

Black-box Testing

Career, Eroticism, and Tragedy

Iris Pinson



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An erotic triptych depicting sin, starting with the original sin, ending in hell. Inspired by the Haywain Triptych by the Dutch painter Jheronimus Bosch.

How does the paradisiacal innocence relate to guilt? Lila, Péar, and Victoria Van Gelre are three sisters who have it all. They are attractive, highly intelligent, articulate, and have a strong appeal to men of status. However, the ladies are selective and only receptive to men of good lineage, who also have wealth to spare.

The three girls don't know any better. From a young age, their mother Margaret, a successful Euro Commissioner, has done everything in her power to provide her daughters with a privileged start in life.

In the college life of Wichita, USA, Victoria is adored for her European aristocratic attitude. Working as an appraiser at Kingston Real Estate, Lila follows a career path lined with gold. Their sister Péar is a talented swimmer who pushes herself to the limit to claim the coveted gold medal at the Olympic Games.

The Van Gelre family symbolizes the allegorical representation surrounding a haywagon, where everyone eagerly tries to secure their share. Unfortunately, the cart is pulled by demons, gradually leading the unsuspecting, hay-blinded family towards the abyss. The dignitaries are not impartial resources, which leads the sinners, one by one, over a bridge into hell.

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This book does not contain a personal life story. What is it then? It's fiction. The story was entirely created in the writer's imagination. All names were randomly chosen and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and refers to the frequent occurrence of similar thought patterns, behavior, events or dreamed fantasies of people.

Part I - Being Nobody

Effortlessly captured in the way it happened.

Chapter 1

Black-box testing is a method to test the functionality of the components. Do they work or do they not work,' said Lila confidently. 'What are you talking about? I've lost track. We love each other, don't we? What's your problem?'

'I don't have a problem. You are the problem,' said Lila agitatedly.

Joen sat relaxed in a comfortable brown leather armchair and observed Lila, who, with a dominant posture, picked up her handbag next to the couch and looked evasively outside. Ready to leave.

Wasn't it supposed to start like this? The beginning of their relationship had been relaxed. Respect for each other. That's what they both had in mind.

'Where are you going? We were supposed to have a moment for ourselves tonight.'

'I'm not so sure anymore. You keep nagging, and you know I can't stand that. I'm already busy managing my portfolio. My goal is to successfully deliver the project so that management can't ignore me anymore. You know I'm determined. So?' Lila arrogantly threw her long, blonde, blow-dried hair back over her shoulders.

'Lila, why are you getting worked up again? It's just work. You've already achieved a prominent position in real estate. Relax, baby.'

Joen watched her as she walked with a straight back, gracefully on her high heels, towards the front door. He shook his head. What a woman Lila was. A woman with a handle.

One thing Joen had to admit: Lila was ambitious, and she proved it. A few years ago, Lila started at the international real estate organization Kingston Real Estate as a junior broker. Kingston was an aggressive player in the Randstad region, which had shaken up the competition abruptly. Lila quickly established her place within the organization and made a name for herself. But it was never enough for her. She always had to go a step further. In addition to appraising and selling commercial properties, she was now involved in Black-box testing. A

large facility had to be rendered voltage-free for one day due to transformer maintenance.

Lila was the woman who would lead the project as the project manager. At the moment, she was busy with the preparations of the project plan. The implementation of this plan caused considerable tension and took its toll, but Lila didn't show it because she had everything under professional control. Ambition and achieving results, that's what it was all about for her.

Unintentionally, Joen had to think about the day he noticed Lila in the Bijenkorf on a busy Saturday afternoon. As he walked towards the escalator, he passed by the makeup department where an advisor held a mirror for a perfect woman to look into. The type of woman every man dreams of. The image of this beautiful woman formed like a 3D picture in his mind. She reminded him of a young Linda de Mol. Her thick, long blonde hair playfully hung over her back. Confidently, she assessed her own face in the mirror.

Joen hesitated for a moment as he placed his foot on the first step of the escalator. He turned around, but because there were people behind him, he continued his way up. In his thoughts, Joen stood on the escalator. This woman was the epitome of beauty. She seemed to have come from the seed of a perfect man.

At the top of the escalator, Joen looked around disoriented. What had he actually come to the Bijenkorf for? He took the escalator back down. But when he looked at the makeup department on the ground floor from the escalator, his perfect creation had disappeared.

