiting hours.

"Did you have a good time with Dad and Rumiana yesterday?"

I stare at her. "Dad, was Dad here yesterday?"

Famke looks down at the floor and sighs.

"Famke, I am not psychotic, I want to get out of here!"

Famke is calm and alert now. She looks at me with her big brown eyes. "The doctors think it's better if you stay here for a while."

"It's terrible being here. The door is locked, literally."

"Yes, I saw that when I came in."

"Don't you understand how terrible it is here?"

"Yes, but we want the best for you. We think that this is best."

"And Dad, what does Dad think about it?"

"Dad, Mum, Walter and me all think the same. It's better if you stay here for a while. We want the best for you, that's why we listen to what the doctors say."

I look at my sister. She seems determined. We have never before opposed each other in such an important matter.

"What are you going to do?" asks Famke.

"Try to talk to the medical director. He can repeal the judicial authorization order. If he allows me to go, I can go."

"Where did you read that?"

"In the brochure about compulsory admission. I guess it was page 13."

Famke smiles. "Occupational disability, May?"

"Yes, I still have it. If the medical director answers one of the three following questions with a 'no', I can go home. These questions are: one, is there any danger? Two, is the danger caused by a psychiatric illness; and three, is there an alternative solution less drastic than compulsory hospitalization? I've already made an appointment, 17 April."

"Oh," says Famke.

"If the medical director lets me go, can I stay at your house?" I ask.

"I don't think the medical director will allow you to..."

"Yes, but in case I'm allowed to go home?"

"But the doctors don't want you to go home."

"Come on, yes or no?"

"I think it's better not to."

I sigh deeply.

"You know it, May, it's only because we want the best for you."

I delve into my handbag and pull out a small silver pouch.

"I've got a present for you. I didn't want to give it to you earlier because it would have seemed like bribery. These earrings are for you."

"Why are you giving them to me now?" asks Famke warily, as she takes the silver pouch.

"It's a sign that we will stay friends. In case it goes wrong, we will find each other again."

"No, I don't want them. It's like a goodbye present," Famke says. She returns the silver pouch to me. "I need to go now. Take care May," she says. She gives me a hug and leaves.

Once Famke is gone, I lean my head against the glass emergency exit door. I feel abandoned. I start feeling sorry for prisoners. I feel their suffering, being locked up all the time, their embarrassment, their struggles. They deserve people who care about them. A chance in life.

When I hear the song *Stairway to Heaven* on the radio in the living room, I decide to call my friend Saskia. She used to play that song on her guitar when we were studying at the School of Hospitality Management in Maastricht.

"Hi, Sas, it's me, May-May."

"Hi, May, how are you?"

"Not so well."

"Yes, Famke told me."

"I have a question: can I stay at your place?"

“Why at my place? Why not at Famke’s place?”

“Because the doctors think it’s better if I stay here.”

“Then I think it’s better if you stay there as well. I’ll discuss it with Famke just to make sure.”

“OK.”

I hang up. Not only do my dear sister, father and mother not want to help me, but my best friend has let me down, too. I will have to deal with it on my own.

The next day, my cousin Igor visits me. He is calm and kind. His father is my mum’s older brother. Igor works in ICT and is married to a woman from Thailand. They got married in Bangkok. Igor has an athletic posture and is bald.

“Do you want to walk to the ice cream café with me?” I ask as I lock the door of my room.

“That’s fine, May,” says Igor, as he asks the nurse if we can go outside. He approves. When we are walking out on the street, Igor asks me, “Are you OK?”

“I’m having a talk with the medical director in two days’ time. I want to get out of here, but I have no place to stay.”

“What does Famke think about it?”

“She thinks it’s better if I stay here. She listens to the doctors primarily.”

“I think that it’s better if you stay here too.” I look at Igor, aghast. Although I didn’t intend to ask him and the opportunity arises coincidentally, I secretly hope that I can stay with him. Then he continues:

“I know what it’s like, to fight for something... You can sleep at my place if you want.”

Igor looks at me. He has tears in his eyes.

I know what he means. His marriage was opposed by his father. That’s why he doesn’t see his father anymore. He knows what it means to be alone.

“Fine, thank you,” I whisper.

We walk to the park.

“I’m really glad you’re helping me out. At some point I had the feeling I had nowhere to go,” I say, relieved.

“Yes, it’s alright, May, it’s alright.”

Together we walk through the park. To our left there’s a swan swimming in the canal and to our right there are enormous trees. It’s relaxing. We enjoy the park and walk on. Before Igor goes home, he also picks up my suit from home, so that I can make a good impression for my talk with the medical director. Finally, someone is standing by my side.

Today is the day. I have an appointment with the medical director at 10.30 AM. I’m glad I can put on my suit again. It’s black with very thin white pinstripes. Underneath I’m wearing a tight red T-shirt. I feel comfortable in my suit after wearing jeans for several weeks. Hein and Mary compliment me on my outfit at breakfast. With high expectations, I go into the interview room exactly on time.

“Good day, I’m Ms. van Duin,” says the medical director as she offers me a weak hand. She’s wearing a brown jacket, and I’m happy that I’m wearing a suit.

“We can be brief. Very brief,” she says, looking at me as I take a seat.

“I support the decision of your treating doctor. She thinks it’s better if you stay here for a while.”

I am astonished.

“What about the evaluation form I filled in about the isolation cell? Didn’t you see it?”

“Yes, it was given to me,” the medical director answers curtly.

I wait for her to give a further explanation, but she doesn’t say anything anymore.

“OK, then we’ll leave it at that,” I say. I feel it won’t make any sense talking any further. I get up, shake her hand and walk straight out of the room.

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## PSYCHOTIC PEOPLE ARE PARANORMAL BUT OUT OF CONTROL

“Seeing that you are the patient with whom I disagree most, I would like to ask you if you want to have a conversation with my supervisor.” Maureen van Dijk, my doctor, presses her lips tightly together and looks at me earnestly. She has bright-green eyes and is a young woman, in her late twenties, I would say. My impression is that she is ambitious, thorough and professional. She continues, “That conversation will take place behind a wall with a one-way mirror, so that people behind the mirror can listen as well, and the room doesn’t become too crowded. Are you willing to participate in this?”

I decide in a split second. Apparently, Maureen is still in training. I always feel sympathy for students, and of course I want to help someone who is in training.

“Yes,” I answer quickly.

“Good, the conversation will take place this afternoon at 3.30 PM.”

I talk about it with Mary and Ava. They encourage me to be open. Ava sees it as a chance to tell the doctors how I chased her demons away and how I helped her to stay ‘in the moment’.

Five minutes before the conversation is due to begin, Bob takes me to a room where I have been before, the room where I had the talk for the emergency help. I hadn’t noticed the mirrored wall before.

Maureen is waiting for me. “May-May, this is doctor Emmanuel Amazayan,” she says.

Doctor Amazayan takes a seat behind the mirrored wall together with Doctor Buizen, an intern, and nurse Madelon. Maureen, her supervisor and I take our seats in the office.

“Good,” says the man, giving me an intense look. “I’ll introduce myself. I am Doctor Rider, Maureen’s supervisor. She invited me to talk with you, because you both seem to disagree. So she wants to hear my opinion about you. What do you think of that?”

“That’s very brave of her.”

“What do you mean?”

“You are her supervisor; therefore I assume you will also give her a grade. Therefore I think it’s brave of her to choose a patient she disagrees with.”

“You’re giving her a compliment?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Do you know what I mean when I say that you disagree with each other?”

“Yes, she thinks I’m psychotic and I don’t.”

“No?” asks Doctor Rider.

“I only really understand people who hear voices and that’s weird for most people. Have you heard of Derek Ogilvie?”

“No.” Doctor Rider raises his eyebrows.

“June Field, do you know her?”

“No, never heard of her...” Doctor Rider is silent for a while. “Why are you asking this?”

“I believe that people who hear voices are a kind of spiritual medium. Like Derek Ogilvie, he communicates with spirits and babies. The point is that he can talk to them if he wants to, he can control it. People who hear voices can’t control it.”

Doctor Rider is doing his best to show interest in me, but his face speaks volumes. It seems as though he wants to say that it’s complete nonsense, but he doesn’t. Maybe he’s heard so many crazy stories that this is just another one, or maybe he’s doing his best to stay polite.

“I discovered it accidentally with a fellow patient here. She was cutting herself. I asked her questions and this stopped her from cutting herself.”

“Yes,” nods Doctor Rider. Maureen looks interested too. I’m having doubts about whether I should continue and tell them about Jeanne,



because I know they will have difficulties with this part. But because they confirmed the first part of my story, I take the chance.

“That fellow patient was being bothered by demons. In fact they were not real demons but the spirit of Jeanne d’Arc. Her soul couldn’t find peace because her life was ended so brutally. I talked with the spirit of Jeanne, and since then Ava has not been bothered by demons anymore...”

Doctor Rider has the same look on his face as when I spoke about Derek Ogilvie. He exchanges glances with Maureen.

“I am thinking about writing a book about this. You can test this theory. I assume that people who hear voices will be more likely to support this theory than people who don’t hear voices themselves.”

“May-May, May-May, you’re going too quickly,” interrupts Maureen.

“I think that people who hear voices themselves will be more likely to believe that people who hear voices are mediums than...”

“Oh, you want to test it?” asks Maureen.

“Yes.”

“You expect that your idea will have more support from people who hear voices themselves than people who don’t hear voices?”

“Yes.”

“OK, I get it,” says Maureen, while she gives a firm nod. Doctor Rider nods as well.

“I am considering writing a book about it,” I add.

“Do you want to test these ideas?” I ask Doctor Rider.

“I’ll wait until the book appears,” he says kindly. “If writing a book helps you, I encourage you to do it. Good, I want to leave it here.”

“Good,” nods Maureen van Dijk.

I shake hands with both of them and leave the room.

I walk to the patio. Mary and Ava are standing in a corner, smoking a cigarette.

“May-May, how did it go?” asks Mary.

“Not good,” I answer. “They didn’t believe me.”

“Did they say that?” asks Mary, lighting a new cigarette.

“No, but I could tell. You know what it is? Most people don’t hear voices. They think it’s a weird story.”

“Exactly, and you wanted to go to the association of people who hear voices, right?” asks Mary.

I nod. "Yes, that's my plan, to ask them if they want to contribute to my research."

"I believe in it, May-May, really! I believe in it," says Ava, gently pinching my arm.

"Thank you," I whisper.

I'm soon to have a court session about the provisional authorization. The doctors want to extend my stay in the Rembrandthof. I decide that I want a new lawyer. I ask nurse Arjen if he knows how I can find a good one. He's often very helpful and one of the few nurses who doesn't smoke, which creates a kind of bond, even though I'm the patient and he's the nurse. That distinction is bigger than any other distinction there can be. That's how it should be in a psychiatric hospital, but sometimes I feel sad that they see me more as a patient than as a human being. As if patients are of a lower caste and do not really belong. I don't have these feelings with Arjen and that's why I ask him to help me. He mentions that I should try the department of Compulsory Admissions at the court in Amsterdam. When I call them, the employee mentions the name of the lawyer Ysbrand Black from Amsterdam. I call him. He seems professional and sympathetic. He says he finds it important to prepare for court sessions. So I choose him as my new lawyer.

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## GETTING FORCED MEDICATION

“Just leave me alone, leave me alone.” I’m singing along with Michael Jackson intensely and from the bottom of my heart. I feel his pain, the immense pressure put on him by being in the spotlight all the time. His beautiful heart, his desire for a better world. His enormous pain when they accused him of sexually abusing children. Tears are rolling down my cheeks when Doctor Buizen knocks on my door. I brush them away quickly.

“May-May, can you come with me to my office?” He walks in front of me to the interview room I know too well. There’s a wooden desk with a computer and four black chairs. The carpet is dark brown and the walls are white.

As soon as I walk in, Doctor Buizen says, “We have decided to give you forced medication.”

It’s a simple sentence, but it causes the ground under my feet to fall away. I feel betrayed. Yesterday, I was so honest, telling the doctors everything that was on my mind and now they decide to give me forced medication. In a rage, I rush out of the office and escape to my room. I call my lawyer and my sister to tell them that I will be given forced medication.

. . .

A couple of hours later, two nurses arrive to inject me with Haloperidol. One nurse, Madelon, looks a bit like Marilyn Monroe. She has platinum blonde hair and ‘smokey’ eyes. The other nurse, Irene, has long, straight, red-brown hair in a ponytail and is sturdily built.

“I’d rather have fifteen milligrams of Zyprexa pills than an injection, if that’s possible.”

“We have passed that phase. We think this is better for you,” says Irene.

“Why?” I ask.

“Because you will refuse to take them,” answers Madelon.

“No, that’s not true, if it’s forced medication and I have to take fifteen milligrams of Zyprexa every evening in the form of oral pills, I will take them. I believe in the Dutch rule of law.”

Madelon and Irene don’t say anything and continue their preparation. I hate the hypodermic syringe because there is absolutely no form of cooperation. It affects my autonomy. I feel betrayed and am reminded about what Mary said to me a couple of days ago: “But May-May, you are not at all aggressive, you wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

“We think this is better for you,” says Irene, in a sincere tone.

I don’t respond. I can’t listen to them. Because I am not psychotic, and because I feel betrayed.

“If the psychiatrist was a real man, he would give me the injection himself and not ask you to do it!”

Madelon and Irene don’t react.

“We want you to cooperate, otherwise we will bring in extra help,” continues Irene.

“*Ask to call your lawyer,*” says an inner voice.

“I just want to call my lawyer.”

“That’s OK.”

I call my lawyer but he doesn’t answer. I leave a message. It’s important that he knows what they’re doing to me, so that he knows what I’m going through and can defend my case. “Mr. Black, this is May-May. I want to let you know that they’re giving me the injection now.”

“OK, that’s done. You can choose where you want to have the injection,” says Irene. “In your upper leg or in your buttock? I recommend picking a spot with a lot of meat, so if I were you I would choose my buttock.”

“Good, in my buttock. Do you mind if I take some time to adjust to the situation?”

“Just a few minutes, then, we don’t really think it helps and you’ll only become more scared,” says Irene.

For two minutes we stand in my room in silence. I concentrate and try to relax to give up my fight. I will be getting an injection I don’t want. An injection which will make me feel incredibly weak. An injection which will make me unable to talk to Christ and Jeanne. An injection which will probably give me the feeling that a bomb has exploded in my head. The same feeling I got when I started taking Zyprexa and then Seroquel. The feeling that you can’t stand on your own legs anymore, that it’s all getting too much.

“OK, that’s it. Lower your trousers and lie on your bed.”

I sigh deeply and do as I’m told.

“The best you can do is to wiggle your toes as you get the injection. Here it comes. Do you feel it?”

“Yes, I feel it.”

“Wiggle your toes. Well done,” says Irene. “Just a little longer and we’re there. It’s quite a thick liquid. It’s a dose for two weeks.”

Within an hour, my sister and Walter arrive. “May, how are you?”

“Well, they gave me that injection.”

“Yes, we heard.”

“Did it hurt?”

“No, the injection itself didn’t hurt. It is more... more....”

“You can say it.”

“I didn’t want it.”

My sister brings her face towards me. I feel her warmth against my skin and smell her perfume. Then she jumps up: “Look May, we’ve brought something for you.”

“Orange juice and Coke, Diet Coke,” I say, taking the drinks from her. “You know how much I love it. The only thing I drink here is tea, milk and buttermilk. It’s driving me crazy. Oh no, I was already crazy...”

“We don’t think you’re crazy,” says Walter.

“No, at most you’re a little insane,” jokes my sister.

I laugh along with her.

“We’ve also brought this for you,” Famke continues, handing me a

fresh feta salad. I take it from her. I can't really express how happy I am with her gifts. She bought the salads from my favourite greengrocer near the hospital. I don't like the food I get here. They cook nearly everything for too long. It seems as if the food is prepared without any love or care. But the greengrocer's salads seem to be made with love. They are fresh and tasty and I usually enjoy eating them in silence.

"Can I give them to you now?" I ask, as I hand her the silver pouch with the pink earrings and wait for her reaction.

"Oh, they're lovely," Famke says.

"And this is what I bought you today," I say, handing her a little pink bag. "I have to do your nickname of 'Pink Lady' justice."

