

*Charlotte*



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*For all students who took a stand against the Nazi regime*



## *Prologue*

Not too long ago I imagined telling you my story. It was a cold afternoon in November 1943, about two months before the Nazis arrested me and locked me up in this prison cell. Things were already pretty bad then, but never would I have imagined that my story would have such a tragic ending.





# *Part One*



I am Charlotte. I was born twenty-six years ago in a little town by the canal, which is known locally as the Golden Town, although it has a different, official, ordinary name. It is renowned for its blacksmiths and jewelers, surrounded by green fields and large farmsteads with thatched roofs, and is distinctive for its crooked towers that rise up on the horizon and look down on the mediaeval cobbled streets. The inhabitants who walk through those streets have made a lasting impression on me: the baker and the milkman going from house to house to visit their customers; farmers, grocers and fishmongers standing side by side on the Wednesday market; the town-crier standing on the steps of the Town Hall, banging a pot with a metal spoon before announcing important news as the chimes of the Town Hall ring out above his head.

A sleepy small town where everybody knew everybody, and which glowed with golden pride in the nineteen twenties. At dusk, lamplighters would walk through the streets carrying ladders and long, lighted poles to spark the gas. A large box seemed to float above the pavement as if by magic zigzagging between playing children. It was filled with potato skins and kitchen garbage, and was attached with little belts to a poor dog that obediently followed his owner; the garbage collector. Next door to our neighbors' snackbar, who fried everything that could be fried, was a large hairdressing salon owned by my parents. *The Golden Scissors* it said in sweeping, white letters on the glass window of the best known and successful hairdressing salon in town. As glorious and magnificent as this may sound, perhaps I should add that it was the *only* hairdressing salon in town. It had antique brown walls, wooden floors that creaked, and separate areas for men and

women. Here it was, surrounded by the sweet smell of shampoo that I grew up.

I come from a long line of barbers. My great-grandfather was a barber. Great-great-grandfather: barber. Great-great-great-grandfather: barber. Great-great-great-great-grandfather: blacksmith. Further back, they were pretty much all blacksmiths, and before that, my forbears were farmers.

In spite of it being the only one in town, owning a hairdressing salon in the Golden Town was a tough business in the nineteen twenties. The fact was that people didn't have enough money to pay for a haircut, which soon turned *The Golden Scissors* into a free trade zone, where people sold anything they had to offer, depending on what they did for a living. The type of goods traded for a haircut was strongly influenced by the customer's livelihood. Farmers traded eggs and milk, and butchers ham and meat; we got bread from the bakers and ironmongery from the blacksmiths. They all knew that Mr. and Mrs. Jacobs lived for their hairdressing salon. It was their pride and joy, and when the great depression rolled like a large wave over our town in the early thirties, they protected it with a determination that turned them into workaholics. They despised other peoples' need for sleep and if they could have found a way to cut hair in their sleep, they would have done so.

Mrs. Jacobs, my mother was tall and thin, like a string bean. She had a pointed face that had a sun-kissed glow even in the cold winter months. My mother tried desperately to get the perfect tan and maintain it year round, even if that meant lying topless on the roof in order to catch the first rays of sunshine in early spring. We didn't have a garden, you see. On wet winter days she refused to leave the house and could be found in the salon all day long, where she listened to the customers' gossip, a broom in one hand, a cigarette in the other. She loved to eavesdrop on conversations and probably was the greatest gossip of all the poor souls in the hairdressing salon. At the dinner table a summary of the juiciest stories was passed on to me and my father, who was known amongst his clients as Mr. Jacobs.

Mr. Jacobs had lost all his hair in his late twenties, and was now a bald, short, rotund man with a large moustache. As he grew older, the trembling of his hands increased, which is why it has always amazed me that, during all those years I lived there, not a single client had been accidentally injured. My father was not fond of innovation, but was very conservative in his thinking (I can still hear him saying ‘First electricity, then the damn telephone! What will be next?’) He loved everything traditional and refused to adopt the latest fashions, which meant that the hairstyles that he offered his clients had not changed since the turn of the century.

In a flat above the salon, with the hum of excited chatter one floor down and the occasional ring of a bell echoing through the hallway, these two people tried, in between cutting hair and serving coffee to clients, to raise me.

