The Girl at the Window

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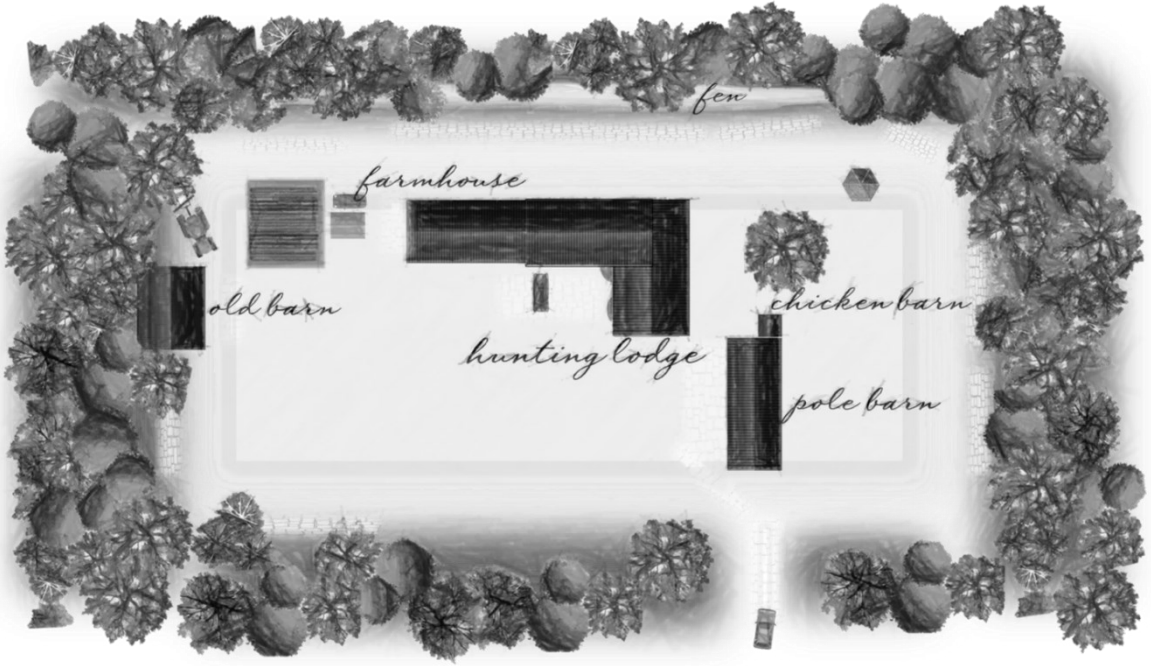
Herborn, Joris van der Haagen, ca 1660

The Heathside



Prologue

1. Taerling house in Delft, Judica Sunday, 1666

Had he been awakened by the church bells or by the door opening?

He didn't know. It was still early, but light was already seeping in. Through the window, the contours of the Nieuwe Kerk took shape, distorted by the yellowed, convex panes.

The musty blanket, rough and full of holes, was thrown aside. She crawled up from the foot of the bed and lay down against him. Her cold knees touched the backs of his thighs. He faintly thought he could smell stale wine and pipe tobacco.

"Today it has to happen," she whispered.

He nodded almost imperceptibly. His gaze slid from the window to the modest table and chair in the corner of the small room. The room felt like a cell. At the same time, it was his only anchor.

Her hand glided over his chest, and a mix of fear and desire knotted his stomach. "Did you remember it?" Her voice was as icy as her knees felt.

"Small, light, valuable, and easy to take," he said, his words muffled by the pillow.

"Good! Don't let yourself lose focus. By tomorrow, we'll be gone."

She had already stepped out of his bed, smoothed her apron, and left the room.

As her footsteps faded in the wide hallway of the reformatory, he turned over. He pressed his cheek against the cold wall and closed his eyes.

II. Wetzlar

Even before she had released the alarm button, an overwhelming explosion threw the slender, gray-blonde woman backward. Blood flowed from her upper arm, forming an ever-expanding stain on the velour carpet. The alarm filled the otherwise serene store with an ear-splitting wail. Red lights flashed nervously on the ceiling and the storefront. Stunned, passersby froze in the idyllic town in Hesse.

The elderly jeweler leaned over his wife. "*Ach, Lene. Ach, Lene*," he whispered, gently stroking her trembling fingers.