Famke takes out the present from the bag. "A pink jumper! How lovely! That's my colour! Thank you!"

Suddenly an awful feeling comes over me. "It's as though I want to bribe you because of the hearing the day after tomorrow."

"No," she answers. "I know that's not the case, because if it was, I would give everything back to you. We've known each other our whole lives, haven't we?"

Although I am too weak and in too much shock to let her lovely words and care sink in, I have a slight feeling that things are getting better.

## THE COURT SESSION IN THE REMBRANDTHOF

“Is your court session this Thursday, May?” asks Walter.

“Yes, I have a preliminary meeting tomorrow. If the judge decides I can go home on Thursday, can I go home with you?” I ask my sister.

She looks at me wide-eyed.

“You do ask some difficult questions,” Famke says to give herself time to think. Silence reigns for a while.

“If the judge says you can go home, you can stay in our home,” says Walter. His words break the silence gently. He knows how to express himself simply, especially when everyone is having a hard time. I’m very grateful to him.

“Yes, that’s alright,” says Famke, although I still notice some doubt in her eyes.

“If the judge wants to talk to you, can I call you?”

“Yes,” she says, determinedly. Her confidence is coming back. We hug each other.

In the morning, before my lawyer arrives, I make sure that we can sit in the comfort room. It’s a relaxed and cosy room. I’m wearing the same clothes I had on during my meeting with the medical director, my black striped suit.

“May-May, your lawyer is here,” says Bob.

A man comes in. “Hi, I’m Ysbrand Black,” says my lawyer and shakes my hand.

Ysbrand is about the same age as me, and has a long ponytail. He’s wearing a shirt and neat trousers. Bob serves us tea and coffee. Ysbrand browses through the documents. “I found your evaluation form about the isolation cell spot on. Having one cardboard chamber pot must have been horrible.”

“Yes, it was.”

“And the fact that you couldn’t ask for assistance because the bell didn’t work, that’s no fun either.”

“No, not at all.”

“Another issue that will certainly be addressed is your accommodation. If the judge decides you are free to go, where will you stay?”

“I can stay at my sister’s place.”

“Can you write this down please? OK. That’s most important. I will see you tomorrow.”

“Ysbrand, your coffee.”

“I don’t drink coffee, I drink tea. Actually, I prefer hot chocolate.”

“Why didn’t you say so?” I ask.

“Now you know for tomorrow,” he says, smiling, as he gathers his files.

Directly after my lawyer is gone, I call my sister.

“Fam, this is me speaking. I know you’re at work, but I want to ask you if you can fax me a letter saying that I can sleep at your place so I can hand it over to the judge.”

“No, I won’t do that,” Famke answers curtly. “I am not going to fax you a note.”

“Why not?” I ask.

“Yesterday we said we would trust each other, this means we don’t have to send notes to each other.”

For a while, I reflect on what she’s saying.

“I will be coming to the court session tomorrow.”

I become hopeful, but first I want to be sure. “So you won’t be choosing the side of my doctor tomorrow?” I ask.



“No,” she says. “You’re right, I shouldn’t be in their seat. I’ll come as your sister tomorrow and you can sleep at our place. I don’t want you to stay out on the streets.”

Although I’m too ill to cheer out loud, I feel so happy. We are sisters again and everything’s fine between us.

Today is the day, the day of the court session, Thursday, 23 April 2009. Ysbrand, Famke and I have a preliminary conversation in the comfort room. I give them tea with the label *fit and wellness*. Ysbrand explains that he might give an alternative argument in order to shorten the authorization for staying in the Rembrandthof from six months to three. Famke asks if she needs to say anything. Just as Ysbrand says that she can only answer questions from the judge, a nurse knocks on the door. The judge has arrived.

The judge is a striking woman. Her lipstick is immaculate and her blonde hair is styled in a bob. The court clerk is a man of middle age. As Bob had said this morning, another doctor will take part in the meeting. I have seen her before at a morning meeting, in which we all sit in a circle and say how we had slept the night before and how we see the new day ahead. She has long, black hair that reaches down to her waist. She has a star tattooed close to her eyes, which gives her an exotic look. Irene represents the nurses.

After everyone has shaken hands, the judge opens, “Good morning everyone. We are here because the public prosecutor has requested to bestow a provisional authorization to continue the stay in the psychiatric hospital of May-May Meijer, born 14 February 1972, staying in Hilversum at the location Rembrandthof. I would like to give the doctor the opportunity to speak.”

“In my opinion, the stay of Mrs. Meijer should be extended. She shows aggressive behaviour. She attacked her father and a police officer. She has a form of schizophrenia and refuses to take her medication.”

“May I add something to this?” I ask the judge.

“Yes, you may.”

“I don’t want to take my medication in the Rembrandthof. I had a good relationship with my psychiatrist at the outpatients’ clinic.”

“She let me know that the dosage you took was too low,” replies the judge.

“I do not agree, but you’re right that we discussed the dosage,” I say quickly.

“I would like to stress the importance of an appropriate dosage of medicine. An appropriate dosage can suppress a psychotic episode. Until recently she was talking about the AIVD. She also spoke to herself in the mirror, while frightened,” says the doctor.

“There are more people who talk to themselves in the mirror,” my lawyer replies.

“Yes, but then they are not afraid and they don’t talk out loud. One of the nurses saw May-May do that when he was on the patio.”

“Yes,” adds the nurse. “I also saw that she hit herself in the face with her open hand. Self-mutilation.”

“Yes, but that’s because I said something stupid. It’s an exaggeration to call that self-mutilation.”

The judge frowns. “Good. Doctor, do you want to add anything?” she asks.

“Yes, the risk of suicide cannot be ignored.”

Famke freezes, even though this message is not new to her. The evening that the two police officers came to get me, I said that I might commit suicide. The AIVD instructed me to say so, but Famke doesn’t know this.

The doctor continues her story, “We want to put the patient on medication and stabilize her first. After that we want to work on her conditional discharge.”

“Mrs. Meijer,” says the judge, looking straight at me. “What do you think about this?”

“I would like to go home soon. Before, when I was in compulsory admission, incidents occurred, but I’m calm now. I can live with my sister. I left home, that’s why I’d rather not go back.”

“You agree with the idea that she will be living in your home?” says the judge, turning to Famke.

“Yes, provided that the doctors think it’s a good idea.”

My heart skips a beat and I hold my breath for a second. Will Famke choose the side of the doctors again?

“I don’t want to take the role of a doctor, I’m here as May-May’s sister,” she adds.

I breathe out.

“Please continue your story,” the judge says to me.

“I would like to mention that I am getting too much medication. I want to use the same dosage as I was using when the psychiatrist at the outpatients’ clinic treated me, the psychiatrist who treated me before I was in compulsory admission. I don’t have any confidence in the doctors who treat me here. They use force, and I don’t like that.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Meijer. Can I give you the floor, Mr. Black?”

“Yes, I recommend rejecting the proposal of the prosecutor. My client doesn’t deny that incidents happened, neither does she deny that she has a form of schizophrenia. She is able to cope with her illness and she is not psychotic. My client wants to take a rest and that is why she wants to live at her sister’s home. Her sister can also keep an eye on her. In addition, she wants to have treatment as an outpatient, as provided earlier.”

Ysbrand looks at the judge to see how she is taking his argument. Then he whispers to me:

“Alternative.”

“Good,” I whisper back to him.

“Judge, I would like to propose an alternative arrangement.”

“Agreed,” says the judge.

“I ask you to limit the authorization to two or three months.”

“Doctor what do you think about this?”

“I think it’s alright if the authorization lasts for three months.”

“Then I will give my decision now. I pose that, in view of the medical declaration and what has been mentioned in this court session, it is sufficiently plausible that the defendant, by dysfunction of mental capabilities, in this case psychosis due to schizophrenia, may cause harm, primarily in the form of committing suicide, and that this cannot be averted by persons or institutions outside the mental hospital. I deem outpatient treatment to be inappropriate at this moment. Herewith I take into account that the treating doctor states that the defendant is very sensitive to stimuli and needs time to stabilize herself and adjust to the appropriate medication. I grant the preliminary authorization to extend the stay of the defendant in the mental hospital by a period of three months.”

The judge and the clerk collect their files and get up. They shake my hand and then the judge and her entourage leave the room. I discuss the court session with Famke and the lawyer. Mr. Black indicates that he thought he had achieved the maximum possible. I agree that the court

session went well, even though I am not happy with the result. Then my lawyer and Famke leave.

I feel a strong need to go for a run outside. I want to be free for a while, to go to the park to deal with the bad news. However, my doctor says that I have to stay inside on Friday and over the weekend.

## YOU ARE A CHILD OF GOD

As I am not allowed to go outside, I go to the patio instead. It's nice weather, the spring sun is starting to get warm. I lie down with my back resting against the wooden bench. The small, threaded wooden beams are hard, but I can take it. The shrubs on the low wall are starting to blossom.

I have changed out of my suit into my jeans, a summery yellow blouse and red sandals.

"Hi, May-May, how are you?" asks Mary.

"Hi Mary, it's too bad. I can't go out until Sunday. I got a provisional authorization for three months. That means they can keep me inside for three months."

"Poor you," says Mary, coughing. It's her asthma, I know.

"Maybe you should try to smoke less," I suggest.

"I know."

"I also complained about my medication," I say. "I think I'm taking too many pills."

"I know what you mean," says Mary. "I have to take 36 pills, 36. Sometimes I want to spit them all out."

I know that Mary's not joking. I have stood behind her in the nurses' office as she takes her pills – three handfuls of them.

"Yes. I can imagine you feel awkward when you have to take so many pills. As though you're a container."

“Exactly,” says Mary. She lights a cigarette.

“Gosh,” I say. “I wonder what Ava’s doing now. She went home yesterday.”

“Staying outside probably. Did I tell you that I can go to Ward B?” says Mary, elated.

“No, that’s such good news, why are you only telling me now? What is Ward B again?”

“Basically it’s the same as here, but it’s an open ward, so you can go out whenever you want. The door’s not locked.”

“When are you going?”

“Tonight.”

“Tonight? When did they tell you?”

“This morning.”

“That’s quick!”

“Yes, they wanted me to be there for the weekend, because everybody’s gone then.”

“I’ll miss you.”

“Yes, I’ll miss you too; you’re the only one I could talk to. I can’t really talk to the others.”

“Yes, I have that feeling as well, Mary,” I say, and I stroke her arm.

“But we can still visit each other, because it’s next door,” says Mary.

I smile. “Yes, we’re acting as if we are going to be miles away from each other.”

“OK, I’d better start packing my things.”

When Mary is gone, I feel anxious. Locked up. I am locked up. I start walking around on the patio. First over the stones then over the overgrown low wall. On one side of the wall, the shrubs are gone because people have been walking or sitting there. I have also placed a chair there myself, because it’s a nice spot to sit in the sun. At the highest point, it seems as if you are catching more sunlight. Then I walk down, straight through the low shrubs. I feel like I am a panther again. Caged. I walk in the small circle again. Over the stones and over the wall, then down through the shrubs. When I am the highest point, I hear Ramona’s voice again:

*“May-May, how are you?”* she asks.

“Terrible, because of you and Peter I ended up in the isolation cell.”

*“Can we do something to help you?”*

“No, will you please go away. I don’t want to talk to you anymore.”

*“Please May-May, you know we enjoy talking to you. Everyone died on Mars.”*

“No, I don’t want to talk to you because people think I’m crazy, and it’s scary to talk to you.”

*“You know what to do to break contact with us,”* says Ramona.

“Yes,” I say, while I trace a small circle on the ground with my foot. I look around to see if anyone can see me.

*“You feel that your energy is directed downwards, and no longer into space,”* says Ramona.

Yes, I think, but I don’t like her still being in my head.

The next morning I have difficulties getting up. I feel downhearted because of the judge’s decision the day before, and very dizzy due to the medicine. When I walk down the corridor I see two turds.

Yuk, turds in the corridor. For a while I think about flushing them down the toilet myself. I decide to go to the nurses’ office. “Arjen, there’s poo in the corridor.”

“Oh, we’ll clean it up,” says Arjen cheerfully.

Later, when I walk back to my room, Arjen is wearing plastic gloves and removing the poo.

“Where am I, where am I, where am I,” I cry out loud as I open my laptop. There’s an e-mail from Derrek, a former colleague of mine at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, in my mailbox. Our scientific article has been rejected for a journal we wanted to be published in. He is as astonished as I am. It’s the first article either of us has had rejected. Derrek has e-mailed me to say that he’s had it with the article. I can do whatever I want with it. I decide to e-mail the editor in chief of the journal, who is affiliated with a South African university. I write that we would like to see the complete comments from the reviewers. In addition, I respond to the little bit of criticism that is given. I send a copy of the e-mail to Derrek.

It’s Sunday morning and I’m awakened by the bells of St. Vitus Church. I would love to go to the church. I wonder if I would hear Christ better than I do now. As I walk to the nurses’ office, I meet a nurse called Janine. She kindly helps me put my bracelet on. I can’t do it myself

because the medication makes me shake. I am grateful to her. I ask her if I can go and see the Holy Mass, but I am not allowed. “You can also watch it on television,” she adds, with regret in her voice.

“Yes, I know but it’s about the experience,” I say softly.

Janine doesn’t say anything. She knows I’m not allowed to go, and that I have to deal with it.

The next morning, I’m having breakfast with Victor and Zafir. Victor is a new patient. He is in his early fifties and looks like a family man from a commercial. He has dark-blue eyes, beautiful teeth and short, wavy brown hair.

“Have you been here for a long time?” he asks me.

“Yes, a month and a half.”

“Do you have any children?”

“Yes. One. Noah. And you?”

“I have four children.”

“I’m going out for a run, do you want to join me?” I ask.

“Yes, that’s a good idea. Then I can get to know the area.”

“May-May has liberties, but I think it’s a good idea if you talk about it with the doctor, Victor,” remarks Zafir.

After breakfast, I go to my room and change clothes. I put on the new sports outfit I bought with the therapist Eline when I was allowed to go out under supervision. On Wednesdays she takes all the patients who are willing and allowed to go out to the market. Last Wednesday I was the only one who wanted to go out, so Eline and I were on our own. It was almost as if I was going shopping with a friend, so relaxed.

“Look May-May, what do you think of this white blouse?” Eline had asked me.

“Yes, it’s lovely.” I bought it. A white blouse with two long ribbons which could be knotted together. At a sports shop I bought a pair of black jogging trousers and a tight red sports shirt.

Eline checked what I bought.

“You mentioned three things you wanted to buy, so we’ll stick to those, May-May.”

We had orange juice at Subway. As I expected, she didn’t want me to buy orange juice for her, I thought that was quite professional. What



comforted me was that she didn't insist on answers. She asked me if I was married. I didn't answer that question.

"If you don't want to answer, that's OK," she simply said. That gave me more confidence in her than the team of doctors.

Back at the nurses' office, I ask if Victor is allowed to join me for a run outside. Bob confirms. I go to Victor's room and a while later we're standing in our sports outfits in front of the entrance to the Rembrandthof.

"Ready to run?" I say to Victor.

"Ready to run," he answers. We run past the houses I can see from the closed ward. We head towards a park called the Old Harbour. We pass a snack bar called Everybody. While we are jogging, we pass a shop called Beasts of Prey, a shop with purple windowframes. They sell 'beasts of prey', like rats and mice. What a weird shop, I think, while we jog past.

I see the Old Harbour now. A low brick wall marks the beginning of the Old Harbour. To the left is an old, light-yellow building which used to be a bunker for salt and sand but now hosts an aquarium specialist shop. When we are halfway through the park I stop running.

"You're stopping here?" asks Victor.

"Yes," I answer. Normally I sprint here, but I don't dare to do that now Victor is here. It may look like I want to show off.

"I'll carry on, OK?"

"Yes, sure," I say. "If you walk along this road you'll reach the end of the park." I sit on a wooden bench and watch the ducks. If I focus on one point, my brain will relax, I say to myself.

"Here I am again," says Victor, as he runs back to me. Together, we run towards the Rembrandthof.

In the evening, Valerie approaches me. "I need to tell you something. Do you have liberties? Shall we go out for a walk?"