Joen struggled to control his obsession with this perfect woman and visited the Bijenkorf every free moment, hoping to encounter her again. After a few months of aimlessly wandering without success, he had given up hope. Until one sunny Saturday morning, as he walked along Veerhaven in Rotterdam and observed the sailboats in the harbor. Suddenly, a luxury car raced past at high speed. Joen blinked his eyes when he saw the beautiful woman from the Bijenkorf behind the wheel. With narrowed eyes, he followed the car as it entered Parklaan. Joen hurried to the gate where the car had disappeared and saw it prominently parked in the courtyard. The car was empty. On the gate, it read: Kingston Real Estate.

Ring the doorbell would be pointless since he didn't have a business story prepared. Joen walked a little further and took out his smartphone. He saw that there was a Kingston Real Estate office located in the city center, selling residential properties.

The following weekend, Joen decided to visit the real estate agency in the center of Rotterdam. He saw the fast car parked in front of the door, and now he had his story ready: the intended sale of his apartment.

Upon entering, he was greeted by a slightly too slick receptionist. He listened to her spiel and casually asked if Mrs. The Broker was present.

'Who do you mean? Lila or Mieke?'

Joen had prepared himself and had looked at the photos of the real estate agents associated with this office on Google.

'Lila Van Gelre.'

The receptionist picked up the phone and dialed an internal number.

'I have a gentleman here at the reception who would like to speak with you,' she said while looking at Joen questioningly.

'My name is Joen Maelre,' Joen said softly but audibly.

The receptionist listened attentively on the phone and asked Joen, 'Do you have an appointment?'

'No, but acquaintances recommended Lila Van Gelre as the expert within your office.'

Joen said this loudly enough so that Lila on the other end of the line must have heard it.

The receptionist listened attentively again, without Joen knowing what was being said on the other end of the line.

'Lila can make time for you now. Please follow me,' said the receptionist, leading Joen through the swinging doors to the elevator, where she pressed the button for the second floor. She smiled charmingly at Joen, as if he were about to receive a prize.

'Mr. Maelre,' the receptionist announced as she let Joen into the room.

'Please have a seat,' said Lila, gesturing to the chair opposite her desk.

'What can I do for you?'

'I would like to put my apartment up for sale. An acquaintance recommended Kingston Real Estate to me.'

'I'm glad to hear that. However, my work primarily involves commercial properties rather than the consumer market. But I can make an exception for you,' Lila said while attentively observing Joen. 'Could you tell me a bit more about your property and what your preferences are regarding the new living space?' Joen sensed perfectly that this Lila was a skillful businesswoman, and he briefly stated the facts about his apartment. 'Shall we schedule an appointment soon, so that I can view your property and determine the selling price?' Joen nodded and took out his smartphone to check his schedule, after which a date was agreed upon.

At the agreed time, Lila rang Joen's doorbell. In a professional manner, she shook his hand and gave Joen a skeptical look because he was dressed casually. Her eyes unabashedly scanned him from head to toe. He could tell from her expression that she was not pleased. When Joen had inquired about Lila at Kingston Real Estate, he had been wearing an impeccable suit.

Lila took a seat on the couch and placed the luxurious brown leather folder on the coffee table. With a business-like smile, Lila complimented Joen on his well-maintained and neatly organized home. 'Smaller apartments fall into a more favorable price range compared to larger properties. The location of this apartment is ideal. In the heart of Rotterdam, these are sought-after properties.' Joen stood up and led Lila through his apartment. In passing, he mentioned that he had taken on various projects in recent years and was now considering taking the next step in his career, which might involve a relocation.

When Joen led Lila to the kitchen area, he noticed a disapproving look in her eyes. 'What's that over there?' she pointed to the pig's foot on the countertop. Joen burst out laughing. 'That's a fake one. The pig's foot looks real, but if you pick it up, you'll feel that it's made of rubber.'

Joen grabbed the foot, squeezed it, and a hysterical sound of a distressed pig emanated from it. Joen offered her the foot, but Lila didn't take it. She wasn't amused by his joke.

As they walked towards the living room area, Lila explained that the advantage of small apartments is that you can make functional use of limited space.

'There are a few basic principles to perfectly style your home. The apartment is currently laid out illogically, but if you create divisions in the large living room, you'll keep it organized.