Three men stood for a moment, indecisively looking at one another, their breaths rasping through their balaclavas. The tallest grabbed a sledgehammer from a black duffel bag and struck the glass of a display case full of valuable watches; the security glass didn't show so much as a scratch. Shouting in Arabic, he barked an order, and an accomplice rushed toward the jeweler with a drawn pistol.

"*Schlüssel, Schlüssel, schnell!*" he yelled, pressing the cold barrel of the gun hard against the old man's temple. Trembling, the jeweler held his hands over his head in despair.

At the sound of approaching sirens, panic erupted. Smoke gradually obscured the view. The tallest man gestured toward the door, and the trio stormed outside.

Out on the street, among the shops, terrified bystanders screamed. An excited dog barked at the three men dressed in black. At one end of the street, a police car with flashing lights and blaring sirens blocked the way. From the opposite direction, officers were approaching.

Two of the robbers looked desperately at their leader in the middle, who quickly took stock of the situation.

A voice boomed through the shopping street. "Hey, Baqil!"

The tallest man reacted instinctively. He turned and found himself face-to-face with a short, muscular Turkish detective. *Der Maulwurf!*—

the mole—flashed through his mind. A wave of irritation and frustration surged within him. He hesitated for a split second and fired two shots into the air. The deafening gunshots echoed through the town, and the sharp scent of gunpowder filled the air.

Bystanders scrambled for cover, if they hadn't already. Between two half-timbered houses directly across from the store, the three robbers darted into an alley. Baqil had planned the escape route and alternatives meticulously.

"Halt!" the detective shouted.

The men ignored the command.

A gunshot rang out in the alley, and one of the robbers fell to the ground, screaming in pain.

"Not a word, Habib," Baqil hissed at his wounded accomplice. Then he jumped into the getaway car. The old Ford Escort screeched away, tires smoking. Through the rear window, he watched the advancing detective, whom he knew as Ahmed Koçak, grow smaller and smaller in the distance.

"Not today, Maulwurf," said Baqil Hrach. Panting from the exertion, he pulled the balaclava from his sweaty head.

I
The Heathside

At Home at The Heathside

I don't talk easily about myself; it's never been one of my strong points. But to tell this story, I'm going to have to confront it. You'll even learn a little about my family history along the way. Otherwise, you'd quickly start wondering how I ended up on the train to Germany with Sandra Mulder and her film crew.

My story may seem like a series of coincidences, but I don't believe in pure chance. It's more likely that the choices I made led me on a journey full of mysteries, intrigue, and desires. And ultimately, to an unexpected discovery.

My name is Rick Walters, and I live on the edge of the forest between Elten, Beek, and Didam, near the border with Germany.

My house, The Heathside, once a hunting lodge, is only accessible via a service road beside the A12. The property is separated from the road by a broad ditch running along the edge of the forest. Two ivy-covered pillars mark the entrance to the driveway.

In the summer, the air carries the scent of elderflower, while magpies and squirrels search for acorns and sloe berries in the autumn. My Bernese mountain dog, Sita, might greet you. Don't worry, she's friendly enough.

After the bend, the house appears among the greenery, imposing yet intimate thanks to the shelter of the meadow and the Bergher forest. In the past, the estate bordered the Elten Heath, which explains the origin of the name The Heathside. Where the heath once lay, traffic now roars along the highway.

About twenty-five years ago, I began researching my family tree. Perhaps I was unconsciously already searching for my identity—or some form of justification. I visited historical societies, archives, and

relatives, and discovered that I should have been named Lamboij—pronounced Lambwa in French—instead of Walters.

I found out that in 1686, Peter Lamboij, who came from Kleverhamm, married Gaertje Gaerts from Didam, a small village about three kilometers from my home.

Peter and Gaertje had two sons: Nicolas and Walter. Like many of Didam's residents, they were Catholic, although this was only tolerated by the Reformation authorities. Officially, everyone was supposed to be Protestant. As a result, the children of Catholics were baptized twice: once in a Protestant church and again in a secret Catholic church, usually in the barn of a remote farmhouse.

Thanks to the Reformation, I got my last name. The Protestant ministers found the name Lamboij either too Catholic or too difficult: the children of Nicolas Lamboij were henceforth baptized as Peters, after their grandfather Peter, and the children of Walter as Walters. The name Lamboij appeared sporadically in church records and then disappeared completely after a few generations.