When I think about my childhood I remember first and foremost the smell of tobacco and cheap coffee that seemed to permeate my father’s clothes when he read to me after dinner, mostly stories about *Ot en Sien*. On the lonely afternoons, when my parents were working, I developed the habit of sitting down on the soft carpet, staring round the living room until I could have drawn every single detail perfectly from memory. The walls were beige; we had oil lamps and a wooden clock that chimed at the wrong hour. The living room could only be heated during the winter, which meant that as my room was on the top floor, I slept under sheets that were covered with a thin layer of frost. Sunday was a dreadful day – church in the morning, Bible readings in the evening. You could say I was force fed my faith. Amen. I was supposed to grow up as a good Catholic girl, and therefore my good Catholic parents sent me to a good Catholic school. It was a small building near the canal, bleak and unheated, which always resulted in the entire class being ill in the winter. Teachers marched like absolute monarchs down the aisle; strict men with rulers and fixed frowns on their faces. On the other side of the small canal was an Evangelical school and we were at a permanent, everlast-

ing, never ending war with its pupils. In the grey light of dawn, rocks and spit flew across the canal; mean words were written on the enemy's school yard with chalk and paint.

During the hot summer months the small classroom, with no less than forty children and a sweating teacher inside, turned into a desert. I was therefore always relieved when in the late, hot afternoons the teacher finally announced the end of the lesson by ringing his bell.

Even though I was supposed to, I never went home right away. The grocer, who was one of our regular customers, frequently travelled into the countryside with his horse and cart and was kind enough to let me jump on and off the cart along the way. From there I walked to several large farms, where I played with many of the farmers' children. They lent me old trousers and wooden clogs, which I also began to wear at home because they made a terribly loud noise and my parents furious. I still have a particularly vivid image of my mother piously raising her eyes to the kitchen ceiling after I came back from one farm and caused a scene in the salon just by entering. My hands were dirty, my hair was unwashed and far too short for a girl. From under a grey, muddy hat a few blond curls stuck out. The customers in the salon might have mistaken me for a boy. "Have you seen her clothes?" they would say and point to my torn trousers and manure covered shoes. In response I used to spit in their coffee mugs when no one was looking.

Around that time my only purpose in life was to do everything a good Catholic girl should not be doing. I climbed trees and threw eggs on innocent passers-by. I infuriated the milkman by following him around all day, and I broke into the large, brand-new factories, which occasionally resulted into being chased by large, angry men. At first my parents did not seem to mind all that much, but after the 'hair salon scene' they unfortunately instigated strict rules and punishments. I was placed under house arrest and had to help around the salon. I was my parents' little helper – 'barber junior', they called me – and after school I weaved my

way through the hair salon to collect the hair on the floor, while I had to endure the harsh looks of my parents. I began to worry that they might expect me to take over the business. After all I was the only 'heir to the throne': I had no siblings or cousins – a rarity in those days. It was just me, my parents and Aunt Marga, a rich, middle-aged lady, who we did not see much, for she lived in the New World.

I had no intention of becoming a hairdresser and this future prospect, in which I would do nothing but shave heads and wash hair all day, threw me into a state of panic. Whether it was my parents' secret plan all along, I still do not know, but suddenly I began to pay attention in class and to work harder. I hated Maths and knitting lessons, but I liked Dutch and foreign languages. I began to invent stories and write them down. Just like the town-crier, I banged on a pot with a metal spoon (belonging to my mother), and told stories in front of the Town Hall. My only audience consisted of Henri, the bookseller's son – a naïve child, who believed almost everything one told him. He sat next to me in class and I didn't like him all that much, but they did have a typewriter at his house and I had been allowed to try it once. Besides, he faithfully swore to me that he would sell my stories once he had taken over his father's bookstore. *Quid pro quo*.

On Queen's Day, 1927 – I was ten and had the largest audience of my career as a town storyteller. Queen's Day was a special day: the medieval streets of the Golden Town always turned into an oasis of orange colors and festivity. Flags and balloons were attached to canal houses and hung above the greenish water. There was a large market near the church and on the square in front of our house, people played traditional Dutch family games. Public buildings were open longer than usual and many store owners wore costumes. I remember only too well my parents standing in the salon dressed as musketeers. Fortunately I did not have to help them that day and I positioned myself in front of the Town Hall and told horror stories to a few children. Some of them, the younger ones, were shaking with fear and a few mothers had al-

ready given me angry looks. I was just beginning my story about how the Crooked Church became crooked, when the town-crier carelessly pushed me aside and announced excitedly that the mayor was planning to come to the dock to celebrate the opening of the new ferry.