A few minutes later, as we walk towards the Old Harbour, Valerie stops. She pauses for a while, looking at me with her light-blue eyes, and says, "I had a vision. I have to tell you that you do not have schizophrenia. You are a child of God. We are pure." She looks intensely at me. "We are pure, May-May" she repeats. She starts walking again and together we walk to the park.

The sun breaks through the clouds.

Valerie recites a poem:

*I see the sun rising behind the mountains  
It lights up the whole kingdom with its bright light  
Even the dark part is lit  
Herds of animals gather around the lake to drink  
Peace seems to spring from here, peace on earth  
God's Kingdom is lit up with your love  
Humanity becomes one with nature  
God's will becomes truth  
Peace on Earth  
Hallelujah!*

“That is such a lovely poem, where did you get it?”

“I wrote it myself,” says Valerie.

As we go back to the Rembrandthof, Valerie and I lie in the grass together. The evening sun lights up the grass and us.

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## OUT OF MY PSYCHOSIS

“Good morning, Maureen,” I say as I enter the consulting room for the talk with my doctor.

“Hello, May-May,” she answers. “Did you sleep well?”

Bob comes in and joins us.

“Yes, sort of,” I say. “My cognitive capabilities seem to be decreasing, I don’t like that. It’s as if I cannot think deeply anymore. As if everything stays on the surface.”

“That’s true, and that’s why Dr. Stijn Fisher has recommended lithium as a new medicine.”

I jump up and walk towards the window.

“Another new medicine. I was on Zyprexa first, then Seroquel, then Zyprexa, then Haldol. I feel like a guinea pig!”

“Lithium doesn’t have so many side effects. The cognitive capabilities are not affected and your memory performs better.”

I think of someone I know who uses lithium, Priadel. He doesn’t seem to suffer that much from the side effects.

“Alright,” I answer and sit back in my chair again.

“Good, I will write out a prescription for you this afternoon,” says Maureen. I shake hands with her and with Bob and leave the room.

. . .

In the afternoon I'm sitting behind my desk in my room and staring out of the window. The patio is empty. I'm thinking about my psychosis.

My symptoms are the same as during my previous psychosis about the secret service. Now I'm in love with someone else.

Then it occurs to me: my Aunt Catrina had the same thing! She was in love with someone who didn't exist. I have the same symptoms. I'm in love with Bert. It's possible that Bert is in love with me too, but the chance that he will approach me via the secret service is small. If I'm away, I can see if he wants to approach me, but if that's not the case, then this was all fantasy.

I run out to the corridor. I see nurse Lisette. She's normally reserved and wears mountain shoes.

"Lisette, Lisette, did you see Maureen? I want to talk to her as soon as possible!" I say out loud and excited.

"She's not here. I'll make an appointment for you. Can I help you?"

"I have the same as an aunt of mine, the Haldol is starting to work. I see now that what I was thinking can't be true." I get tears in my eyes.

"I... I have the same as my aunt," I repeat.

"I could kiss you!" says Lisette.

I call my husband immediately and leave a message on his answering machine.

"Vince, this is me. I just discovered that I had another psychosis. I have the same as Aunt Catrina, who was in love with someone who did not exist. I want to talk to you soon."

Then I call my sister. She picks up the phone.

"Fam, this is me."

"Yes, hello."

"Fam, I want to tell that I'm out of my psychosis."

"What, really?"

"Yes, we'll see each other tonight, OK?"

It costs me a lot of energy to talk and to wait until the evening. Nevertheless, I would like to talk about it with Famke because she is so close to me.

In the afternoon, a new man arrives on our ward. He is handsome, muscular and tall. He comes from Uganda. Lisette tells us: "Raoul only speaks English and he doesn't feel at home here."

A while later I walk through the living room and see him standing there.

“Hello, I heard that you are from Uganda.”

“Yes, I am. I am Raoul, and you?”

“I am May-May,” I say.

“I would like to show you my room,” says Raoul, wrapping his arm around my waist. I feel uncomfortable with this. Just before we get to his room, he touches my breasts.

“You must not do this,” I say and walk away.

I don’t go to the nurses because I don’t want to be the accuser. In addition, I expect that he will get the message because I walked away. In every other situation, I may have liked him, but not now. I am married, I have my imaginary love affair, and that’s already too much.

When I am back in the living room a while later, Raoul comes up to me.

“She is my girlfriend,” he says to the others, pointing at me.

At that moment, Lisette calls out to me. “May-May, Ruby’s here, it’s time for dance.”

I am very relieved that I can get away from our ward. Luckily no-one else joins me.

“May-May, you don’t seem to be feeling well today,” says Ruby.

“No.”

“What’s wrong?”

“There’s a new young man, he touched me.”

“Did you tell the nurses?”

“No, I thought he would understand because I walked away.”

I dance to two more songs. One of them is the song *Closer* by Ne-Yo. Ruby introduced me to his music. Normally I like to dance to it, but this time I feel a bit uneasy. The dance is over. Back in the nurses’ office, Ruby tells the nurses my story about Raoul. I’m very grateful to her.

In the evening, Famke, Walter and I go for a drink at Café Luno in the town centre. Luno is a modern, grand café. We have a table by the window. Famke sits opposite me. Walter sits to her right, he has his sleeves rolled up, exposing his tattoos.

“And?” asks Famke. “What happened?” She leans forward with her chin on her hands, elbows on the table and looks at me intently.

I cry out, "I was at my desk in my room. Then I realized that I was thinking the same as the last time I was in a psychosis. I could remember that I felt I was being spied on by the AIVD as well. I also thought about my love for Bert. I met him at political congresses and talked to him, but no more than that." I gasp for air so that I can carry on talking. I don't feel shy talking about one of the most sensitive parts of my psychosis to Famke and Walter. "The chance that he would approach me via the secret service seems very small to me." Famke looks at me wide-eyed.

"You are really out of your psychosis," she shouts.

"Shhh," I say. Although it's a Tuesday evening and the café is nearly empty, I am afraid that someone may hear us. Not because I'm scared of the secret service but because of the taboo surrounding psychosis and schizophrenia.

"Wow, I can't believe it," says Famke. "You know the most beautiful part of it all?"

"That is?"

"That we now have real contact with each other again. The last few months you were so far away from us. Now you are reacting to us again."

"Yes," I say. "I have the same feeling too, as though I am back again. As if I've been away for months."

"For us, you were," says Famke softly.

She strokes my arm. I put my hand in hers.

Then I jump up. "I need to take a walk. I can't sit still, I think that's because I have been in the A for so long."

"Oh, go ahead. Then we can relax a bit as well," says Walter. I get up and walk around the block, past the café, past the Hilversum Museum and back to Luno.

"Is it OK if I call everybody?" asks Famke when I'm back at the table.

"Yes," I say. "I'd appreciate it. Making phone calls is too strenuous for me."

"I just can't believe it," says Famke, looking at me wide-eyed again. "How did this happen so suddenly?"

"I don't know. I was at my desk putting things in place. I suddenly thought: this can't be true."

"Do you know that you've been in your psychosis for months?" asks Famke.

"We were a bit scared you would never come out of it," says Walter.

I look at them, puzzled.

“Yes, that’s true,” says Famke. “According to Vince, that’s what your psychiatrist at the outpatients’ clinic said. If she doesn’t get out of it soon, she may stay in it or hear voices for the rest of her life.”

“How do you mean?” I ask. “Do you mean I would never have come out of it?”

“I don’t know exactly,” says Famke. “We heard it from Vince. You’d better ask your psychiatrist yourself.”

We stop talking to drink our tea.

“Did you realize that you started speaking to us in English?” asks Famke.

“Did I? Oh, I really had no idea.”

“We were just speaking English back to you. We didn’t mind,” says Walter.

“What about Christ, do you still believe that you met him?” continues Walter.

“I don’t know, I don’t know. It was all so very real. I talked with him, walked with him. I don’t know. On the other hand, if the assumptions don’t hold, does the model work? I met him via my cooperation with the secret service, but that wasn’t real, based on nothing. Then the logical conclusion would be that I did not meet Christ either. But this meeting left me with a certain feeling I find hard to ignore. In other words, that meeting left me with a certain belief I find hard to ignore. Belief, belief, what is that?”

“Isn’t this getting a bit too much for you?” asks Famke, worried.

“We are so happy that we can talk with you again,” says Walter.

“No, no, talking with you is fine. For me, everything is new. I can’t explain everything,” I say, sighing gently.

“Yes, we do understand you. For us you’re back again. Good that you are here again,” says Famke.

“You were talking about living creatures on Mars, what do you think of that now?” asks Walter.

“That’s a difficult question. The same as about Christ, I think. I got into contact with them via telepathic experiments. It turned out later that I’d done these experiments on my own.” I laugh. “It would have been handier if I had gathered some evidence. A photo or something like that, but no that wasn’t possible, I only felt the energy. You know what I mean.”

“We would have wanted to take that photo, wouldn’t we Fam?” teases Walter.

“Have you talked to Maureen van Dijk yet?” asks Famke.

“No, not yet. I’ll talk to her on Monday, because of Queen’s Day.”

“What are you going to do on Queen’s Day?”

“I’d planned to see Mum and Frans.”

“You don’t find it difficult, seeing Frans?”

“Not at all. I hope to see Vince and Noah then as well, I want to see them as soon as possible.”

“Did you talk to Vince?” asks Famke.

“No, I only spoke to his answering machine.”

I’m longing to see Noah and Vince. I haven’t seen them since I left home. That was 15 March, six weeks ago. It will be so strange to see them again. I just live day by day, moment by moment. Suffering from a deep pain. I don’t plan anymore. It feels as if I am back in the ‘real’ world and as if I have been partly away for a long time. I neither hear the voices from Mars nor do I think about paranormal people. ‘The other world’ disappears quickly, but my brain still seems to be bruised and inactive as a result of my illness and the medicines.



## MUM, YOU WILL GET BETTER

“Hi, I’m back,” says Mary, when I meet her on the patio.

I’m sitting on a chair by the low wall in the inner courtyard. “Didn’t things go well at Clinic B?”

“No, they thought it was better if I stayed at A a little longer.”

“Well, I think it’s nice to have you around here again.”

“It’s good to see you too,” says Mary. We give each other a short hug.

“Hi Raoul,” I say to Raoul, who has come to get some fresh air.

“Who’s that?” whispers Mary.

“A young man from Uganda. But be careful, he likes touching women,” I say softly.

“It’s just like a prison here,” mutters Hein, as he sits on a wooden bench, his arms on his walker. The red scaly spots on his face look a bit lighter than before.

“Hein’s still the same,” I say with a smile.

“You haven’t changed, have you, Hein?” she laughs.

“Can’t you speak Dutch?” says Hein. “I don’t understand a word you’re saying.”

Then a new resident walks onto the patio. He reminds me of Vince. He’s wearing a checked shirt, and smart trousers and shoes. But he’s about ten years older than Vince. Like Vince, he wears glasses. Glasses with a light frame, so you can see his eyes clearly. They’re dark blue. He

doesn't introduce himself and starts walking quite aggressively up and down in the inner courtyard.

This gets Hein's aggression going at once: "Can't you behave normally? Can't you walk a bit more quietly?"

"I walk the way I want to, mind your own business!" the new resident shouts back at him.

"I'll mind anyone's business I like!" shouts Hein.

"Shut up, or I'll thump you!" screams the new resident.

For Mary and me, the atmosphere has become too violent, so we go to the nurses. Bob is the first nurse we meet.

"The new resident and Hein are arguing. They're on the inner patio," I say.

"Tygo, you mean? Yes, he's a bit aggressive. I'll come with you." Bob sends Tygo to his room, putting an end to the quarrel. I am relieved that Tygo is gone, the mental hospital feels like my home and I want it to be peaceful and quiet. Since I am out of my psychosis, I don't feel like I am a secret agent anymore, that is why I don't dare to stand up against Tygo. I also don't feel such a close connection with Christ anymore, which makes me feel insecure. Mary also seems relieved that Tygo is gone.

"Will you be getting visitors?" I ask her.

"Yes, David, my husband, and Caren are coming. And you, May-May?"

"I'm waiting for my son Noah, Vince my husband, my mum and her partner."

Then I see Noah running towards me.

"Mum, Mum!!" shouts Noah excitedly, arms outstretched in front of him. Vince seems to have bought a new blue and white shirt for him. It looks very cute on him.

"Look, this is my son," I say to Mary. Noah keeps on shouting "Mum" as I pick him up. I give him a couple of big kisses on his cheeks. At the same time, my mother and her partner arrive. While we walk to my room, Noah runs along the white clinical corridors.

"Where's Vince?" I ask my mum and Frans.

"He's coming, he's parking the car," says Frans.

"Look, I bought a Floddertje CD for you," I say to Noah as he walks into my room. I put the CD on and soon the song about a girl who's always dirty fills the room. Noah enjoys the music and starts stamping his feet.

“Oh, we shouldn’t have the music on too loud,” I say as I turn the volume down. “I’ve also bought a book for you. It’s called: *A Present for Piglet*. Come and sit on mum’s lap, Noah.”

I start reading and look across to my mother and Frans. They seem to be fine. They’re sitting on the bed and Noah and I are sitting on the chair. While I’m reading, Noah shouts: “I’m such a lucky guy.”

“Yes darling, you’re a lucky guy,” I say and cuddle him. I don’t quite know what to think. I’m happy that he’s happy although I wish too that I wasn’t ill and could take better care of him. I don’t really have time to let this sink in because I hear Vince’s footsteps in the corridor. I feel my heart beating in my throat.

“Hello,” he says as he comes in.

Wow, he is looking so good. He is suntanned, has a green/blue striped shirt on, jeans and white trainers. We give each other a kiss on the lips. Although I haven’t seen him for such a long time, his kiss feels self-assured.

“Shall we go somewhere?” he proposes.

“Let’s go out for a walk,” I suggest. “I’m looking forward to being away from the Rembrandthof.”

“La Place in Laren?” proposes Vince.

“Fine,” says Frans and the decision is taken.

A while later, we’re walking on the heath.

“We’ll take care of Noah, so you can talk to Vince,” my mother offers.

“Yes please,” I say, grateful for her help.

“How are you?” asks Vince.

“Vince, I’m out of my psychosis.”

“Yes, I heard that on my voicemail.”

“I have been in love with someone else for a couple of months.”

Vince frowns: “Was that the reason you left home?”

“Yes and no,” I answer. “Yes, because that was the reason I left. No, because I was psychotic. I never really had any contact with him. I talked with him several times at a congress. I had what Aunt Catrina had, do you remember?”

“Yes, we talked about it with your father,” says Vince.

“She was in love with someone who didn’t exist. I was in love with someone who I had met occasionally during political meetings, but I hardly had any contact with him.”

“You didn’t kiss him?” Vince asks to be sure.

“No,” I say. “I didn’t even really talk with him. I didn’t meet him during the period I fell in love with him. That was after I read about him in the newspaper. I assumed we were communicating via texts on trucks. For example if ‘Goodnight’ was written on a truck, I assumed that he was wishing me goodnight. That’s how it started. Later on I thought that I was communicating with him via telepathy.”

I look at Vince to see how he’s taking all this. He’s silent for a while.

“Well, this is an emotional rollercoaster for me,” he says, rubbing his fingers across his forehead.

“First you leave home, then you say you did it because of your psychosis. What now?”

“I would like nothing more than to go home,” I say, giving him a loving look.

“I’ll have to think about it,” says Vince, decisively.

“Yes, I can imagine,” I say gently.

“Is it because of my love for Bert?” I ask.

“No, I heard from your sister that you even thought you were talking to God. So it all adds up. It’s more that I want to get things straight for myself.”

“How are you?” I ask.

“I’m fine. I had a farewell party at work three days ago. We had dinner with the management team. I got a beautiful painting from the Supervisory Board. But you leaving me was very hard for me. To me it was just as if you’d really left for good.”

“You didn’t think I would come back?”

“No,” says Vince, firmly.

“Can you manage with Noah on your own?” I say when I look at Noah playing with a branch in the distance.

“Yes, my parents helped me a lot, that was great. I had to dash from home to the day care then to my work, and in the evening the same but then in reverse. I was glad my parents picked him up sometimes.”

“Noah’s looking well. Does he miss me?”

“He knows you’re ill.”

“Yes, I am ill. But I’m going to do my best to get better very quickly. I’ll look for work again. I will really do my best to find work again.”