Try separating the open kitchen by placing the table on the right side. Move the buffet cabinet that's against the wall to the table. That way, the room will appear larger, and you won't have a direct view of your countertop.'

Joen remained silent and chuckled to himself. Lila was enthusiastic. He understood that decorating homes was her passion and zest for life. Joen had no interest in how the apartment looked. He took on long-term IT Security assignments and, whenever possible, rented a private home near his temporary client. No hassle with waiting lists. The rent was considerably higher, but he earned well from his assignments.

Joen knew that his current assignment would be completed by the end of the year, and he was considering taking an assignment abroad. Recently, a colleague had moved to Canada and had already mentioned that they were seeking people with his analytical security knowledge in Toronto. Joen had not made a decision yet because he saw Lila as an enticing trophy on his list. He found her exceptionally attractive, a bit pretentious, but someone to have a few months of fun with.

'My advice is: Buy a few plants and place them on that cabinet. That way, the seating area will have a more intimate atmosphere.'

'Coffee?' Joen asked, looking at Lila seriously.

'What kind of coffee do you have?'

'Nespresso.'

'That's fine,' and Lila took a seat in an armchair. She grabbed her folder from her bag and demonstratively placed it on the table. Then she quickly made some notes.

He observed her from the kitchen. She was truly beautiful with her long blonde hair. The black tailored suit was perfect for her. The snow-

white blouse completed the ensemble. Joen noticed that Lila wore little makeup. Either she didn't use it, or she knew how to apply it invisibly.

Joen placed the Nespresso on the table. He smiled at Lila and said, 'I have to admit, you have a lot of knowledge when it comes to decorating and styling homes. How long have you been working in real estate?'

'Just a few years. I've always been fascinated by how designers showcase their creativity in television programs.'

Smiling, she said, 'You've confused me. You came to our office in a nice suit, but I find the interior of your apartment doesn't match your personal style.'

'Your analysis is spot on. I completely furnished this apartment from a bankruptcy sale. Currently, I'm considering taking a job abroad, so I want to sell this place.'

Lila nodded understandingly and said, 'One advantage of this complex is that it's built in the Amsterdam School style. Lots of brick and expressive facades filled with ladder windows. These projects used to be initiated by social housing. Now they're sought-after properties.'

In the meantime, Lila closed her folder and informed him in a businesslike tone about the price at which the house could be sold.

As Lila grabbed her bag, she casually asked, 'Where do you work, by the way?'

'I work for Rococo.'

Lila let go of her bag and looked at Joen intrigued. 'Fashion Company Rococo?'

Joen nodded, capturing her full attention. 'Yes, that's right. The headquarters are in Paris, but there's also a division here in the Netherlands. From a tax perspective, it's advantageous for large multinational companies to have certain parts based in the Netherlands.'

'What do you do there? Are you involved in the latest fashion trends?'

Joen chuckled internally. Apparently, that was the only thing Lila was interested in. Status; that's what she was after. But Joen knew how to handle it. Lila wasn't the first woman to hang on his every word in excitement upon hearing the name Rococo and Paris.

Joen took his time and talked about Rococo: how haute couture was seen as the pinnacle of fashion. 'You can't imagine, but only one or sometimes a few copies of certain garments are custom-made for the customer. All pieces are handcrafted from the most beautiful and expensive fabrics, woven to special specifications. That's the big difference with the ready-to-wear industry, which floods the retail market with their off-the-rack clothing in large quantities. You're not unique if you pick clothes from the store, try them on, and buy them. We owe haute couture to Charles Frederick Worth, who designed his own collections and was opposed to the ready-to-wear model. His aim was to provide wealthy clients with unique designs.'

'Wow, Joen, you work for an inspiring company. I'm very creative myself and read a lot about fashion. It inspires me. What do you do exactly at Rococo?'

'I work in digital security. Additionally, as an analyst, I ensure optimal returns are achieved from the two collections that Rococo presents per year. You have to imagine that a collection should contain at least fifty different new garments per model. The target audience that can afford our haute couture is extremely wealthy but also very small.'

Lila ran out of words to satisfy her curiosity. It was an open invitation for Joen, and he charmed Lila like a seasoned charmer.

'The new collection will be presented next month.'

'Joen, I would love to be there sometime,' said Lila, looking at him longingly.