The origin of the name remained a mystery. Before 1686, there was no trace of Peter Lamboij. I searched for variations of the surname, and I looked through every document I could find, hoping for any link to Kleverhamm, the region near Kleve where Peter had come from, but found nothing.

Slowly but surely, I lost interest. By then, I was married—back then, at least—and my precious time was consumed by work and family obligations. When your life has a clear goal and direction, genealogical research quickly becomes a secondary concern.

The files ended up in cardboard boxes, first moved to a spare bedroom and eventually to the attic.

My inner demons first really showed themselves about twelve years ago, when my wife, Lisbeth, left me. I only saw my kids on weekends,

but those brief visits didn't fill the emptiness. I found myself alone in the house where we had laughed and cried together, where children's feet had stamped, where we had been happy and sought comfort in each other. The house I was so attached to.

In the first years after the divorce, I took refuge in alcohol as a way to escape the pain and the loss, and to combat the terrible feeling of failure. Over time, I slowly pulled myself out of that rut and got my life back on track.

Last year, those demons suddenly flared up again. I had been a manager at a plastic manufacturing company in Nijmegen for decades. I liked my work, especially the contact with people. Although I am quite introverted, I can generally empathize well with others. The production itself didn't particularly interest me.

Two years ago, the factory was taken over by a multinational. Suddenly, I—nearly hitting sixty—was plunged into a world of numbers and spreadsheets, efficiency, and cost savings. The hollow slogans about our success and sustainability just sounded like empty words to me. I felt that my role as a leader was being questioned, and I began to doubt myself.

On a sunny day in May, a young woman from the Personnel Department, now called Human Resources—probably to make it sound less personal—invited me for a one-on-one meeting. She looked stern and distant over her black glasses and had clearly prepared her speech.

"Close the door and have a seat, Mr. Walters," she said, leaning over the file in front of her.

"I have no secrets, you know. The door can stay open as far as I'm concerned," I replied, still cheerful, holding my coffee.

"Not for me." She straightened her blazer and pushed her glasses further up her nose. The tone was set.

She explained that there was a need for renewal and that a consulting firm had drawn up management profiles to restructure the organization. Changes were expected in the way the staff was managed, and adjustments were needed within the company.

She continued, but my attention drifted. I stirred my coffee, already sensing the storm coming.

"I read that you drink beer with your employees on Friday afternoons?"

I was taken aback. From the way she'd studied my file so carefully, it was clear she'd go far in Human Resources.

"Yes, on Fridays it's 'ready-go-home' time," I said. "Everyone puts in that extra bit of effort, so we can have a beer and still get home on time."

She smiled faintly, as if she were in energy-saving mode. "And they can't put in the extra work the rest of the week, Mr. Walters?"

I shrugged. "Well, the bow can't always be drawn tight, right?"

From the icy expression on her face, it was clear that wasn't the answer she had wanted to hear.

You can guess what happened next: I was out on the street. Fortunately, I received a good severance package.

Of course, I could have started job hunting immediately, but there was so much to be done at and around the centuries-old hunting lodge that I decided to take some time for myself first.

Honestly, I wasn't sure what else I was supposed to do. "The Heathside fills your heart and empties your wallet," my father used to say, especially when there was work to be done on the white cornice.

I felt differently: my heart was empty, and my wallet was full. The hunting lodge, where my family had lived for generations, felt soulless. Desolate. I sought that comfort again at the bottom of a bottle.

Luckily, there was someone who kept me somewhat grounded: Gerhard Ross, my tough neighbor. He lives in the simple farmhouse that's attached to the left side of the hunting lodge.

In the summer, I refurbished the garden path, painted window frames until blisters appeared on my fingers, and energetically wandered with Sita through the Elten and Bergher forests. I helped Gerhard late into the evening, mowing and haying under the roar of his almost-antique tractor. I didn't fall into the notorious black hole, and never got bored.

"Time fer a pint," Gerhard would say in the evening. Then we'd have a couple, but I didn't tell him I had a few more at home afterward.

And sometimes, a few more after that.