I have just come out of my psychosis and I’m trying to survive, which is why I’m intuitively focusing on getting back to work and having a

normal life again. Then I realize that there's something else I need to say. "I have thrown away my wedding ring..."

"That's not a problem, we can..."

At that moment, my mother, Frans and Noah walk towards us.

"Shall we have a drink?" asks my mother.

A while later, we're all sitting on the terrace of La Place. Frans gets huge glasses of freshly squeezed orange juice for us.

"Mummy, can I sit on your lap?"

"Of course, come here darling," I say as I lift Noah onto my lap.

"What will you do all day, Vince?" asks Frans.

"I'm intending to do some sports. I've bought a mountain bike."

"Don't you think you'll get bored?"

"I don't have time to get bored. I also bought a new business."

"So you'll be working full-time soon?"

"I don't know, first it's time to relax," says Vince with a smile. He has such an attractive smile, that's one of the reasons I fell for him. When he smiles, you can see his teeth. They're beautiful. His teeth irritate him because his front teeth are a bit askew. Ugly, according to him. Sexy, according to me.

"We also have some news. We're going to get married," says my mother, radiant.

I give her a big kiss on her cheek. "Congratulations, Mum."

I congratulate Frans too. The afternoon passes quickly and soon it's time to go back to the Rembrandthof. My mother and Frans take Noah home. Vince takes me to the Rembrandthof in his Mercedes Cabrio. I was never really attached to luxury or cars – I never wanted to get one from Vince as a present – but now I have to admit that it feels good to feel the wind blowing through my hair. Soon, I hope, I will be free again. Vince takes me inside. Our farewell is short.

"Bye," says Vince.

"Bye," I say. We kiss each other on the lips. It feels fine and yet strange, just like our kiss at the start of the afternoon.

We've known each other for so long, have been through so much together. But a lot has happened in the last couple of months. That's why it also feels so weird. When my husband is gone, I walk down the white corridor to my hospital room. Vince wants to reconsider our marriage, but I don't feel there is anything I can do about it. Contrary to my character, I let it wash over me.

. . .

While I am waiting in front of the closed door of the closed ward, Jade comes up to me. I don't have a lot of contact with her, but I know she's been in Ward A for a while. I knock repeatedly on the door, but in vain.

"Normally I want to get out, but that's not allowed. Now I want to get in, and that's not allowed either."

"Look, this is what you need to do," says Jade, fumbling with the lock on the door. "If they think you're trying to escape, they'll come." And sure enough, a nurse appears.

"Couldn't you just ring the bell?" asks Bob.

"I didn't think of that, normally we're on the other side of the door and we have to wait for the door to open," I say.

"OK, we'll hang a note with 'bell' on it."

"How was it?" asks Mary when I get back.

"Fine. It was very relaxed. We went to the heath for a walk. It was good to see Noah and Vince again." I consider telling Mary why I hadn't seen Vince for such a long time, but in the end I don't. "How about you?" I ask.

"Oh, it was good to see David and Caren again. But they were late, they were stuck in a traffic jam. Waiting's so terrible," says Mary.

"Yes, it is, isn't it? Visitors have no idea how much we look forward to seeing them."

"Yes, it's as if you're being released from prison."

"Precisely. They should advise visitors to arrive on time."

"Exactly," says Mary, lighting a cigarette.

"You're looking a bit sad, Mary."

"Yes, I am. It's because of my father. I hate him. He abused me and my two sisters."

I give Mary a pat on her shoulder. She breathes smoke out of her mouth, then she says, "Thanks May-May."

I go to my room.

In the corridor I meet Arjen. "Hi May-May. Was that your husband?"

"Yes," I say, more curtly than I intended.

"I didn't know you were married."

"We haven't seen each other for a while," I say as light-heartedly as I can.

I walk back to my room. It feels too painful to talk about what happened.

A couple of days later, Vince, Noah and I are strolling around the funfair in Hilversum. There's a stall on De Groest where you can lift plastic ducks out of the water with a stick.

"He's a bit too small for that," says the man behind the stall.

"Me do, Dad," says Noah to Vince.

"Can we help him a bit?" I ask the man behind the stall.

"Of course," he says.

"At school they say that Noah is very smart for his age," says Vince.

"How do you mean?" I ask.

"He knows words that children his age don't often know, like 'buoy'."

Meanwhile, Noah tries to lift a plastic duck out of the water with the stick.

"Shall I help you?" I ask.

"No, I do it." A few minutes later, he's proudly lifting a duck into the air. He wins a green, pink and white cuddly toy. We walk past the stalls. The music is blaring from the speakers.

"Vince, the music's hurting my ears."

"Oh, let's walk on and then we'll go back."

I wanted to go back immediately, but Vince finds it difficult to understand. He can't imagine that my ears hurt because of the music.

As we walk back to the Rembrandthof, Noah says out of the blue: "Mum, you think you won't get better, right? I think you will." I lift him up and give him a big kiss. Vince and Noah say goodbye to me in the hospital car park.

Noah is only three years old, but he gives me love and hope. Everybody seems to have lost faith in my recovery, but he strongly believes in it. That is exactly what I need.

As I walk along the corridor back to the closed ward, I see Victor again. He told me he's suffering because of the money he needs to pay back. He looks rather bewildered and confused.

"Are you OK?" I ask him.

"My wife wants a divorce. She wants a divorce..."

“I am sorry to hear that, Victor.” He doesn’t know how to react to what I say. He mumbles to himself and shuffles away.

I feel sorry for him, but I am still too sick to help him. I can’t even really stand up for my own family. I am just trying to get through the days. My mind isn’t creative, worrisome or lively anymore due to my illness and the medication. It also affects my body. I have lost energy, weight and limberness. Nevertheless, my new-found love for Vince strengthens me a bit.



## BLOWN APART BY THE STORM

Vince and I are on our way back home. I'm glad that the nurses let me spend time with my family. Noah is in day care. We are in the Mercedes Cabrio with the music turned on, and this time I can stand it. I love it. I'm wearing the cap I used to wear when we drove in the Mercedes. We arrive home in Bussum a little while later. It's a white villa with dark-green window frames. Seeing our home always reminds me of the time Vince and I posed on the grass out front with new-born Noah. Vince parks the car close to the oak, his favourite tree. The tree is so big, we often wonder if we could build a bench around it. It hasn't happened yet.

"I said I'd be back at the Rembrandthof in two hours," I tell Vince.

"We don't have a lot of time then," smiles Vince.

"I want you," I whisper in Vince's ear.

When we get inside, I shout: "Catch me if you can!" I run towards our bedroom. On the staircase, Vince gets hold of my ankle and starts kissing me as I turn around. I return his kiss passionately. He quickly unbuttons my blouse. I pull off his T-shirt. I kiss him gently on his neck, move slowly down his chest with my mouth until I reach his belt. As I reach down to open it, the clank of the belt turns me on.

"Oooh, Vince, it's so good to feel you again," I say as he gently slides inside me.

It's lovely to make love with my man.

"Let's go and lie down in the garden," says Vince, when we're done.

He rolls out a blanket and we enjoy the spring sun. I lay my head on his chest. It feels so familiar, just like it used to. We stay like this until it's time to go back to the Rembrandthof.

As I walk to the closed ward, I see that note attached to the door, with the word 'bell' written on it. I ring the bell. Madelon opens the door.

"Did you have a good time?" she asks.

"Fine," I say. Luckily, she doesn't ask me any more questions.

As I walk into the living room, I see Tygo quarrelling with Hein again. "You're a freeloader, do you know that?!" shouts Tygo.

Hein is not impressed. "You, you should keep your mouth shut."

"What did you ever achieve in your life?! Come on, tell me!" bullies Tygo. Tygo starts hitting Hein.

"Stop it!!" shouts Hein.

Madelon comes out of her office. "That's enough gentlemen! Tygo, go to your room."

Tygo does as he is told. The contrast with being at home with my husband couldn't be any bigger.

On Queen's Day, Vince visits me again. The nurse shows Vince to my room and walks away. I am sitting at my simple table in my hospital room. When Vince walks in, I notice he's wearing a new shirt and that he has been to the hairdresser.

"I want to tell you something, May-May," says Vince, rubbing his hand across his forehead. His voice sounds unsteady, as though he has a very tough message to deliver. I wonder what the matter is.

"Sit down," I say. Vince sits down on the yellow and orange blanket on my bed. He leans forward. For a moment he looks at the floor then he looks into my eyes.

"I want a divorce," he says, with difficulty but firmly. He looks sad.

I'm so stunned, I catch my breath. The tone of his voice tells me he means what he's saying, but I don't want it to be true.

"You want to divorce?" I ask, to be sure.

"Yes."

"What about last Friday when we were home together? I thought it was OK between us?"

"I regret that," he says. "I shouldn't have done it."

"You don't need to," I say softly.

I look at Vince. I don't want to divorce him. I love him, but I also know he's already made up his mind, and he won't reconsider.

Then he continues: "Too much has happened. The days we were together. The bond we had is gone. I don't feel any love for you anymore."

His words cut through me like a knife. I gasp for breath. I've been fired as a lover. Although my face betrays no emotion, an enormous wave of sorrow hits me inside. I have the feeling I've reached the limit of what I can handle. There is no space anymore.

"Shall we go outside?" says Vince, to break the silence.

"OK," I answer, in a daze.

Defeated, I turn the lock of the door to my room. Vince tells the nurses that we're going for a walk. A while later, we're walking in silence through Hilversum city centre. I am overwhelmed. It's as though the ever-passionate and powerful fire in myself that drives me and is able to resist Vince's impulsive decisions has been replaced by a small flickering pilot flame. The 'ill me' doesn't have the power or the initiative to grab Vince by his arms, look at him and tell him from the depths of my heart how much I love him. It doesn't cross my mind either to say that we can't divorce, because we have a young son. I move with the wind. We pass the Ice Café without either of us suggesting going in.

No Queen's Day will ever be the same, as we pass the characteristic villas on our way back to the Rembrandthof. Vince is the love of my life. My decision to marry him was a choice for eternity. The solid foundation of love underneath our future family. I feel as if I'm falling down a tunnel – losing everything in life I ever had – and I have no clue where the tunnel will end. Every time I think I've reached the bottom of this fast-moving downward slide, I go down even further. I'm feeling so weak and vulnerable and love Vince so much that I can't do anything else but feel love for him and forgive him. These emotions swell up deep inside me, and all kinds of thoughts race through my mind until we reach the Rembrandthof. Just before the main entrance, we say goodbye. For the first time in my life, I give Vince three kisses on his cheeks instead of the tender, intimate kiss on his lips. First he looks a bit disconcerted, then he returns the same three kisses on my cheeks.

The storm has blown us – two caring lovers – apart.

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## VICTOR

Since I have come out of my psychosis, I'm allowed to go to Ward C, an open ward. This means that the door isn't locked and that I can go outside, provided I report it to the nurses and I don't have dance therapy or another therapy session scheduled. In addition, I can go home at the weekends. Because Vince wants a divorce – and has put all my belongings into storage – I have no home. At the weekends I have to sleep at my father's, my mother's and my sister's place alternately. I'm too sick to really care about it. I just adjust to the situation.

The same week that I move over to Ward C, Saskia invites me for a picnic. Luckily, the nurses are so kind as to let me go and allow me to miss part of the day programme. We leave from her workplace, the youth hostel Stay Okay Bunnik, where Saskia is the manager. The Stay Okay complex consists of three buildings, with two of the buildings dating from 1830. The tallest building is the 'Ridderhofstad' with a monumental entrance and big green blinds across the windows. Children play on the grass in front of the Ridderhofstad.

When Saskia started her job as manager, nine years ago, the staff were always quarrelling. Now they're a team again. Being a hotel manager, Saskia knows her way around Bunnik and the surrounding areas. She's borrowed a bike for me, and very soon we're cycling across the fields around Utrecht, looking for a location for our picnic.

"It's lovely here," I say to Saskia.

“It’s beautiful isn’t it? I do this quite often. Where shall we sit?”

“There by the barn might be a good idea,” I propose.

A little later we’re sitting on the grass. Saskia has made wraps with a salmon and yoghurt filling. She’s also brought peppers with cheese, baguettes with tapenade, and freshly squeezed orange juice.

“This is delicious! How did you manage to bring this all with you?” I ask her as she takes some cutlery out of her bike bag.

“Yes, I stuffed it all in,” she says. “Unfortunately the rug didn’t fit in.”

“Doesn’t matter. Being here on the grass is a great experience. Pine and Gilmore wrote a book about it: *The Experience Economy*. They explain that having experiences is becoming more and more important. You pay a couple of cents for a handful of coffee beans. If you make coffee from them and sit on a terrace, you’re willing to pay three euros for the same coffee beans. How much does a cup of coffee cost at your place?”

“2.25 euros.”

“OK, 2.25 euros,” I say, and get stuck into my fruit salad.

“And if it’s a less chic environment, like here in the middle of a field, is that good for the experience too?”

“It’s priceless,” I say.

While we are chatting, I suddenly say, “Vince wants a divorce.”

“What? Why?” asks Saskia, stunned.

“He can’t deal with my illness.”

“But he can’t just leave you, can he? You didn’t choose to become ill? You marry for better or worse!”

“That’s what I told him. I said I saved his life when he got altitude sickness when we were climbing Kilimanjaro... He just doesn’t know how to deal with a sick woman. Moreover, I’ve already had a problem with my health for three years now.”

“What about Noah?”

“He’ll stay with Vince. It’s what we agreed upon when I walked out of the house during my psychosis.”

“Maybe you can take care of him later.”

“Yes, maybe,” I answer, with pain in my heart. I take a glass of orange juice. I can’t say anything more about the divorce.

“Shall we have a look in the barn?” asks Saskia.

I walk along with her.

In the barn they sell home-made products.

I buy some marmalade for Saskia.

“What about your sabbatical? You were going to take leave for a year and travel around in a camper van,” asks Saskia, as she straps the picnic stuff onto her bike.

“It’s not going to happen. Vince wants to take Noah on a trip through France and Italy from 20 June till 15 August.”

“So you’ll have to be away from Noah all that time?”

“Yes.”

“Shouldn’t he discuss it with you, then?”

“A lot of the campsites were already booked.”

“I really think he should take you into greater account.”

I can’t say anything in reply. I’m too sick to defend myself. All I want is to maintain a good relationship with Vince. And it’s true, a lot of campsites were already booked. Nevertheless, I enjoy Saskia’s company and I am grateful that she’s taken me out. The afternoon passes quickly.

When I return to the ward, Bob comes up to me. His face looks serious this time, as he says, “I don’t know if you heard, but Victor died.”

“What?”

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

“He... committed suicide when he was on leave for the weekend.”

“Oh no...”

Although we’d been out running together recently, I immediately take on this new reality. I know it’s true. It is the umpteenth blow to my wounded mind.

A couple of days later we have the opportunity to reflect in the circle room, which is reserved for special occasions. I wear my suit and visit the room together with two other patients. I look at the photo of Victor. He looks like the handsome family man I remember. I write a message in the book for him. My handwriting is almost illegible due to the medicine. I can’t really get my mind around it – too much has happened.

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## SCHIZOPHRENIA

“May-May,” says Bob as he knocks on my door. “The independent psychiatrist is here. She wants to talk to you.”

A female psychiatrist comes in. “Shall we sit in the consulting room?” She has curly, dark-blond hair that’s tied in a ponytail. “Are you aware of my role?” the psychiatrist asks. “There will be a court session regarding your stay here. As an independent psychiatrist, I will give advice.”

“Ah. Then it will be the same as last time.”

“Good,” she says. “How are you?”

“I would like to have less medication. I can’t sit still. I thought it was because I’ve been indoors for such a long time, but I understand it’s due to the medication.”

“Do you use Akineton to reduce your impulse to move?”

“Yes I do, but that doesn’t help, or not enough.”

“I read in your medical file that you have been diagnosed with schizophrenia. What do you think about this?”

“I didn’t know,” I answer, in shock.

The psychiatrist is silent for a while and then she looks at me. “You didn’t know?”

“No. I had the diagnosis ‘psychosis further unknown’. Another psychiatrist said ‘schizophrenic disorder,’ but not schizophrenia.”