Joen deliberately didn't respond to her remark. That was for the next phase. He adopted a businesslike demeanor and shifted the conversation to the sale of his apartment. Actually, he didn't want to sell his apartment. It was his home base. Financially, the apartment was in good shape.

A few days later, Joen received a written proposal from Lila for the sale of his apartment. He had casually thrown it on the table.

The next day, Lila called like an experienced sales manager and asked Joen if he had any questions about the proposal. But Joen had no questions.

'I'll be in Paris for the next few weeks because the new collection is being presented. Maybe I can reserve a spot for you at the presentation. Would you like to come to Paris?'

Before Joen could finish speaking, Lila exclaimed YES through the phone. She was ecstatic.

Joen discussed the logistics of where and when they would meet in Paris in a businesslike manner. He found Lila a fascinating woman. Her ambition knew no bounds, despite her excessive need for validation and admiration. She enjoyed the attention that came her way like necessary oxygen, compulsively inhaling it deeply.

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The presentation of the new Rococo collection in Paris was breathtaking and extravagant. Joen could tell from Lila's face that she was enjoying it. Afterwards, she stood with a glass of champagne in her hand and took a sip contentedly.

'What did you think?' Joen asked with a wide smile on his face.

'This is one of the most beautiful days of my life. The elegance with which the models walk down the runway is so fascinating. The collection is truly magnificent, and the colors for the new season appeal to me. I think it's important to dress in trendy designs with the right color combinations for the season,' she said seriously while looking at Joen. Then she took another sip from her glass. Before Joen could say anything, Lila continued, 'My personal style aligns perfectly with what I saw today. As a successful businesswoman, having a consistent style is important. A style that complements my appearance.'

Lila nodded twice to affirm herself, followed by another sip from her glass.

The experience with Lila was something Joen had never encountered before. They had enjoyed an elaborate dinner near the Champs-Élysées, with an excellent selection of wines.

The night that followed was like an unreal dream. It happened so naturally. In the elevator, Joen casually draped his arm around her shoulder, and Lila allowed it. She even smiled encouragingly at Joen as she led him to her hotel room. As she lovingly looked at Joen, she opened the door for him. He couldn't resist her charms. In the room,

he pulled Lila closer and tenderly held her beautiful body. Slowly, their lips drew closer to each other.

He undressed Lila while maintaining eye contact. She allowed Joen to lift her, and he gently placed her on the bed with love. She was so beautiful. Her blonde hair formed a halo around her head. He felt her hands glide over his lower body, and Joen surrendered to an intense lovemaking. That night, their hearts were intimately connected. A warm fire consumed his body, a moment he wished could last forever. That night, Lila fulfilled all his desires. Joen had unconsciously sensed it when he was carried up the escalator in De Bijenkorf. Lila was the woman who knew how to bring men to a turbo orgasm.

Without exchanging a word, they stared at each other the next morning. This couldn't be a surprise. The feeling was so deeply ingrained that it was immeasurable. Joen felt like the happiest man on earth. He lay in bed, watching Lila as she got out of bed with her perfect body and walked to the bathroom. Joen stroked his naked body and felt his erection returning. He made a mental note to pleasure Lila as soon as she came out of the bathroom.

But Lila stayed in the bathroom for too long, and he called out, 'Honey, are you coming?'

'I'll be there soon. I'm still busy,' she replied.

Joen yearned for her delicious body and found it difficult to restrain himself.

'Are you coming?'

But there was no response. In an excited state, Joen walked to the slightly ajar bathroom door. His lust disappeared when he secretly watched Lila. She stood in front of the mirror whispering to herself. Joen couldn't quite make out what she was saying. She pressed her hips against the sink, her face close to the mirror. Normally, Joen wouldn't be able to control himself if a woman stood with her perky butt sticking out. But this display was strange and surreal. Lila looked like a parakeet chatting with herself. When he gently pushed the door open further, Lila noticed him. She turned her head and looked at Joen. 'How do you like my eyes?' she blinked a few times.

'Beautiful,' Joen said, wrapping his arms around her hips and gently pulling her buttocks against his body. He kissed her tenderly. Lila broke away from his kiss, tossing her long blonde hair over her

shoulders. Then she looked past Joen in the mirror, unabashedly admiring herself.

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Joen felt his phone vibrating in his pocket, pulled it out, and saw that Lila was calling.

'Hey Joen, how's it going?'