At the start of autumn, my enthusiasm waned. I painted a few more shutters and then tidied up the home library. More and more often, I found myself making excuses not to go outside. I usually spent my time in front of the TV in the living room, aimlessly flipping through channels, neglecting my physical activities.

Two months later, the next two shutters were half-sanded and abandoned in the pole barn. Sita regularly laid her head on my knee to let me know it was time for a walk. My metabolism seemed to have slowed right down. I stared bleakly at the falling autumn leaves. Maybe there wasn't a deep black hole, but it sure felt like a little gray pit.

My kids came home for Christmas. It doesn't happen often that all three of them are there.

Tom lives in Geneva and works at CERN; Paul is doing a PhD in chemistry in Boston. He stayed for two weeks, then spent another two weeks with his mom, Lisbeth, who lives in Arnhem. My daughter, Claire, lives in Gorssel. She came to visit with her friend, Linda.

We watched old-fashioned Christmas movies and exchanged gifts. I got socks, slippers, and two bottles of brandy. Apparently, I kept my

inner struggle well hidden, or they would have brought something different for sure.

Claire pointed at my stomach and said, "I think you've put on some weight, Dad."

"Yeah, a couple of kilos," I lied, as I grabbed a piece of sausage from the table. The last time I weighed myself, it was eight more, and that was two weeks ago.

"Staying inside all day isn't good for you—you should go outside for once!" she remarked, a little sharply, while giving me a curious look.

The others nodded in agreement. I couldn't help wondering who the adult in the room was.

But habits are like comfortable slippers: hard to let go of, even when they're worn out and you've got a brand-new pair sitting in a box, waiting. So, the week after Christmas, I spent most of my time inside again.

January 2 was a dark winter day, and it was snowing. I took the Christmas decorations up to the attic. While moving one of the dusty cardboard boxes filled with my family history files, a folder slipped out. I picked it up, blew off the dust, and saw the mysterious name on the cover: Lamboij.

I sat down, opened the box, and flipped through the files, stopping to look at the yellowed family photos and memorial cards. I spent the rest of the morning in the attic, until I realized I was shivering. Even though I had wrapped myself in one of those old, musty blankets that had probably been eaten by moths or mice, I was still cold.

I took one of the cardboard boxes downstairs to the home library. It felt strange, almost unfamiliar to me, after my months of lethargy, sitting in front of the TV in the living room. I placed the box on the desk and opened my laptop. Then I picked up a file and began searching online for the name Lamboij, and especially any link to Kleverhamm.

I didn't find anything.

What I did find was a mention of a certain Cornelia Lambiotte in a document register from the Duffelt, a region between Nijmegen and Kleve. The name Lambiotte was quite similar to Lamboij. The register only contained a brief summary of the old documents, and in order to view the mentioned record, I would have to go to the archive in Arnhem.

Off to Arnhem

The Gelderland Archives had relocated. From the parking lot along the Rhine, near a small marina, deserted in the offseason, I stared at the new building with mixed feelings.

The reason I was standing here now was unusual. The night before, something happened to me that had never occurred before. I was looking for beer in the cellar and found only alcohol-free. However, my eyes landed on an opened bottle of Bommerlunder, a German schnapps I had once received from an acquaintance. The fact that the bottle was already open gave me an excuse to take it up to the living room. A glance at the alcohol content reassured me that, at least, it couldn't have gone bad.

That morning, I woke to sounds downstairs. While still in bed, I remembered that Gretha, the housekeeper, was due to come by. Gretha Henricks, who had looked after me after my mother's death, is—along with Gerhard—the other person in my life who keeps a watchful eye on things. She started as a sixteen-year-old maid with my parents and never left. Despite being in her seventies, she still comes by once a week to clean.

I looked in the mirror. The man who stared back hadn't shaved in a week, and dark circles under his red eyes made it seem like he'd been in a boxing match the night before. The Bommerlunder—which, for me, sounded a bit like "bellringer"—had given me a pounding headache.

Gretha, with her lovely silver hair tied in a bow and still full of energy despite her age, greeted me without commenting on my appearance. She followed my furtive glance at the empty bottle on the counter and discreetly took it to the recycling bin in the utility room.

"Got any plans for today, Rick?" she asked, as she started doing the dishes.

"Yeah, um… I was planning to visit the Gelderland Archives for my family tree research." I ran my hand through my uncombed, messy hair.