I can’t concentrate for the rest of the conversation. The word

'schizophrenia' echoes in my head. I knew I had a type of schizophrenia, but not that I belonged to the most severe category. The word beats down on me like tidal waves breaking against the shore. *Schizophrenia, schizophrenia, schizophrenia. I have schizophrenia. Who wants to have schizophrenia? I'm an outcast, I have schizophrenia. I am no longer part of society. Schizophrenia, Schizophrenia, I have SCHIZOPHRENIA. SCHIZOPHRENIA.*

I don't tell the psychiatrist that I am shocked by her announcement. Because I am still vulnerable, I am taciturn. With the word 'schizophrenia' echoing in my head, I say goodbye to her.

After the conversation, I call my sister. "Hi Famke, this is me. You know what, I just had a talk with the independent psychiatrist about extending my stay here, and she says that I've been diagnosed with schizophrenia."

"Oh, how terrible for you!"

"Yes, it surprised me. I was flabbergasted. They didn't give any explanation."

"That's weird," says Famke. "The next time we have a family meeting, I will mention it."

Just after hanging up, my mother happens to call.

I tell her the same story.

A while later, Madelon comes up to me. "Your mother called us and she was rather angry. She's quite right. We are used to terms like schizophrenia and bipolar, but we need to be more careful. Maureen will talk to you about this."

In the next talk with my doctor, Madelon indeed touches upon the issue of how my diagnosis was communicated to me.

"That wasn't done very carefully," says Madelon.

"No, it should have been communicated differently," affirms Maureen.

I accept it.

The hearing regarding the extension of my stay in the Rembrandthof takes place on 8 July, 2009.

"Are you coming, May-May? The judge has arrived," says Madelon as she knocks on my door. As I walk along the corridor, I see a relatively



short elderly man at the other end of the corridor. He looks distinguished. He stands out because everyone in the hospital environment dresses informally.

“Good morning,” he says and introduces himself.

As I shake his hand, I look at him closely. Then I say: “Hello, my old neighbour.”

“Yes, I recognize you. Well, that’s a coincidence,” he says.

Meanwhile, my lawyer arrives, together with my doctor, and we walk to the office. As we sit down, the judge starts: “I used to be Mrs. Meijer’s neighbour. If I had known I would have asked someone else to take over this case. Mrs. Meijer, do you want another judge?”

“No, I have confidence in your professionalism,” I answer. I look at my lawyer. He nods reassuringly.

“Good, then I give the floor to Mrs. Meijer.”

“I would like to reduce my medication. Because I feel the constant urge to move. The only thing I can think of, even now, is that I need to move. That’s why my doctor, the psychiatrist and I wrote something down about the need to decrease my medication. A condition was that the authorization of continued residence here would be extended. I object to that.” I look over to the judge, but I can’t tell if it bothers him that we know each other. He takes on his role of judge effortlessly.

“Thank you, Mrs. Meijer. I now give the floor to the psychiatrist, Ms. Van Dijk.”

“The patient has the diagnosis of schizophrenia. In my opinion, her treatment isn’t going smoothly. She wants to negotiate everything, as we’ve seen now regarding her medication.”

The judge looks to see if she has said everything she wanted to say.

Maureen takes a deep breath and continues.

“I would like to add that the patient attacked her father during a psychotic episode.”

*That was six weeks ago* I think to myself, but I don’t say anything.

“Finally, I would like to give the floor to Mr. Black,” says the judge.

My lawyer is also brief. “My lord, I propose extending the authorization by three or four months.”

“Good,” says the judge. “I will pronounce the judgement of the court. The court will extend the authorization to continue residence by a period of four months.”

I am satisfied with his verdict. The standard term which is used to

extend the authorization to continue residence is a year, so four months seem reasonable to me. I look at the judge and shake his hand.

“Would you like to drop in for a cup of tea with me some time?” he asks. I smile. Then he walks away. I appreciate his gesture. Apparently, he still sees me as his old neighbour and not as a psychiatric patient. Or maybe as his old neighbour *and* as a psychiatric patient, but that does not stop him from inviting me for tea.

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## A NEW HOME

Gently, I slide my fingers over the huge aluminium letters on the white wall of the hospital corridor. They spell: 'I make it right with what is left'. I like moving my hands along the beautiful round letters. I repeat the text to myself a couple of times: *I make it right with what is left*.

Hmm, I think the text has rather a negative meaning.

At that moment, Klaas walks up to me. We met in Ward A. He's an economics teacher at a secondary school. He is 50 years old, and has a dark-brown beard with grey hairs peeping through.

"Did you know that there were problems with that?" he asks.

"With what?" I ask.

"With the text. When this building was completed, the text was part of it, but a couple of people didn't agree with it."

"Yes, that's what I was just thinking, it's quite negative. As if there's less left after you have been here."

"Yes, they thought the same."

"And you, what do you think about it?"

"Well, I don't mind," answers Klaas. "By the way, I heard that Tygo has changed. He is quieter now, more in control."

"Normal, did he become normal?"

"As far as we are normal here, you could call him normal. Let me put it this way, he is not so aggressive anymore."

“How do you know?”

Klaas smiles. “I have my sources.”

“You met him, that’s how you know!”

Klaas walks away. “I need to rush,” he says. “It’s my turn to do the cleaning.”

I like Klaas, he always seems to know a lot and is caring about the others. He told me that he is depressed, but he never talks about it with me. Therefore I hardly notice that he is ill.

When I get to my room, I start picking up my long, dark hairs from the yellow linoleum floor. It has become a habit, from the period when Christ told me he doesn’t like them. Then my phone rings. It’s my sister.

“How are you, May?”

“I want to go home.”

“I think you need to buy yourself a new home,” says Famke.

“Yes, I know, I know.”

“But?”

“I don’t... I don’t want to leave Vince and Noah.”

“No, I can imagine,” my sister answers.

I sigh. “But I can’t sleep at your place every weekend... I also want to have a place of my own.”

“Vince told me that he’s willing to pay your mortgage and give you some money to buy furniture. And Frans wants to help you find a new home, so that’s good.”

“Yes, it is,” I mumble. After a few seconds I continue: “Next weekend I can sleep at home for the first time. I mean, I don’t have to sleep at the Rembrandthof. I’m going to sleep at Mum’s and Frans’ place, maybe we can also talk about houses.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” says my sister. “OK, May, I need to go now. Lots of kisses.”

“Kisses.”

Then we hang up. If my sister didn’t bring up the subject of finding a new home, I wouldn’t have thought about it. Even important things don’t attract my attention. In this way, a mental illness isn’t different from a physical illness, you first need to recover before you can do anything else.

. . .

I live in the moment, and let the days of the week pass by. In creative therapy I paint five plaster fairies for Noah. Two male fairies with green outfits, hats, and skirts made of leaves, and three female fairies. I paint their dresses blue, yellow and pink. One female fairy is wearing a floral crown on the top of her head. I paint the flowers white with a yellow heart. The therapist suggests sticking them on a measuring rod for Noah. She helps me saw the wood. I am so glad she does, because I feel quite clumsy with my shaking hands. In addition, I am not blessed with creative talent. The measuring rod is 1.50 metres high and I paint the wood in different colours.

I also go to the supermarket several times during the week. I buy small items such as toothpaste and apples. I go outside for a walk with Klaas. The weekend is approaching fast.

On Saturday, my mother and Frans come to pick me up in their car. Frans drives us to their villa in the town of Oegstgeest in South-Holland. After my mother and Frans have brought us some drinks, my mother sits at the table in the living room and turns her computer on while I sit on the couch. My mother starts looking for houses for sale on a national website.

“Look, this house is very close to the centre of Bussum, what do you think of it?”

I walk to the table. “Yes. I want to live close to Noah.”

“And what about this one, it has four rooms and a garden. A lot of space.”

I smile faintly.

“We’ll make appointments with the real estate agents. When we visit you, we can take you along,” says my mother.

We take it easy for the rest of the weekend. I can’t do any more. My homesickness makes me think back to the weekends I attended political meetups. Or longer ago, when I went out with friends. It’s been a long time since I went out. The last time I attended a party was at Vince’s workplace, but the music was so loud I couldn’t sleep all night.

On Sunday evening I go back to the Rembrandthof. Although I don’t like to be indoors again, the atmosphere on the open ward is more relaxed

than on the closed ward. My sister visits me on Tuesday evening during visiting hours in the living room. Our mother had told her about a few houses that could be interesting for me.

“Let’s go take a look at the houses, to see where they are,” she says as soon as she enters the living room.

“Fine,” I say, and I get up. I’m relieved that she wants to show me the houses. In addition, I take every opportunity to get away from the Rembrandthof. In a blink of an eye we’re driving from Hilversum to Bussum. A while later, the satnav says, “You have arrived at your destination.” We are standing in front of a semi-detached house.

“This should be it, Maytree Street number 14,” says Famke. “What do you think of it?” she asks.

“It seems like a decent house,” I say hesitantly.

“Yes, and you have a nice garden,” she says. “This looks good, May. OK let’s visit the other house in the centre now.”

A while later, we park the car in the city centre. We have to walk a bit because the house is located in a pedestrian-only area. We are standing in front of a modern red/orange terraced house.

“It’s a new building. Frans said that these houses are no older than five years. I think the one on Maytree Street is nicer, you have a garden there,” says Famke.

“Hm,” I say, slightly hesitantly. “I don’t know. This one’s nice too. I like that it’s situated in the town centre.”

My sister drives me back to the Rembrandthof. Seeing that we are all ill and a lot of fellow patients can’t afford to buy a house, I don’t say anything about my visits to see the houses.

A few days later I view the houses from the inside with my mother, Frans and a real estate agent. The house on Maytree Street has four rooms, but is rather dated. The house in the centre is modern and new, but only has three rooms and no garden. What a dilemma.

“I would go for the house in the centre, then everything is new,” says Frans in the car on our way back to the Rembrandthof.

“Hm,” I say. “Neither house is quite what I’m looking for. They’re both rather dark. And I would like to have a house with four rooms and a garden.”

“Good, then I’ll look for you in a system only real estate agents have access to,” says Frans.

“That’s handy, thank you for helping us,” says my mother to her husband-to-be.

Within a couple of days, my mother calls me: “We’ve found a very nice house for you. It’s a lovely white family house, close to Noah.”

The same week we visit the house with my mother, Frans and a real estate agent. It’s a modern white house with green window frames. The sun starts shining just as we enter the living room. The house is straightforward, and the real estate agent gives us a quick tour.

“And?” asks my mother after the real estate agent has left.

“I’ll take it,” I say.

“Don’t you want to sleep on it?”

“No,” I say. “I’ll take it.”

“Do you know how you are going to manage financially?” asks Frans.

“Yes, Vince wants to pay for my mortgage and new furniture.”

“You’d better sleep on it,” says my mother as Frans drives me back to the Rembrandthof. As I walk through the corridor I notice that Bob is working in the office. I am glad that I can chat briefly with him about the house I just visited. Then I adapt myself to the atmosphere of the mental hospital again and start colouring a mandala.

That evening I chat with other patients on the patio. It’s a sultry evening. I talk to Ahmed, a sporty looking guy with brown eyes and dark curly hair.

“What did you do before?” I ask him.

“I was with the commandos.”

“Commandos? That’s why you were so fanatical at sports today.” The commandos have always impressed me since I was young. They are tough.

Ahmed doesn’t notice my admiration. “Yes, I love sport, it really gets me loose.”

“Did you go on a lot of missions?”

“I was in Bosnia.” Ahmed looks into the distance. Despite the fact that he is very lively and cheerful, he has a sad look in his eyes.

I decide not to ask any more questions.

“I hardly sleep. Three, four hours a night, that’s it.”

“I have the opposite problem. I sleep too much. You can’t get me out of bed,” I say with a smile.

“Oh, May-May, can I have some of your hours?”

I catch a glimpse of a smile on his face.

“Yeah, post-traumatic stress disorder,” he continues.

“Good evening, lady and gentleman.”

“Hi Lorenzo!” Ahmed gives him a gentle slap on his shoulders.

Lorenzo is short and has a carefully groomed beard.

“How are you?”

“Yes, alright, alright,” says Lorenzo.

“Do you have a home yet?” asks Ahmed, looking at Lorenzo.

“No, not yet. I am on the waiting list.”

“So you’re sleeping at the Salvation Army again at the weekends?”

“Yes,” says Lorenzo modestly.

“I sleep at my mother’s place at the weekends,” says Ahmed lightly.

I don’t say anything about my new home that I visited today.

“Gentlemen, it’s getting late. I’m going to the office. Can I bring something for you? A beer?”

“I’d rather have a Bacardi Coke,” says Ahmed, winking at me.

“I’d like a beer,” says Lorenzo.

I go inside to get my medication. Then I walk outside again.

“Gentlemen, here are your drinks. A Bacardi Coke and a beer,” I say, giving them each a plastic cup containing a soft drink.

“Cheers to the night life in the Rembrandthof,” says Ahmed while lifting his cup.

“To the Rembrandthof,” Lorenzo and I shout in unison.

When they’ve finished their drinks I walk back to my room. Without being aware of it, I care deeply about people who have a completely different background to me. It is not that I didn’t care about homeless people before I got sick. Once, Saskia and I invited a homeless person for coffee in a snack bar. But it was different at that time. It was like we were doing good and the vagabond was helped by us. Now we all belong together. I am open and don’t judge. There seems to be a certain solidarity amongst the patients who gather on the big patio.

. . .



The following day my mum rings me. “And?” she asks with excitement in her voice. “Are you going to do it?”

“Yes,” I say. “I still want it.”

We chat for a short while and then we hang up. It is the first time in my life that I don’t feel excited about moving to a new home.

## MUMMY HOUSE AND DADDY HOUSE

At 8.00 AM a nurse wakes me up by knocking on my door. Today my mother and Frans are getting married.

Carefully, I put my cornflower blue dress on, with my blue heels which I bought especially for the occasion, my blue earrings and the blue Tanzanite necklace I got from Noah.

We drive to my new home, where Saskia is waiting for me. My mother has asked her to take photos, something she enjoys doing. Together we drive to the home of my ex parents-in-law.

“Hi May-May. It’s good to see you. Oh, oh, what a situation,” says Dewi, hugging me. “Do you want a cup of coffee?”

“No, but thanks for asking,” I say to her.

Dewi has tears in her eyes, she’s obviously glad to see me.

That makes me feel good. I am feeling touched, too, but I can’t express it. Damned medication.

“Mummy,” says Noah, giving me a big hug.

I give him a big hug back. While I cuddle him, I realize how glad I am that he still sees me as his mother.

He’s wearing a smart shirt and waistcoat that Vince bought him for his younger brother’s wedding.

“Did you have a good holiday?” I ask Noah.

“Yes, Mum, we swam a lot. I also swam alone, Dad let me.”

“And we Skyped a lot, darling, didn’t we? Twice a week.”

“Yes, because I was at the computer and could talk to you.”

“Yes, darling. OK, we need to go to Grandma Gaby and Grandpa Frans. Saskia is waiting in the car for us, Noah. Bye bye, Dewi.”

“Bye,” says Dewi, waving to us.

I live in the moment and don't think about the fact that the good relationship I have with my parents-in-law will change, because my husband and I are separated. We just move on to go to the wedding.

When we arrive at Frans' and my mother's house, my mother is already fully dressed. Frans and his two daughters, Annette and Sandra, are in the house too. They are approximately ten years younger than Famke and me. My mother is wearing a light, white summer dress and is beautifully made up. The grey shimmery eyeshadow and black mascara match her dark Indonesian skin. The red lipstick with lip gloss gives her an exotic look.

“You're looking gorgeous, Mum.”

“Yes, very beautiful,” says Saskia, picking up her camera immediately.

While Saskia is taking photos, I notice that even on her wedding day my mother is wearing the red and orange bracelet I made for her during creative therapy. My thoughts start wandering. I think of Ahmed's father who brings a cookie to his son every day, and his eternal hope that he will get better. It reminds me of my love for Noah. The unconditional love of a parent.

Then I am back in the present. “Mum, do you have Noah's trousers?” I ask.

“Yes, I'll get them.”

My mother helps Noah into his new trousers.

He looks very cute in his new black trousers with matching waistcoat and neatly combed hair. Through the window I see Famke and Walter arrive in their car. As they get out and walk towards the house, I see that Famke is wearing a fuchsia-coloured halter-neck dress which falls elegantly around her slender body. Her dress is shiny, which makes it look extra festive. She's wearing very fine high-heeled black sandals. Walter is wearing a dark-grey suit.