'Good. You sound enthusiastic. What are you up to?'

'I'm calling to tell you that I'm too busy. Black-box testing is scheduled for this week, and I'm fully occupied with the preparations. I won't have any time to come see you in the next two weeks.'

'That's a shame because I've been looking forward to seeing you. You know that.'

Joen knew his remark confused Lila.

'That's sweet of you. But right now, I need all the available time to wrap things up.'

Joen suspected that Lila had multiple lovers, and apparently, there was a competitor planned for the upcoming weekend. Joen didn't like it, but he knew he could never satisfy Lila in every aspect. She wasn't the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. It was fun while it lasted. Black-box testing would consume her activities and decisions in the coming time. She was taking on too much with this project.

'You know I'm the project leader at Kingston Real Estate, overseeing the entire project. Black-box testing takes place in a grand building on the site. The building was constructed in the 1970s with an outdated technical infrastructure even upon completion. Since then, there have been several major reconstructions. The building doesn't have an attractive exterior. It's square-shaped with a dull gray concrete color. Comparable to the concrete blocks from the former Eastern Bloc. The past few weeks have been stressful with preparations and creating the schedule. In the meantime, I've completed the playbook with the role assignments for the responsible employees and the agreements with external maintenance companies. Joen, you have no idea how much is involved here. What do you think? The vital systems, such as the fire alarm system and emergency power generators, need to be deployed.'

'Lila, aren't you stressing too much? These kinds of tasks are better outsourced. Why do you take on projects like this yourself?'

'Joel, I want to be all-around capable, and then I can charge a good hourly rate as a consultant. If I successfully complete this Black-box testing and have a satisfied client, I'll be happy too.'

Lila continued talking for a while. Joel stopped listening. His attention faded away.

'Lila, the doorbell is ringing. I have to answer it. We'll talk in two weeks. Greetings and good luck.'

Joel ended the call. The doorbell hadn't actually rung. He was done with her.

Chapter 2

‘My heart is full of love. Nothing more is needed to let this emotion flow through my blood and body. It's really not complicated. From my perspective, I can oversee everything. I still remember when I saw you for the first time. It was love at first sight. It felt like I was on a different planet. I tried to control myself because I didn't want to show that I had fallen for you immediately.’

‘Those are beautiful words, Lila,’ said Sander.

Lila looked lovingly at Sander, who placed his warm hand on her belly and kissed her shoulder.

‘When I saw you entering our office for the first time, I was immediately captivated. You came to present the Black-box testing project. I couldn't get you out of my mind. Like a gust of wind, you took possession of my heart. You push me into a metaphorical corner where I slowly come to my senses. There is more between heaven and earth. A higher power. Your gust of wind was the messenger I needed to hoist my sails, so that the strong wind could determine the direction,’ Sander spoke like a seasoned actor.

Lila became emotional from his sweet speech, and she looked at Sander with moist eyes. No man had ever said such things to her. Sander confirmed that she was special to him. Before she could say anything, Sander continued, ‘I think you are the most beautiful woman on earth,’ and he lay down on Lila, who gladly welcomed him into her perfect body.

Sander was the seducer, skilled in creating a paradisiacal feeling. He applied his technique seamlessly to Lila, who was receptive to it. Sander was the man that Lila had secretly been searching for over the years. The most important thing for her was that he came from a good background. His parents lived in a large villa in Wassenaar. His father had his own company in Dubai and traveled the world for work.

Sander's full name was Alexander Goudriaan tot Datema. Lila had Googled his family name and suspected he came from nobility. Sander denied it, but she knew better. For her, Sander was the prince on a

white horse. It wasn't just his beautiful blue eyes, muscular body, and sweet voice that made her heart beat faster. There was more to it. His broad, yet not excessively trained shoulders, and his defined jawline indicated he must have a healthy testosterone balance. Lila had read about it in women's magazines. Sander had the ideal height of 1.80 meters, short blond hair, and a clean-shaven face. He dressed in Austin Reed design suits, exuding English sophistication. Thankfully, he didn't wear those brown shoes that the majority of sales tigers in the Netherlands roamed around in with their dark blue suits.

Lila had a good substantive conversation with Sander about the Black-box testing project. She was sure he must have graduated with honors from a prestigious university. The way he formulated his sentences and his detailed knowledge confirmed her theory. During lunch, Lila observed Sander and noticed that he smelled his wine glass before taking a sip. His parents must have a generous wine cellar. Deep in her heart, Lila hoped that Sander wasn't a player who would heartlessly replace her with another attractive young lady.