"Good idea…" she said, looking out the window. "I was planning to air out the bedrooms today."

There was no turning back. After a shower and a shave, I left for Arnhem.

I stood before the building with its alternating layers of glass and vanilla-colored facade cladding. It gave the building the appearance of a layered sponge cake, not something you'd expect at a historical archive. When I had last visited the archive years ago, it had been housed in a monumental building in the heart of Arnhem, which seemed much more appropriate.

At the reception, a helpful woman asked if I had registered. Of course, I had not.

I was about to turn away, but she kindly said, "No problem, sir, it's usually quiet here." She then jotted down my details and handed me a pass with a number.

The reading room on the first floor was remarkably bright and smelled of new carpeting and fresh paint. The large windows that stretched across the entire width of the building offered a panoramic view of the Lower Rhine and the floodplains. The barges, laden with their cargo, made their way toward the rolling hills, faintly visible to the east.

Only a few people sat, absorbed in documents or staring at the monitors before them. Greetings didn't seem to belong to the archive culture.

I requested the document from the Duffelt document register on a screen. At least the move had improved efficiency: within minutes, I received a notification that my document was ready at the counter.

I quickly became excited again. Reading old documents is like cracking a secret code. At first, the scribbles look mysterious. Over time, familiar letters and words emerge, revealing hidden treasures in the inkblots, although the lack of spelling rules and a uniform writing style can sometimes make it challenging.

In the Duffelt court records, I found an entry from 1662 detailing how the inheritance of the late widow Cornelia Beckers was distributed. Cornelia, originally baptized as Cornelia Lambiotte in the Walloon Church in Delft and deceased at the house Germenseel in Zyfflich, was the subject of an entertaining plea by the heirs. They debated whether Marie, Cornelia's sister, was entitled to her share, arguing that she had lived a "wicked, evil, and godless life, as one of thievery and lechery" in Delft. The heirs in Duffelt had no intention of giving Marie (who seemed to have enjoyed herself in Delft) any part of the inheritance.

I didn't find anything else. If I wanted to know more about Cornelia Lambiotte, I would need to go to Delft. I noted her birth date and returned the archive box.

On the way home, I was filled with doubt. Should I go to Delft to follow this vague lead? I had grown accustomed to my passive life at The Heathside. On the other hand, the switch from beer to spirits the day before had left me feeling uneasy. I shook off the uncertainty—after all, you can never win an argument with yourself.

I thought again about how Claire had pointed at my stomach during Christmas and told me I needed to do something. I sucked in my stomach—for no one else but myself.

Delft was certainly worth a visit, even if I didn't uncover anything about Cornelia Lambiotte.

A Meeting in Delft

It was the second week of January. The incident with the Bommerlunder had occupied my mind over the past week and left me deep in thought. Maybe I hadn't opened the gates to hell just yet, but the door to its entrance was certainly ajar. Somehow, I had to escape this self-imposed treadmill.

Reluctantly, I forced myself to adopt a bit of discipline and set a date to visit Delft. On that drizzly Thursday morning, I drove my old orange Mercedes toward the Randstad, the urban heart of the Netherlands.

The city archive in Den Hoorn, just outside Delft, was surprisingly smaller than the one in Arnhem. I checked in with the archivist, a lanky, drawling man named Wim van Beenen, and took a seat in the reading room. I was the only visitor. A few staff members worked silently behind the counter, and the only sound in the room came from my laptop.

I checked my screen to choose the document I wanted to examine: a register from the Walloon Church in Delft, where Cornelia Lambiotte had been baptized. In Wallonia, Calvinists had been persecuted and expelled, prompting many to flee to Holland and establish their own Walloon church communities.

I entered the document number, and soon a staff member brought a brown archive box to my table. Carefully, I took out the battered, tattered church book, which smelled of age. The handwriting was scrawled, and the old parchment was stained with ink blotches, making it hard to read. Despite this, the years and dates were clear, and I found the Cornelia I was searching for.

To my disappointment, I discovered my trip had been in vain: her real surname wasn't Lambiotte but *De la Motte*. The name in the Arnhem record had been misspelled. I could go home. There was no

connection whatsoever between the De la Motte family and my ancestor Peter Lamboij.

That could have been the end of the story, but just then, a side door to the room opened—and that's when things really started.