“Walter, you're wearing a suit, how's that possible?” I say.

“Yes, isn't it good?” says Famke, winking at me.

At that moment, Frans and his two daughters walk down the stairs.

Frans is wearing a sand-coloured suit. His daughters are both wearing black and white dresses.

“Hey, the sisters are dressed in the same style,” remarks Famke. “May and I are both wearing brightly coloured dresses, and you both picked a black and white dress.”

“Yes, indeed,” says Sandra, standing beside her sister. “We belong together like this.”

“You are our four daughters,” says Frans, wrapping his arm around my mother.

“And that’s how it is,” answers my mum.

The wedding ceremony takes place in the luxury vintage hotel ‘Villa De Beukenhof’ in Oegstgeest. There aren’t that many of us – mainly family – but Frans has a big family. The wedding couple didn’t want to invite too many guests because it’s the second marriage for both of them. The chairs are decorated with white balloons and in the middle of the venue there’s a big tree with a shiny white ribbon around it.

“Look Noah, it’s just as if the tree is getting married, do you see that?”

“Yes, that looks really nice!” he shouts enthusiastically.

“You can take your seats now,” says Famke, who is the master of ceremonies.

Everyone does as she requests.

“You can go to Grandma and Grandad, Noah.”

“Come Noah, come with me,” says my mum, reaching her hand out to him. Carefully, so that the other guests can’t see her, she walks through the restaurant. Famke, Annette, Sandra and I take our places on the white chairs. After a while, my mother and Frans make their appearance as they walk onto the red carpet. Noah walks behind them.

“Look at Mum, she is radiant,” says Famke.

“Yes, it’s lovely to see,” I agree.

Noah sits next to me on his chair quietly, he is so small that his feet don’t touch the ground. Then a lady wearing a traditional dark-blue and black velvet cloak enters. The wedding official. She opens the ceremony with a short statement that we have all gathered to celebrate this important moment in which Mrs. Captain and Mr. Captain will be pronounced man and wife. Although she is a good speaker, I find it

difficult to concentrate. At the moment that my mother and Frans promise to be faithful to each other, the words echo in my head:

“Do you promise to be faithful to each other for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. What is your answer?”

“Yes,” says my mother whole-heartedly.

“Yes,” says Frans firmly.

I am here for Mum and Frans. Nevertheless, the words *in sickness and in health* keep racing through my mind. Like two horses on the run.

The wedding official jolts me out of my thoughts. “You may now put on the rings.”

“Noah you can come here, bring us the rings,” says my mother.

Noah jumps up from his chair and brings them a red heart-shaped cushion with the two rings that are held together by a white ribbon.

“Then you are now husband and wife,” says the wedding official.

Frans gives my mother a kiss on her lips. She smiles. They look very happy. My mother is shining like a bride who is getting married for the very first time.

“I have the honour of being the first to congratulate you on your marriage,” says the wedding official. The guests stand up and start to applaud spontaneously. After a while they congratulate the wedding couple as well. The formal part of the wedding is over. Champagne is served and we toast the bride and groom.

I don't want to be a spoilsport, so I toast with them. I just sip from my champagne because the social-psychiatric nurse advised me years ago not to drink alcohol.

After the end of the wedding ceremony we all sit down at a long table outside to have lunch. My sister invites the guests to the table. “Will everyone take their places at the table. Lunch will be served soon.” She looks as if she's used to being a master of ceremonies. My mother and Frans sit next to each other. Noah sits opposite my mum. Then the starters are served. I'm having the 'lightly thickened mustard cream with smoked salmon and almonds.'

“That looks delicious,” says Saskia.

“Yes, and Saskia knows, because she's manager at Stay Okay,” says Frans to his daughters.

“Oh, that’s nice, have you worked there for a long time?” asks Annette.

“About nine years,” answers Saskia.

While we are having an animated conversation, my mother feeds Noah spaghetti. After the starter, Famke taps on her empty wine glass with her knife as a sign that she’s about to give a speech. She looks beautiful in her shiny fuchsia-coloured dress.

“Dear all, I would like to take you back to the time when our mother and Frans first met. My sister and I felt like worried parents. We said to my mum: ‘You want to go away for a couple of days together, but you’ve only just met?!’”

The guests start laughing immediately. Famke speaks with flair and ease.

My thoughts wander off for a couple of seconds. The days that I needed to protect my sister are long gone. As the elder sister, I always made the speeches, but it’s up to her now. Although I certainly wish that I would feel better, I do not envy her at all. No. On the contrary. I love her.

“Mummy, mummy, I want to go,” whispers Noah.

“Aunt Famke is giving her speech, Noah,” I whisper in his ear.

“I want to go now, Mum.”

I decide to go away before Noah starts screaming and we attract the attention of all the guests. We walk to a small field with a trampoline. I lift Noah up onto the trampoline.

“Mum, you come too.”

“Yes, Noah, I’m coming,” I say as I climb onto the trampoline.

He’s too small to be on his own.

Unfortunately, I’m missing Famke’s speech now. After a few jumps, I say, “OK, Noah. Do you want to come with me? Then we can listen to the rest of Famke’s speech.”

“No, I want to jump.”

I accept the situation. Together we jump up and down until we’re exhausted.

“OK, put your shoes on, now we’re going to Aunt Famke, Grandma and Grandad.”

Just as we arrive, Famke is finishing her speech and everyone starts to applaud. Famke smiles.

“Sorry that we missed a big part of your speech, Fam,” I whisper to her.

“Doesn’t matter,” she says.

I know she means it. That’s because we are really close sisters.

In the evening, there’s a garden party at Frans’ and my mother’s home. The garden is beautifully lit. There are two white party tents and a lot of high tables. My mother and Frans invited more people for the party, it’s cosy and crowded. I see two pregnant women. I’m happy for them. Nevertheless, it reminds me that Vince and I wanted to have a second child. That was also one of the questions Vince asked the nurses when I had just come out of my psychosis. Whether we could have a second child. The doctors said that being pregnant again could trigger a new psychotic episode. I look at one of the women. She’s touching her belly with her hand. Exactly like I did when I was pregnant with Noah. I so wish I could still have a family. I know that this is also the case for singles or people who can’t have children, but I can’t help it, it hurts. Veronique, a friend of my mother, comes up to me, as if she can see I’m having a hard time. She’s always dressed neatly, in a classical way. She’s known me since birth. She and my mother are best friends, despite the distance they need to overcome. Veronique lives in Belgium. When she visits, she always brings us Belgian chocolates. We talk about the difficult time I’m facing right now and that I’ve just bought a new house. She tells me she’s still working for the European Commission of the European Union. She coordinates the parliamentary questions about education and culture. I also talk to one of my aunts. Then the band starts playing – they are called ‘The Band With No Name’ – and the evening soon passes by.

While my mother and Frans say goodbye to the guests, I take Noah to bed. We are sleeping at the home of Frans and my mother. I read Noah a bedtime story. When the story is over, Noah says, “Other story, Mum.”

“No darling it’s already late.”

“Second, Mum.”

I read him a second story.

At the end of the story, Noah suddenly says, “When you are better, you come home?”

In an instant I’m thinking of the book Vince bought for Noah to tell him about our divorce. It’s called *Home at Dad’s and Home at Mum’s*.

“Mum is going to live somewhere else. Then you’ll have two homes, darling, a Dad home, and a Mum home,” I say, trying to hide my pain.

“And a Grandad-Grandma home,” says Noah meaning the home of my former parents-in-law. I’m surprised that Noah seems to take it so lightly.

“Yes, and a Grandad-Grandma home, that’s three homes.”

“Sleep well, darling. Here’s a goodnight kiss for you,” I say as I give him a kiss on his cheek.

“Another goodnight kiss, Mum.”

“Here’s another one,” I say as I give him another kiss.

I go to bed but it’s hard for me to fall asleep. I don’t know whether this is due to the stimuli during the day, my illness or the fact that Vince and I are going to divorce. It’s probably because of all of this. I lie awake for several hours.

The next morning, I take Noah back to Vince, back to our family home. I need to swallow hard as I drive past the white walls and see the magnificent garden with the red tree I love so much. This is the house that Vince and I chose as our family home. It was Noah’s first home. We lived here for five wonderful years together.

When I arrive, Vince goes to kiss me on my lips. “Oh, sorry. Force of habit,” he says.

“You can if you want,” I say, while I purse my lips.

“What’s going on?” asks Noah.

“Oh nothing, Mummy’s making a joke,” says Vince.

“Did you have a good holiday?”

“Yes, we were outside a lot, but Noah’s probably told you.”

“Yes, he told me.”

Meanwhile, Vince has placed Noah in front of the television. “Do you want a cup of tea?” he asks.

We walk to the kitchen and take a seat on the dark-brown designer stools close to the counter. I look at Vince. His face is tanned from his holiday. He’s looking good.

“I want to talk to you about our divorce,” I say.

“Yes, that’s OK, go ahead.”

“It wasn’t clear to me if you wanted to divorce me because of my illness.”



“No, but when you had just come out of your psychosis, you were talking about your work all the time. That it was so important to you. You kept on stressing it. It’s in my DNA you said.”

“Yes, I said that, but my family is important to me as well.”

“You didn’t say that.”

“No, because I had just come out of my psychosis. It feels like coming out of coma. I’m trying to survive. Of course my family is important to me. The doctors said that they know how important family is to me. They said that when you were there.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Well, that means it comes down to my illness. If I hadn’t been ill, then we would still be together.”

“I think so too.”

I look at Vince. He is remarkably honest, I still like that about him. He loved me until he had to let go. I’m still too ill and weak to be angry at him. He has difficulties dealing with illness. Me too. This terrible illness.

“I’ve got something for you,” I say, taking a little book from my handbag. I bought it during my leisure break in the centre of Hilversum.

“For me?” he asks, surprised.

Vince takes the book as if it’s a very expensive present and looks at it. On the cover is a photo of a red ladybird on a big, green flower bud with above it the title: Thank you!

As he opens it, he reads the text I have written on the first page: *Thank you for the fifteen wonderful years together. I hope we will continue to be good parents for Noah.*

He looks at me, and with tears in his eyes, he says, “Thank you, thank you.”

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## HOSPITALIZED AND STARTING TO WORK AGAIN

Although I'm still hospitalized, I can't wait to get back to working for Shahrzad News again. Shahrzad News is an Iranian news organization giving Iranian women a voice in the media. I am responsible for public relations. Maureen tries to convince me to quit my job. She believes that deadlines are bad for my health and advises me to look for another job. I don't give up and, although I'm still feeling weak, I argue the opposite. Namely, that working in a professional environment, doing the work I like surrounded by colleagues, makes me forget the terrible situation I'm in and contributes to my recovery. Moreover, it's only for a couple of days, which is something I am sad about.

Finally, my psychiatrist gives in and I'm allowed to work for a couple of days to organize an upcoming event.

The day I'm due to go to work again, I get up early. I have asked the nurses to knock on my door at eight o'clock, and that's what they do. I put on the clothes I'd laid out, a cornflower-blue blouse and black skirt – it looks smart. One of the few pieces of smart clothing I have at the mental hospital. I drive to the *Radio Netherlands Worldwide* building close to the Mediapark where Shahrzad News is located. It's a park with all different types of broadcasting companies. I enjoy driving my car again, after such a long time of not being allowed to. I ask for Mina, our managing editor, at the reception desk. She comes down to pick me up herself. Mina is a small, no-nonsense woman with brown hair in a short

bob. She's wearing a simple but smart dress. Mina comes from Iran herself and speaks Farsi, English and Dutch.

"How are you?" She asks as we enter the lift.

"A little bit better," I say. I feel uncomfortable only telling part of the truth. But I don't know what to say. How can I explain to her that I am still hospitalized? I feel so ashamed of my situation.

Mina gives me a friendly look. "You told me you were going to get a divorce?"

"Yes, that's true. I've already moved out of our home."

Mina gets out of the lift and walks to her office.

I admire her enormously. She's a woman with a mission.

"When you're ready, come through to my room."

"Yes, OK."

I get a cup of coffee from the machine in the hall. I'm trembling so much that the coffee splashes over the edges. I am so ashamed of myself. I seem like an elderly woman instead of a young lady of just 38. When I have put away my bag and drunk my coffee, I go to Mina's room.

Mina's face is turned towards her monitor. She looks up from her computer when I enter the room and invites me to sit at the table. Her table is dominated by a vase with beautiful yellow roses.

"Next week I want to hold a press conference with politicians and other people with interests in Iran. This is because Shahrzad News has just published a book featuring the stories of 20 young Iranian journalists. The book will be presented in Newspoort, close to the Houses of Parliament in the Hague. I want to ask you to inform politicians, the press and other people who are interested in this topic about our event."

"What a good idea," I say.

"Fatima can help you to send the press release to all our stakeholders. Our system has special options to make that possible. We should also think about someone we can hand the book over to."

Not giving any thought to my imaginary love affair with him, I suggest, "What about the Minister of International Aid, Bert Koenders?"

"Yes, that would be great if he's available."

"I know him from the time I worked at the university. The event is coming up very soon, but I can try to invite him," I suggest.

"Excellent," replies Mina.

I go back to my room, and with my heart thumping in my throat I

send an e-mail to the communications department of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I don't want to let my mental illness get in the way. I'm still a bit weak, I thought we had an affair and that we had to pursue world peace, but I can deal with it. It's just me, May-May, inviting him on behalf of Shahrzad News in order to give a voice to Iranian women. The communications department forwards my invitation to Bert. He replies quickly, saying that he supports the Iranian cause, but that his agenda is fully booked already. "See you soon," he concludes.

*That's very kind of him*, I think. I sit in silence for a moment behind my desk. It would be strange for him to learn that he has been corresponding with a psychiatric patient. But I can't help it. I always worked hard. Did my best for my political party, too. I don't have much time to think about it. I tell Mina that the minister can't attend.

"Let's try a Member of Parliament then," she says.

We decide to invite Harry van Bommel, Member of Parliament for the Socialist Party. He is always passionate about the Iranian issue too and has known Mina for a long time. I've met Harry as well, during my time as chair of the Dutch National PhD council. Luckily, he responds quickly to say that he's able to attend.

At the end of the day, as I'm driving back to the Rembrandthof, I have mixed feelings. I'm pleased because I'm working again, but I don't like the idea of going back to the mental hospital. When I arrive at the patio in the Rembrandthof, some fellow patients stare at me. Janet, who arrived two days ago, walks towards me. She has white permed hair and pink lipstick. A part of her faded bra peeps above her blue T-shirt. A fresh white bandage is wrapped around her hand and her wrist.

"You're looking smart," she says.

"I've been working," I explain.

"You've been working? Really? While you're here? How sad!" she shouts.

"Oh, but I enjoyed it."

Janet does not react; her thoughts already seem to be somewhere else.

"With my thoughts somewhere else, I'm always everywhere," I say out loud.

"What? What do you mean?" asks Janet, who is suddenly alert.

“Nothing. It’s just a saying.”

“A saying?”

“Yes, the saying on the wall close to Ward A.”

“Oh, yes, yes that one. I’ve seen it... I’m going out to smoke. Do you want a cigarette?”

“No thank you, that’s very kind, but I don’t smoke.”

I’m really grateful to her, although I don’t have the appropriate warm feeling inside I should have, due to the medication. Janet walks over to Lorenzo and Mary who are smoking as well. I go to my room.

On the day of the book presentation we gather at a café in the centre of The Hague close to the Dutch Parliament. I love the vibrant atmosphere, the visitors, the politicians, businessmen. Everyone seems to congregate in the square in front of the Parliament building. Over lunch we meet the chair of the day, the panelists and the board members.

As we enter Newspoort, the Member of Parliament, Harry van Bommel, comes in. He’s early. He walks up to me and shakes my hand. “May-May, good to see you. How are you?”

“Fine, I’m OK,” I mumble.

I’m happy that he still recognizes me after all these years. We once organized a demonstration in order to let PhD employees finish their doctoral dissertation and be able to receive a salary. Harry was the one who accepted the petition and shouted for action through the megaphone we’d brought with us.

“How are you?” I ask.

“Good, I’m busy. I’m happy that Foreign Affairs is in my portfolio because it’s very interesting,” he answers.