“Even a professional photographer from the newspaper is coming!” bellowed the man, who in his excitement had even forgotten to bang on his pot with a spoon. “He is going to take a picture of the mayor and a few locals at the canal!” And so, in action-reaction style, the whole neighborhood immediately marched over there to be recorded in a black-and-white photograph. Having never seen a camera in our lives, Henri and I also decided to go. Henri walked to my left, dragging his feet a little, just like his father. He was slightly overweight and always wore the same old, smelly hat. Everyone thought he was a bit crazy. The town’s fool, some called him.

“Bloody hell,” he murmured when we arrived at the dyke, where a small crowd had already gathered. “You would think the Queen herself was coming.”

Rudely we elbowed our way through the crowd and ignoring all the complaints, we climbed onto a large wooden bench. In front of us the grey water of the river sparkled in the sunlight and a cold breeze blew from the north. On the other side of the river the ferry was slowly steering our way. Despite the new engine, it would still take the yellow boat ten minutes to reach our side. It was my profound belief that I could swim faster than that thing.

“And?” asked Henri, while we waited for the mayor to arrive. “How did the church become crooked?”

I pushed a child, who was climbing his way up, carelessly off the bench and said in dead earnest, “Long, long ago a woman was accused of witchcraft and burned at the stake in front of the Town Hall. An hour later the right side of the church just sank.” I grinned and added, “Actually, come to think of it, the witch died on the exact same spot where you were standing.”

Henri raised an eyebrow in his usual gullible way and gave me



a frightened look, the color high in his round face. “You’re making that up!”

“Am not!

“Are too!”

My response was lost in the hum of excited chatter which suddenly began to grow louder and louder: men wearing black suits and top hats were emerging, one by one, from the old entrance gate of the Golden Town. Upper class men. Some were rich factory owners, some were politicians or aristocrats, and then there was the mayor of course, who always had a walking cane with him. The last to come through the gate was a bored-looking man with a camera round his neck: the journalist, followed by a young boy, whom I recognized at once. Theo Prins was his name, son of the ferry captain and one of the pupils from the Evangelical church with whom we were at war. In a heated religious battle I had once hit him with a stone, and Theo, who often helped his father on the ferry, swore that he would throw me overboard if I ever set foot on the ferry again. From that day onwards, I hadn’t dared to go within a hundred feet of the port. But besides the rivalry between our schools and the unfortunate ‘stone incident’, followed by the ‘ferry threat’, Theo and I had nothing against each other outside of school. We often played soccer together, but, my dear guest, whoever you may be, if it is all the same to you, I’d rather tell you about that later.

“Hey Jacobs!” bellowed Theo when he noticed me standing on the bench. He always called me by my last name, hoping I assumed, that I would follow his example and call him Prins.

“Hey Theo,” I said, as he jumped on the bench. His blond hair glistened like flecks of gold from the furnace, and his eyes were made of a curious chocolate brown color. He pointed at the photographer.

“Do you see that man? That’s good old Uncle Bert. He promised my father that I could follow him around and learn about his work. First Uncle Bert said no, because he was very busy and all, but I bumped into him at the market! Can you believe it? What a fortunate coincidence!”

I glanced at 'good old Uncle Bert', who was grumpily angling his camera, and, in my view, seemed to find it anything but a fortunate coincidence.

Henri, who had not been listening, crossed his arms and looked earnestly at Theo. "Theo, do you happen to know why the Crooked Church is crooked?"

There was a short silence.

"What?"

"The church? Why is the bloody church crooked?"

"It isn't," said Theo as if that were blindingly obvious and I looked at him in surprise. "Actually, it's the streets that are crooked and the church that is straight."

Before Henri or I could come up with a way to respond to this odd statement, he jumped off the bench and walked back to Uncle Bert, who did not even deign to look at him.

"That boy is crazy," I said. "It must be the Protestant Faith."