Lila was still bothered by Joen. Joen was a nice guy, but something was missing. He was indecisive too. He had asked her to appraise his apartment for sale, but in the end, he didn't put it on the market. She managed to sell the apartment quickly because it was located in a nice area in the city center of Rotterdam. However, the interior was dated and unattractive to potential buyers. Her relationship with Joen had developed superficially and revolved only around sex, whenever Lila couldn't rely on her other lovers. She found Joen's employer, Rococo, interesting, but that was the extent of it. Lila had hoped to take advantage of Rococo's employee discounts. But when Joen told her that Rococo didn't offer any staff perks, she was done with him. She just had to tell Joen that.

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'Hello Lila, how are you doing?'

Her mother, Margret, called and wanted to be kept informed about her daughter's achievements in a dominant manner.

'Mom, everything is going well here. The Black-box testing project has been completed to satisfaction.'

'I hadn't heard from you, and I was worried.'

'Why worry? After the evaluation report, the management at Kingston Real Estate was thrilled with the results. I'm sure a promotion is in the cards for me. They simply can't ignore me.'

'Darling, just keep in mind that there are always others trying to outshine you,' said Margret in a concerned tone. 'When are you coming to Brussels? I'd love to spend the weekend together and go shopping. Your sisters are coming soon too. You do keep in touch with them, right? It's important to maintain strong family bonds.'

'Yes, Mom. I spoke to Péar and Victoria last week.'

'And what about your brother Lucas?'

'I haven't had time to call him.'

'Oh, Lila. Your brother is part of the family too. It's not nice to neglect him. We don't treat each other like that in our family.'

'I'll call him, Mom,' said Lila with a sigh.

After the conversation with her mother, Margret, Lila placed her phone on the table and stared into space. Could she ever measure up to her mother, Margret? Despite her lofty ambitions and drive, Lila had her moments of insecurity. Her mother, Margret Van Gelre, was in a league of her own. She had made a career in the business world at a young age and had ventured into Dutch politics through a circuitous route. A few years ago, she was appointed as a European Commissioner. Ambition was her second nature. She even made it to Forbes' list of 'Most Powerful Women.'

Margret came from a prominent Rotterdam family that had amassed a fortune in the shipping industry. Her parents had encouraged her to pursue higher education, believing in the importance of women's development.

Amidst all the successes, there was also a great frustration within the Van Gelre dynasty, which compelled family members to achieve great heights. Margret's ancestors had founded the University of Harderwijk in 1648, the fifth university in the Netherlands during the Dutch Republic. According to historical tales, some cities refused to pay their share of the expenses, despite being part of the university's

establishment. Subsequently, the French invasion led to the university's closure. King Willem I attempted to revive the university in 1815, but its doors were definitively closed in 1818.

When Margret had had one glass of wine too many, she would become rebellious and would always mention that it hadn't been necessary to close the University of Harderwijk. She would boast that the university had produced great scientists like Jacob Roggeveen, Carolus Linnaeus, and Herman Boerhaave.

Lila knew all too well that it was futile to argue with Margret about her family's role in the University of Harderwijk. It always led to harsh and unnuanced statements, as if Margret had inherited a rebellious gene from her ancestors. She could become angry, very angry.

Lila had no memories of her father. Her parents divorced when she was very young, and her father had gone abroad for work. Margret had taken charge and guided the family excellently. A father figure had never been necessary to lead and support a successful family. Margret was a true Van Gelre, a fighter who wouldn't tolerate obstruction or opposition. She protected her territory like a lioness. Her strength lay in the political arena. She was a master at channeling her anger and irritation into resounding results through supernatural powers.

Lila's sisters, Péar and Victoria, and her brother, Lucas, were privileged to grow up in this environment. Margret had a busy job, and as a mother, she was often away. During their childhood, the household staff and nanny maintained order and regularity in the Van Gelre Residence. Looking back, Lila could only be positive about her childhood experiences. Margret spared no expense when it came to their education. Although Lila wasn't a high achiever, she managed to obtain the necessary diplomas within the available time. However, she did feel the pressure from her sister Péar.