Mina comes in and shakes his hand. The rest of the panelists and participants are starting to arrive. There isn’t a big audience so we switch to a smaller room. When everyone is present, Mina talks about the book, and then hands it over to Harry van Bommel. Being a politician and a former teacher of Dutch and English, he’s a natural speaker. Afterwards, the participants discuss the situation in Iran. Although I’m glad I’m amongst engaged professionals again, I also find it difficult to fulfil a role in the background. Nevertheless, I silently enjoy being briefly surrounded by people with a passion for Iranian women and being out of the mental hospital and so close to the heart of democracy. At the end

of the event, Harry approaches me and gives me three kisses on my cheeks. This is special to me, first of all because he is kind, but also because I am feeling inferior due to my hospitalization.

Immediately after the event, I meet my sister at the Luden café on the square in The Hague. As she crosses the square, I feel nothing but admiration for her. She looks so professional in her black suit with her loose, glossy, dark-brown hair dancing in the air as she walks briskly. I feel she's helping to pull me through. During my period in compulsory admission, she arranged welfare benefits for me. It hurt my pride, but the need to have an income weighs stronger, and I'm pleased that Famke arranged it for me. My temporary work for Shahrzad News is not enough to provide me with a full income.

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## DEPRESSED

Three weeks later, my father and I are working in my new home. With help from my family, I quickly got the furniture together. When we went out shopping, I didn't know what I liked anymore. That's why I followed the advice of my sister, my mother and Saskia. Without Vince and Noah the house feels empty and cold. My father is around, which relieves my pain a little. My mind is bruised and there is a deep pain inside me. Although I hardly talk, I'm very grateful that my father is helping me fix things. We are having dinner together.

"I'm going to attend a conference in Bulgaria next week as the keynote speaker."

"Congratulations." I try to be a bit more enthusiastic, it's a great honour to be invited as keynote speaker. "That is very nice for you, Dad."

"Yes, it is. Together with a colleague I'm preparing a paper about a new chip. We're expecting a lot from it."

"Dad?"

"Yes?"

"Your work means everything to you right?"

"Everything? I don't know about everything, but I love my work a lot, yes."

"It was the same for me. I can't work with schizophrenia. I just can't. It's interfering with my plans."

"Uhm."

“I don’t want to have schizophrenia. I want to have enough energy to help Noah get dressed and to wash my hair. I want to get out of bed on time. I don’t want to take six pills every evening. I don’t want this stupid illness. I don’t want to be an outcast. I want to be normal again.”

My father doesn’t say anything, he stares at his potatoes.

“I can’t handle it anymore, Dad.”

My father starts fiddling with his hair, which he always does when he’s reflecting. That’s what he did when he used to help me with maths.

I don’t know what to do. I feel very uneasy. I don’t have a future anymore. The best years of my life have already passed by. I’m stuck in the prison in my head. I feel like a wild horse that’s been captured. I want to kick against the walls with my legs, but it won’t help. Only one path seems to lead to freedom. “I want to die.”

My father still doesn’t say anything, still fiddling with his hair. There’s silence between us. After a few minutes, he says, “There’s a large group of us going to the conference.”

“Oh,” I say. Then I get up, walk to the corridor, pick up my mobile phone and call the nurses, leaving my father with his plate of food behind.

“Hello, May-May here.”

“Hello May-May, this is Janine of Ward A speaking. How are you?”

“Bad. I’m thinking about suicide.”

“Where are you?”

“At home.”

“Are you alone?”

“No, my father’s here.”

“Have you made plans about how you want to do it?”

“No.”

“May-May, I just want to say that you are doing very well.”

“I’m doing very badly, I’m thinking about suicide.”

“It isn’t strange that you’re having negative thoughts, this is a very hard period for you.”

“I’ve been thinking about suicide the whole day.”

“You are really doing well, I mean it.”

“I can’t remember seeing you before.”

“You were on Ward A.”

I remember: she was the kind lady who helped me put on my bracelet.



“Oh yes, I remember now.”

“I know what you’ve been through, and that’s quite a lot. You’re a tough cookie.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you feeling better?”

“Yes, yes, sort of, it’s OK.”

“If you want, you can come here tomorrow to talk to a doctor.”

“I’ll see how I’m doing tomorrow. Thank you.”

I hang up, I’m feeling a little bit better. For a moment I can control this panic in me that wants to run away from the pain inside. The deep pain of hardly seeing my child is so huge that I don’t even speak it out loud. The pain of suffering from schizophrenia. The pain of feeling like an outcast.

When I walk into the room, my father is still speechless above his plate. Apparently, he overheard the conversation just now. He doesn’t say anything about it.

We eat the rest of our food in silence.

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## LIVING ON THE EDGE OF SOCIETY

On Sunday evening, after our walk on the heath in Bussum, my father takes me back to the Rembrandthof. I succeeded in not talking about my depressive thoughts and feelings all the time.

As I walk through the corridors, I see Klaas leaning against the light-yellow brick wall on the patio. I ask him if he wants to go out for a walk. As I tell the nurse that we're going out, she remarks that Klaas and I walk a lot, which is true. I love to exercise and to be outside, to be away from the hospital, to escape.

Klaas and I are going to Laapersveld park, one of his favourite places. We know about each other's problems, but we hardly talk about them. We are simply enjoying each other's company.

Klaas walks quite fast. After five minutes of walking we come across a street with monumental houses, classical statues, and hedges in all kinds of shapes. We admire a villa with tall white beeches in spiral forms. Next to it there are box trees cut square. Then we walk on towards a lovely white café and restaurant, built in 1901. The green and white shutters give the building a historical look. The door of the café is dark green, with a lantern on either side. Rose bushes are growing luxuriantly against the building.

"This café is right between a junction of two roads," says Klaas, waving with his arms. "In this way, tax could be imposed on both roads," he says, resting his hands on his back and leaning forward.

“Horses and carriages of the Royal Family were exempted from tax.”

“Did they come here?”

“Yes, this is the road to one of their palaces. We are walking in that direction.”

Klaas and I continue our walk.

“Look, this is a typical example of the new building style,” says Klaas, pointing at a white villa with a pointed, black roof and bright blue window frames. We are now walking in the direction of Laapersveld park.

“Ah,” says Klaas, picking a leaf from the ground. “If I see these types of leaves, I know they’re from a quercus tree, because they’re fan-shaped. This is the quercus, the quercus sociana, which has a very thin leaf.”

One of Klaas’s hands is in the pocket of his jeans and in the other he is holding a cigar. Then we arrive at Laapersveld. The park consists of a big pond with lots of inlets and a small island with a weeping willow.

“We are at the lowest point of Hilversum, approximately three metres below sea level. This park was made for the drainage and storage of rain water. That’s why there’s a big pump designed by the world-famous architect Dudok here, we’ll pass it soon.”

A woman on a black bike passes us. On the front of her bike she has three little dogs in a basket with flowers. It’s a sight to see. The dogs bark loudly. As we carry on walking, Klaas continues his story: “This park was designed by Mr. Dudok together with Mr. Meijer, the park master at the time. Dudok did not enjoy working with others because he was a perfectionist. Remarkably, he cooperated very well with Meijer. Meijer had a special love of trees. Thanks to him, Hilversum has more than 700 different types of trees. This, for example, is the American water cypress.” Klaas points at a big tree with very small leaves. I wonder how Klaas knows all this and whether what he is saying is all true. It’s as though I’m out with a walking encyclopaedia. I know he doesn’t like it when I ask about how he got his knowledge, so I keep my mouth shut. After a while we walk on and arrive at the highest point of the hill. Three teenagers come into view. One sits on his scooter and two others on the wooden bench. They are engaged in an animated discussion about bits and bytes.

“Do you want a beer?” asks one of the teenagers sitting on the bench. He offers us a can of Heineken.

“No, thank you,” Klaas says quickly.

“Where do you live?” the teenager asks me. I’m feeling deeply ashamed, I don’t dare to say that I’m staying at the mental hospital.

“Somewhere close by,” I mumble.

“Bye,” says Klaas and we walk on. A group of thirty geese are standing half on the grass and half on the street. They cackle loudly. As we walk back to the Rembrandthof we see the roof of the St. Vitus Church.

“The landowners at that time always stayed within sight of the St. Vitus Church,” says Klaas.

“Thank you for being my guide,” I say to him when we are back at the Rembrandthof.

“It was my pleasure,” answers Klaas, and he walks back to his own ward.

As I’m having breakfast on Monday morning, Madelon walks up to me: “You’ve got a talk planned with Maureen, her colleague Lisa and me at eleven o’clock, May-May.”

At five to eleven, I walk towards the office. Madelon, Maureen and Lisa are already waiting for me. Maureen gives me a firm handshake as usual. Lisa introduces herself. She has long brown hair, which she is wearing loose. I love how her hair falls. She gives me a warm laugh.

“How are you?” asks Maureen.

“In pain,” I answer. “I’m depressed.”

Maureen presses her lips together. Then she asks: “How long have you been depressed?”

“For several weeks now. I have started to realize that I’m ill, that I suffer from schizophrenia. I have been depressed before, after my second psychotic episode.”

“You can suppress psychosis with medication,” says Lisa.

“I know. But the illness is affecting me at three very important levels. My health, my family and my work at the university. I also suffer from the side effects of the medications; I hardly have any energy...”

“Yes, but that could be due to your psychosis,” says Maureen.

“Will it get better?”

“A little, but you have to take into account that things will not be as they were before,” answers Maureen.

I sigh. "That's terrible. Even the smallest things cost me a lot of energy. Even washing my hair or getting something from the shop."

Maureen, Lisa and Madelon are silent for a while.

"Tell me, if you have depressive thoughts, do you want to die?" asks Maureen.

"I don't know. I have depressive thoughts mostly at the weekend when I'm in my home, alone. Then I feel locked up. Literally and figuratively. I want to break through the windows."

"But you don't do it," says Maureen.

"No, I don't. It would make such a mess," I say with a slight smile on my face.

"What keeps you from committing suicide?" asks Maureen.

"I don't think I want to do it. Moreover, I don't know how to do it. I can't stand the sight of blood, for example."

There's a silence between us.

I rub my thumbs against each other. "Is it perhaps a good idea to take antidepressants?"

"Yes, that's a possibility," says Maureen.

"We can also do a test to see how suicidal you are," suggests Lisa.

"That sounds like a good idea to me. It seems strange to be depressed. I was never depressed when I was young. I always thought they should send depressed people to Africa, where there is hardly any food, so that they appreciate what they've got."

"Yes, but you have got to look at it in the right perspective. You've lost a lot. You mentioned your health, your family and your work. These three subjects are important to people. You should accept your illness, however difficult that may seem to you," says Maureen.

"Or cope with it," adds Madelon.

"Yes, I know. That's what I should do, but it's not easy."

"Is there anything else you would like to say, May-May?" asks Maureen.

"No, thank you," I say and we shake hands.

The mental caregivers are right. I am overwhelmed by my illness and everything I've lost.

The Hamilton depression test is being conducted in the office by an intern, Paul. He is tall, handsome and has light-blond hair falling over

his left eye. He is young. I think to myself that I shouldn't growl this time to protect him. I laugh at the thought.

"What's the matter?"

"Oh. An inside joke," I say.

"OK, then we'll start the test. It's not about being right or wrong, it's about mentioning how you're feeling. Right?"

"Yes, fine."

"How was your mood during the last three days? Have you felt gloomy? Did you have a feeling of despondency or helplessness?"

"Those are a lot of questions all at the same time."

"Yes." Paul smiles. He waits until I reply.

"It's quite alright. The last three days were fine. The weekend before was terrible. I was depressed then."

"How have you been sleeping the last three days?"

"I've slept well."

"Did you eat as much as usual in the last three days?"

"Yes, my eating habits didn't change."

We are working our way through all the questions. I thought I would need to elaborate upon the deep, deep pain I'm feeling inside, my despair and feelings of hopelessness, but that's not the case.

"You will get the results tomorrow from the psychiatrist, Doctor Stijn Fisher. I will join the discussion, together with a nurse," says Paul.

The next day I go to the reception desk on the ground floor. I appreciate being in the hall full of light with the two magnificent green palm trees.

"Do you know where it is?" asks the receptionist.

"I'll walk with you," says Paul, who just happens to be walking past.

Paul knocks on the door of Doctor Fisher, the psychiatrist who advised me to take lithium as well. He is an elderly man with twinkling eyes. "Come in," he says.

"Take a seat," he says to Paul, Madelon and me.

"We have studied the outcome of the test and it seems to be better than expected. You have a score of 10 points. On a scale of 0 to 30 that's not very high," he says, once we've sat down.

"I noticed that a lot of the questions were about sleeping and eating well. I don't have any problems with that, maybe that was why I didn't get a high score?"

“That could be, could be,” nods the doctor. “Would you like to take antidepressants yourself?”

“No, I’d rather not.”

“Well, let’s not prescribe medication then. But if your negative thoughts get worse, let us know.”

“You know, you can always call us,” says Madelon.

“Yes, thank you. I’ve called the night duty several times.”

We walk out of the office. The doctors have taken away my worries about my depressive thoughts. Or at least I know that it is OK to call for help if I can’t handle it anymore. I am relieved that I don’t have to take more medication.

That afternoon, I walk down to the Ice Café with Jeanette. She treats herself to a pistachio ice cream and I take a straciatella ice cream. We sit in the sun on the terrace on orange plastic chairs with a view of St. Vitus Church.

“At least we’re getting a little feeling of summer, don’t you think, May-May?” she asks.

I smile and look at the bandage on her wrist.

“I wanted to cut my wrist,” she tells me spontaneously.

I give her a concerned look.

“My mother called the ambulance. Luckily they were there very quickly.”

“Wow, that’s heavy.”

“It is. But I’m doing OK now. The medication is doing its job.”

“I’m happy for you,” I sigh, relieved.

We finish eating our ice creams and then we walk back to the Rembrandthof. On our way, we meet a white cat lying on her back and rolling over the ground. She spins around as we stroke her on the head.

When we are back at Ward C, Jeanette goes to her room. I go to the big patio and see Tygo leaning with his back against the wall. He is sitting on the wooden bench, enjoying the evening sun. He opens his eyes as he hears me walking towards him. I sit down next to him.

“How are you?” he asks me.

“Fine.”

“Fine?”

“To be honest, I’m thinking about the period I’ve been ill. I had an accident in my head.”

“An accident in your head, that’s a good expression. Where did you get it?” asks Tygo, putting his feet up on the bench.

“I saw a professor from the University of Amsterdam at the Gelderlandplein in Amsterdam before I was hospitalized. She said she had an accident in her eye, which affected her sight terribly. I thought, well, I’ve had an accident too, an accident in my head.”

“Yes, that’s the way it is. I had an accident in my head too,” says Tygo thoughtfully.

“You know what I worry about, Tygo?”

“What?”

“About my position in society. Without being aware of it, I was at the top of society. I had a lovely husband, a child, a good job, a lot of friends, a job on the board, voluntary work. And now... now I’m at the bottom of society.”

“The edge, you mean we’re at the edge of society.”

“Yes, like we were playing football for Ajax or Feyenoord in the first team and now...”

“We’re in the crowd, watching. Or worse: we can’t even enter the stadium.”

We are silent for a while.

“I know what you mean, May-May. It’s tough. I used to have a lot of friends, keeping busy by being around our children. Making jokes at barbecues. Due to my divorce I barely have any friends now. Not being able to work isolates me. Before I was hospitalized, I hardly ever left my house. I became very passive as a result of the medication. A couple of friends said that to me. But I have stamina. Stamina. You have that too.”

“You think I have stamina?” I ask, astonished. “I have endurance, yes. But my solution was always simple. If it doesn’t work, you work harder. If it still doesn’t work you work even harder. I don’t know how to fight an illness. How to deal with situations where working is not the solution. I remember how I read about a man who became handicapped and how he dealt with it. I thought to myself, *I wouldn’t know how to handle a disability*. But he didn’t have a choice. No choice. We don’t have a choice either. There is no alternative.”

“You can do it, May-May. You can do it,” says Tygo.