Péar was affectionately called 'Star' at home. She effortlessly earned her study credits and graduated well ahead of schedule. But Lila was also proud of Péar because she was a successful swimmer, breaking one record after another. Lila realized that she had inherited her mother's business acumen, but she didn't know who had passed on the swimming talent to Péar. Nevertheless, Margret had recognized, stimulated, and capitalized on the talent at the right moment.

With an empty glass in her hand, Lila walked to the kitchen. She turned on the faucet and filled the glass with cold water. While taking small sips, she gazed contentedly ahead. She was proud of the interior of her home. A few years ago, she had purchased a neglected bungalow and invested a lot of money and time to renovate it according to the latest trends.

Her hobby was interior design, and Lila had a natural talent for determining the right style and colors. She discovered this talent at a young age. She still remembered the first time she saw a beautiful sofa in a shop window. She was shopping in the city center with her mother and sisters, looking for new winter coats. Her sister Victoria had stepped into a dog's mess and slipped. Margret managed to catch her just in time. It was a disgusting, soft light-brown pile of mess that curled up along the side of her shoe. Margret pushed Victoria to the curb and tried to scrape off the stinking mess from her shoe by rubbing it against the edge. As Margret was busy helping Victoria, Lila's curiosity led her to an exclusive interior shop's display window. There, she saw a beautiful sofa in various colors. The sofa reminded her of tales from *One Thousand and One Nights*. The entire display was beautifully arranged, quite different from their classic home interior.

'Are you coming, Lila?' called Margret, who had already moved on with Victoria and Péar. Lila couldn't take her eyes off the display, but Margret reluctantly pulled her away.

The kitchen of Lila's renovated bungalow was her showpiece. Everything was done in sleek white, including the hardwood floor. The ceiling consisted of dark wooden panels. An open bookshelf separated the space, partially filled. The neat countertop only showed the curve of the faucet. The white wall-mounted extractor hood somewhat disrupted the perfect image.

Cooking in the kitchen was a challenge for Lila. If there was a drop of water in the sink, she immediately wiped it dry. In reality, she hardly cooked, as reheating microwave meals was considered healthy enough. Besides, she had another mission: achieving a perfect body with a slim figure at all costs.

During temporary relationships, men often enjoyed it when she cooked for them. She reluctantly bought ingredients according to the recipes from Albert Heijn's *Allerhande* magazine. With some creative improvisation, she managed to serve a delicious meal. Men complimented her on her cooking skills.

After finishing her glass of water, Lila reluctantly entered the living room, grabbed her mobile phone, and called her brother Lucas. Lucas was never talkative; she had to pull words out of him.

'Hey, Lucas, how are you?' Lila began.

'Good. Why?' replied Lucas curtly.

'We haven't talked in a while. I've been so busy with my assignments. I meant to call you tonight.'

'And you're calling me just now?' responded Lucas with a sharp tone.

Lila wanted to end the call but remembered Margret's words. Family bonds were important and needed to be preserved.

'How's work?'

'Good.'

'Where are you working now? Maybe we can have lunch together if I'm in the area,' said Lila hopefully.

'I'm stationed in The Hague at 5G-Go. That large gray building next to the viaduct.'

Lila was stunned since that was the same building where she recently supervised the Black-box testing project and had an appointment with Sander next week to discuss a new project.

'How long have you been working there?'

From Lucas's tone, Lila could tell he reluctantly answered her questions.

'I've been hired as an electrician for at least a year. But the client has already expressed interest in keeping me on the payroll permanently.'

'I'll be in the area next week. Shall we meet up?' asked Lila hopefully.

Lucas didn't respond, and an uncomfortable moment of silence followed.

'Lucas, are you still there?' asked Lila.

'Yes.'

Lila knew she wouldn't get an answer, so she decided to end the call. Margret would be pleased; she had contacted her brother.

Lila pondered the brief conversation with Lucas. They had never quite seen eye to eye. Lucas was a few years younger and always felt mothered by Lila. As a teenager, Lila had the idea that Lucas carried a secret, something he didn't want to share with anyone. Lucas intrigued her.

This had led Lila, years ago when she still lived at home, to sneak into Lucas's bedroom one Sunday afternoon. She was curious and wanted to unravel the mystery behind Lucas's behavior. He didn't behave like a typical Van Gelre family member, lacking the pride and winner mentality.