As psychiatric patients, Tygo and I feel like outsiders. The nurses and the psychiatrists hold a high position in the hierarchy. They are healthy, they carry a phone on their belt, have a job, have a life. When you have an appointment with them, they expect you to just be there. No matter if you were doing something else. This contributes to the feeling. Although they are healthy too, I sometimes feel closer to the cleaners. They don't ask anything from me.

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## GOING HOME

*Day closure is cancelled*, I read, in green letters on the whiteboard.

I ask Jeannette if she knows why the day closure meeting has been cancelled. She replies that there are not enough staff because of the summer holiday. Jeannette wants to have the meeting, so I suggest that I lead it. Six patients show up and everyone says how their day was. Lea, an older and sturdy-looking patient with long, grey hair hanging down her face in strands, tells us that she stayed in all day because she was too afraid to go outside, but that she did post some cards.

“Good that you did that,” remarks Valerie.

The rest of the patients stare ahead. Most of them are too ill to react. I make sure that everyone has their turn. As usual, I also ask if people are expecting visitors in the evening. To stop Tygo from feeling uneasy, I don't ask him. I know he doesn't get a lot of visitors.

Jeannette asks how my day was. I tell her and my fellow patients that I had a conversation with the doctors, went out for a walk, and that I finished my measuring rod for Noah at creative therapy. I also ask if anyone would like to play volleyball with me after visiting hours. Unfortunately, nobody is interested.

The next morning after breakfast a new patient enters the living room. He has striking grey-blue eyes and a youthful appearance. He wears a

tight T-shirt, a cap, jeans and All-Star trainers. I feel a physical attraction towards him, although he looks a bit young to me. I hold my breath slightly as he walks towards me.

“Hi, I heard from Bob that you often go out for a walk, may I join you?”

“Yes,” I answer. “There’s a break in the programme now, so if you want you can join me now.”

“Are other people joining us?”

“We can ask Jeannette and Klaas from Ward B if they want to join us.”

When we try to find them, they are apparently following a programme.

“You’ll have to deal with me then,” I say to the young man. “What’s your name by the way?”

“Niels. And yours?”

“May-May.”

“May-May,” he repeats thoughtfully. He looks a bit puzzled.

“Yes,” I say. “I will tell the nurses that we’re going out.”

I go to the office and tell Bob we are going out. Niels waits for me just outside the office. His eyes are twinkling and he gives me a smile as I walk towards him.

We walk to the park, the Old Harbour. Soon, the massive modern-looking yellow building of the aquarium shop comes into view, marking the beginning of the Old Harbour.

“Do you walk here often?” asks Niels.

“Yes,” I answer. “I used to jog with my sports therapist, and we would run towards the Old Harbour. Since then I often come here. And how about you? Is everything new?”

“No, I have lived in Hilversum for years, I know my way around,” says Niels. He walks quite fast. When we reach the end of the Old Harbour, at the Dogsbridge, we turn around.

“Klaas explained to me how the Dogsbridge got its name, but I’ve forgotten, do you know?” I ask.

“I think it was given that name because it was paid for with dog tax, but if you want to know for sure, you’d better ask Klaas.”

“You know him as well?”

“Klaas knows everyone,” says Niels, tugging at his cap with his hand.  
“Look, young ducks.”

“Oh, ducklings, they’re so cute,” I say, smiling.

Niels smiles too. He has beautiful teeth. “May I ask you something?  
How old are you?”

“I’m old.” I answer, laughing.

“Come on, tell me!”

“38. And you?”

“Guess,” he says. He’s teasing me.

I doubt if I will guess correctly. “I’m not good at this.”

“Come on, how old do you think I am?”

“You’re young, probably much younger than me. 28?”

“No. Try again.”

“No, I told you. I’m not good at this. Come on, tell me.” I say with a smile.

“I’m 36.”

We both start laughing. Niels’s light-heartedness relieves my pain a bit.

In the evening after dinner I walk to the patio. Part of it is covered, and contains six simple wooden benches. When it’s raining people come here to shelter. It’s a sultry evening. Klaas, Niels and Ahmed are outside in the covered part. I join them. Klaas is reading a pile of Dutch national newspapers, *de Volkskrant*.

“Hi, Klaas, can I read a bit?”

“These newspapers date from May,” says Klaas as he continues reading.

“May? Why are you reading newspapers from May, it’s the end of August!” I say.

“Yes, reading up a little,” says Klaas imperturbably.

Niels leans with his back against the building. He doesn’t say a lot, which makes him even more attractive.

“What type of job do you have?” I ask Niels.

“I work in a factory, in Weesp: Smit. You probably don’t know it.”

“No, not really.”

“Smit makes chemical stuff for producing leather. What about you?”

“I worked in science for ten years. I’m a PR consultant now, a freelancer.”

“She worked recently,” says Klaas, looking up from his paper. “She’s a tough lady, don’t forget that,” he continues.

“Do you want to join me at the Ice Café?” I ask.

“Yes,” they say in chorus.

As we walk towards the exit, we meet Tygo and Jeannette, who join us on our way to the Ice Café. At the Ice Café I order a chocolate chip ice cream and we all sit outside on the terrace.

“I’ve eaten more ice cream this summer than I’ve ever eaten in my life,” I say to Jeannette.

“Yes, I’ve stopped counting too,” she answers.

Niels and Ahmed tell each other jokes. Tygo is quiet, but he seems amused.

“Shall we go home?” I ask, when I’ve finished my ice cream.

“Going home? To the Rembrandthof you mean,” says Klaas. Then he says in a solemn tone, “Colleague, I’m starting to worry about you. I get the impression that you’re becoming institutionalized.”

“Institutionalized? What does that mean?” asks Ahmed.

“That means you are starting to consider your hospital environment as familiar, as your home,” answers Klaas.

As we arrive at the Rembrandthof, we all sit together for a while on the inner patio. At some point, I’ve had enough. I walk towards the nurses’ office for my medication. When I’m back in my room I hear a knock on the door. It’s Niels.

“I wanted to say goodnight to you, beauty,” he says, while he strokes my cheek.

“Oh, yes of course. Goodnight,” I say with a smile.

Then I close my door again. Although I still have a deep pain inside, I am longing for love and his touch has left me pleasantly surprised.

The next day at breakfast, Niels and I sit apart from each other deliberately. Niels is wearing a different coloured cap. Today it’s red. It’s difficult not to look at him. When nobody’s looking, he winks at me.

After breakfast I have a talk with Maureen and Bob. Having talks with psychiatrists has become a regular routine for me. I don’t feel

ashamed about it anymore. Instead, I am relieved that they are willing to listen to my suffering.

When we are in the consulting room, Maureen begins. "How are you?"

"Depressed."

"Yes, that's a feeling that won't disappear very quickly. We should monitor it. It's a good thing you did the Hamilton test. We can always start with antidepressants. Nevertheless, we think you're doing better. It's better for you to go home, otherwise you'll get used to the hospital environment too much. Meaning that you will feel safe here and won't want to go outside," continues Maureen.

"Yes, you're right," I say. "I think it's a bit scary to go home. I'd rather stay here."

"Exactly, and it's because of that feeling that it's better to go home," says Bob.

"You started by staying at home for a couple of nights; we can extend that next week so that you can go home soon. Do you have any questions?" asks Maureen.

"Yes. I'd rather stop using Haldol. It makes me feel like I want to move all the time. I can't have a normal conversation because I feel the need to move all the time."

"I don't think that's wise," says Maureen in a serious tone.

"I think she'll be fine," says Bob.

"Oh you do?" asks Maureen.

"Yes, judging by the way May-May behaves, I can imagine she'll be fine."

"Good, then we'll make a plan before you go home. Will you make sure that your family is there please?"

I nod.

"Do you have any further questions?" asks Maureen.

"No, that was all."

Although my medication suppresses my feelings, I feel lightly excited as I walk out of the office. *I can go home!*

At lunch, Niels keeps winking at me again when no-one is watching. I'm worried that people will notice. We clean the tables together.

"Shall we go out this afternoon?" I suggest.

"I always like to go out with you. Where do you want to take me?"

“Utrecht,” I suggest. “It’s close by but we’ll be in another environment then.”

“Yes, that’s a good idea,” says Niels.

“I’ll tell the nurses,” I say, as I walk to the nurses’ office.

They approve of our plan.

“It’s OK, as long as we don’t stay out too long.”

Off we go together. We start walking in the direction of Hilversum Central Station. I enjoy being at the station. The crowds, all the people walking criss-cross. It reminds me of when I used to travel to the Vrije Universiteit by train every day. When we’re on the train, I stare out of the window. Green fields, neatly demarcated by straight ditches, with black and white cows grazing on them pass by at top speed.

“Hey, are you still here?” asks Niels.

“With my thoughts somewhere else, I’m always everywhere,” I say with a smile.

“Do you want to become Miss Rembrandthof?” jokes Niels.

I smile. “You know the quote.”

“Of course, I saw it hanging above the reception desk. I see everything.”

A while later we arrive at Utrecht Central Station. When I was the chair of the Dutch PhD council, we used to hold meetings here. We walk through the city centre. I enjoy the canals and watching the people sitting outside. Then we pass the Dom Tower. We join a group of tourists on a guided tour. The guide is a sporty-looking lady of middle age.

“The Dom Tower is 112 metres high, the highest church tower in the Netherlands and the tallest building in Utrecht. The Dom Tower has 464 steps,” says our guide.

Together with the guide and three English tourists, we climb the Dom via stone spiral stairs. The walls are old. We climb up slowly. Niels is a gentleman and helps me. I know he has been left in the lurch by his life partner, too. He has a child of approximately the same age as my son. We share the same pain.

Then we arrive in a room of stone.

“This is the wedding room, a lot of weddings take place here,” says the guide, as we walk around. I mention that Jay and Ivy were married here and that Vince was the master of ceremonies. All of a sudden, I realize that this is not the kind of talk Niels wants to hear. But he stays polite. We carry on walking until we arrive in a room full of bells.

“This is the bell attic. There are fourteen different bells here. They all have a name. The largest one is the ‘Salvator.’” The guide bangs the bell with a hammer. It makes a deep sound.

“Can she try it?” Niels asks the guide, pointing at me.

“Yes. Take this rubber hammer, then you can bang it against the clock,” says the guide, handing the hammer to me.

I bang on a small clock.

Niels looks at me.

“Can you hear that? That bell is the Michael, a rather light tone compared to the Salvator.”

“Yes, I hear it.”

Then the guide gives the hammer to the English tourists. They hit a clock hard. The sound vibrates through the whole area. “That’s the Maria,” says the guide.

A while later, we climb to the roof of the Dom.

“What a fantastic view we have from here,” I say to Niels.

“Look. Wedding couples everywhere because it’s 9/9/2009,” says Niels, wrapping his arm around me and pointing with his other arm to the wedding couples walking in the street below.

“Yes, I see them. How lovely,” I say.

“All right people, we are going down now,” says the guide. The guide descends the stairs with the English people behind her.

When Niels and I are the only ones left on the top of the roof of the Dom he walks towards me and pushes me gently in a corner. “May I?” he whispers.

“No objection,” I say as I place my hands against his chest.

Gently our lips find each other. Gradually we kiss each other more passionately. His tongue is eager to find mine, and I respond in kind. We stand there for a while.

Niels gives me another gentle kiss on my lips. “Come on, let’s go down, before they miss us,” he says, and grabs my hand.

Together we walk down the steep stairs.

The next day Famke comes to pick me up because I can go home. When I’m in my living room at home it feels different this time. It feels good to be at home, but it also feels a bit weird. Whereas at the Rembrandthof I felt locked in and sick, I do feel a little uncomfortable being on my own again. Luckily, I’m getting used to it.

. . .



A couple of days later we visit the 'Kijkduin' beach in The Hague. I see the sandy beach appear behind the dunes, smell the sea breeze and hear the sound of the waves of the North Sea. The seagulls fly back and forth. It's good to be outside in nature again. To feel the sand between my toes and the sun on my head. I may still not be completely recovered yet, but I'm at the beach with my darling sister. And I am free. I am free!

As we get an ice cream, she laughs at me and says, "Here we are, this is what I wrote to you about, the day on the beach with our ice creams."

## EPILOGUE

Noah is a happy young thirteen-year-old boy now. I often tell him – like his father does – that I love him enormously, forever. He stays alternately at our home and at ‘Daddy house’. When I asked Noah on New Year’s Day what his resolutions were for the coming year, he said: “That I get good grades and that you don’t become ill again.”

Vince has found a new partner, Sylvia, who has two children.

I still have a very close bond with my dear sister and parents. For them, my psychoses were a terrible drama too. Especially because I didn’t realize I needed medical help, didn’t dare to talk and constantly wondered if the AIVD would allow me to say something. I was often alone in my own world, and my family had the feeling that they didn’t have any real contact with me. My father told me that I also often didn’t remember his visits or my sister’s. That gave them a feeling of powerlessness. My sister and father sometimes had contact with the Rembrandthof, but – especially during my later second period of compulsory admission – they got the impression that the information they provided wasn’t treated properly. Also, the fact that they were not allowed to join my court sessions hurt them a lot. Luckily, they knew how to deal with it, and their relationship with the Rembrandthof improved later.

My friend Saskia moved to Madagascar and lives in La Reunion with her family at the moment. I still see my old friends. I met a good friend,

Arianne, in the gym. We see each other at least two days a week. Pearl is still working in the soup kitchen ‘Under his Wings Food Foundation’ in Sir Lowry’s Pass Village. Tygo became a friend of mine. Niels and I were both left by our partners, whom we thought were our partners for life. Our light-hearted relationship relieved our deep pain for a while, for two and a half years in fact. Valerie is doing fine. She doesn’t want to be reminded of her time in the Rembrandthof. I don’t have any contact with the patients from GGZ Delfland.

After my first period of hospitalisation in 2009 which I describe in this book, I suffered from depression, loneliness, and the feeling of being an outsider for a long time. A friend and local politician, Marko Barendregt, asked me to become active in local politics. I also joined the Committee of Foreign Affairs of the Dutch Labour Party again. Due to the side effects of the medication – I had to be hospitalized because of my depression – I stopped taking them. Subsequently, I was in compulsory admission again in 2013-2014. After that compulsory admission, I found a new psychiatrist who now helps me balance taking enough medication to prevent me from getting sick again on the one hand, and not suffer too much from the side effects on the other. This was paramount to my recovery. I do not suffer from depression anymore. I have more energy again and have lost 20 pounds. What also helped me – I needed the time for this – was the notion that I should take into account my ‘vulnerability for psychosis and mania’, as I now call it. I focus on my strong points and do what gives me love and strength.

One of my wishes is to help people with a psychiatric illness recover. Recently, I held a talk for a group of psychiatric patients about my recovery. I published several articles for *Schizophrenia Bulletin* of Oxford University Press and blogs on the Dutch website *PsychoseNet*. I also participated in a round-table session with members of Dutch Parliament about the new Act of Compulsory Mental Health Care.

During the second period that I was in compulsory admission, I got two messages. One message was to be open about my psychosis – this would take several years – and the other was to visit the house of God. When I went to St. Vitus Church after my second compulsory admission, the priest recommended that I buy the *YouCat*, in which the Bible is explained. On the first page, I read: ‘God is Love’. Exactly what I found and describe in this book. My emotions become too much for me at times when I am in St. Vitus Church. I feel the presence of Christ and

the words of the priest touch upon a hidden truth. I love Christ very much now and talk with him. I considered my First Holy Communion on Maundy Thursday as my marriage with him.

My love for Christ, the war in Syria and the two bombardments I 'experienced' inspired me to work for peace. That is why I founded the international NGO 'Peace SOS'. Peace SOS is working to stop wars and resolve conflicts via peaceful means. We empower local peace organizations. Last year, I went to Tel Aviv to attend the public peace negotiations which were organized by Minds of Peace. I also visited Bethlehem and the Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem. I hope that – especially in one of the holiest places on earth – people will unite for peace. My dream is the coming of God's Kingdom, a world in which all children can play.

*Note:* the names of May-May, Gerard, Rumiana, Niels, Saskia, Arianne, Pearl, Mina, Marko, Pamala, René, Theo Schuyt, Felix Meurders, Bert Koenders, Wouter Bos, Ahmed Aboutaleb, Sylvester Eijffinger, Ronald Plasterk, Harry van Bommel are the real names of the people in this story. The majority of the rest of the names are real people but with fictitious names.

## FROM THE AUTHOR

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