Lucas had the attic floor to himself. Margret had allowed him to spray graffiti on one of the side walls. Lila sat on his bed and scrutinized the scene. She found it miraculous that Lucas had managed this. The well-executed sprayed image indicated that a professional had done it. Lucas had never drawn anything, let alone create such a beautiful image on the wall. Perhaps some people had been in the house without Margret knowing. The graffiti scene was painted with great precision, showing rolling grasslands with low bushes and small clusters of trees on both sides. The rising sun gave a dreamy depiction of morning dew on the grass.

Lila stood up and positioned herself in front of the wall. The rising sun was partially obscured by a large rusty container. It was a mysterious and somewhat eerie portrayal. Lila ran her finger along the wall. Who would want to look at such a large, unattractive, rusty container? What was there to see, Lila wondered aloud with her shoulders raised.

Under the slanted roof of the attic room, Lucas's wooden bed stood. On the other side was his desk with an empty desktop by the window. Lila sat on the chair behind the desk and cautiously opened the top drawer. It was empty. In the second drawer, she found a new notepad and a black fineliner. As she was about to close the drawer again, her eye caught a piece of paper. An almost invisible strip protruded from the side of the notepad. Lila picked up the notepad from the drawer and placed it on the desk. She carefully flipped through it and saw handwritten poems by Lucas. He had filled page after page. Some of the poems seemed familiar from her own poetry album. It was bizarre

because Lucas had never wanted to write in her poetry album. Two poems stood out because they were written in red ink, unlike the other poems.

*Chisel in marble the good that's been done,
So you never, never forget anyone.
Write in the sand what wrongs you've received,
So you'll soon, soon forget and be relieved.*

*Thoughts may vanish and lives may fade,
But my care for you won't be swayed.
You were the sunshine in my life,
And you meant so much to me, so rife.
Two halves of you and me are one,
The other is the same, never undone.*

The second poem, Lila had never seen before. Afterward, she continued flipping through the poems until she came across the minuscule protruding piece of paper. It turned out to be a hand-drawn micro-sized map. Lila looked at it, but she had no idea what the map referred to. There was a path drawn with straight square lines. The diagram contained symbols such as a wreath, unknown Chinese characters, but also the same container that was depicted on the graffiti wall. She read the words: safe haven, entrance, well, and Jasmine. The exit was at the word 'well.' At Jasmine, there was also an arrow pointing outward, but the path was closed. Lila found it confusing. Who was Jasmine? She searched further in the desk drawer, but it was empty except for the fineliner. She flipped through the notepad once again, but there was nothing that could connect it to the mysterious map.

Lila neatly arranged everything as she had found it. But she wasn't done yet. Lila stood in the middle of the room, closed her eyes, and listened attentively. Lucas must be hiding something. She opened her eyes, walked slowly to the bed, and moved it so she could access the hatch under the slanted part of the roof. There was a door in the panel,

but the key was missing. Lila looked around in vain. Where could Lucas have hidden the key?

Lila didn't let herself be discouraged and went downstairs to get a screwdriver and a flashlight from the toolbox in the meter cupboard. Skillfully, Lila opened the simple lock. It was dark behind the door. Lila turned on the flashlight. It was a disappointment, as there was nothing to see behind the panel. She shone the flashlight around once more, and in the far corner, she saw something. On her belly, she slid through the narrow space. With her arm stretched, she could just reach a small black plastic bag. She pulled it toward her carefully. Inside, there was a folded board game. Lila didn't recognize it. It was amateurishly drawn on cardboard. Could Lucas have made this as a school project at the High School? she wondered.

The bag contained two small plastic figurines and a few tokens. They were different. One was a cowboy with a red shirt, and the other was a woman in a gray dress. Types that Lila had seen in old photos from the time of World War II. She carefully put the figurines back in the bag. One by one, Lila examined the peculiar images on the tokens, such as a white token with a black icon of a man flexing his muscles. The other token had an image of a black cloud with a white letter 'Z.' Lila couldn't remember Lucas ever receiving this game for his birthday or Christmas. She was about to close the board game when her eye caught the image of a container. Again, that container. She shook her head. She needed to investigate this further soon. What on earth was going on here? Lila carefully placed the black plastic bag back where she found it. Then she crawled back under the slanted wall and closed the door. However, she couldn't lock it again. Silently, Lila left Lucas' bedroom.



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