"His explanation is more logical than that ridiculous tale about that witch of yours," said Henri, who was peering at the ferry, which had finally docked, the motor puffing, the fresh paint shining. Leaning on his wooden cane, the mayor carefully stepped onto the ferry and tapped on the yellow steel. "See, gentlemen. Un-sinkable." The men wearing suits and hats nodded, impressed, and they shook hands.

"That's what they said about the Titanic as well," said Henri.

"I knew someone who died on the Titanic," I said.

"Really?"

"No, of course not. Who is that?" I pointed at a girl of my age, who stood among the men, sucking a piece of candy. "I haven't seen her before."

"That's Irene Driessen. New girl, moved here two days ago. Her father is the man standing next to the mayor. He took over the new milk factory. They say he financed the new ferry."

My gaze fell upon her expensive looking dress, wandered upwards to her hazel eyes, before they finally lingered on the bow in her hair, and I instantly decided I did not like her. Meanwhile

the photographer took a picture of the men in front of the ferry – I noticed Mr. Driessen, milk factory owner, standing next to the mayor – and then they all came our way.

“And now a picture with the locals, I assume,” said the mayor cheerfully. “Smile brightly, folks, because this will appear in the newspaper.” As he positioned himself in front of our bench, everyone within a five meter radius nervously started to adjust their hair and clothes. Henri and I flashed our brightest smiles, while the journalist was angling his camera again and tried to push Theo aside, who was apparently in the way.

“Why isn’t he pressing the bloody button?” murmured Henri through clenched teeth. “My mouth is getting numb.”

“Henri, be quiet, for Heaven’s sake! The mayor can hear you!”

“Do you think it hurts?”

“What?”

“Being photographed of course!”

“They say the flash is so bright that it can cause blindness.”

“That’s a lie!”

“I’m telling you, I am not lying!”

Henri, his eyes narrow, his cheeks turning from bright red to a dangerous purple, gave me such a sharp push that I lost my balance and fell off the bench. In the distance I heard a loud flash.

“Dammit, now I’ve missed it! Henri, you are such an idiot!”

I got to my feet and saw that the mayor and his men were already walking back to the entrance gate. Next to the journalist, who was putting away his camera, Theo Prins was roaring with laughter. I took no notice of him, but ran after Henri, who had long absconded, leaving a trail of fear behind him.

As it is in the interest of every storyteller to guide their audience through the tale and present to them the scenes in the best way possible, I feel obliged to explain something to you before I officially introduce you to Irene Driessen, the next character in the assortment of the many interesting characters that are still to come. It is important that you know that this is not a story in the

traditional sense, but more a Tour d'Horizon through a recollection of memories. My own memories, which make this far more personal than any story I have ever told. I am not sure that Irene would agree, but then she disagreed with everything I said. You already had a glimpse of her at the dock on Queen's Day, where she entered the stage for a moment before disappearing behind the curtain again with her father.

It was unlikely, maybe even impossible, that the new girl in town of whom I knew nothing except that she was the daughter of the milk factory owner, ten years old and upper class, would befriend me. And yet this is exactly what happened.

It was precisely two days after Queen's Day that Irene Driessen first entered our small classroom. The short and formal introduction given by the teacher proved to be unnecessary: the whole school, if not the whole town, had already heard of the Driessen family. An article about them had appeared on page three of the local newspaper, *The Golden Times*, forcing other news aside and turning Irene's father into a local celebrity. Every single person who called the Golden Town his home had already been told about the grand opening of the milk factory, the financial aid for the new ferry, and Mr. Driessen's membership of the NSB. "What is that?" I'd asked Henri on our way to school. "The NSB?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Henri had looked at me as if I were a three year old. "The National Skating Bond, of course!"

"Blimey, why didn't I think of that?"

It was only later that I found that NSB stands for National Socialistic Party.

The article had been topped by a black-and-white picture showing dad, mom and beloved daughter standing in front of the new milk factory. Irene stood in the middle and was basically a miniature version of her mother: tall and proud, with large hazel eyes and oozing an air of condescension. She did not smile. Her expression had been serious and bored, but I did not find this unusual, since rich people rarely smiled in public according to me.

It was with the same dull and serious expression that Irene sat

down at the wooden table that the teacher had allocated to her. It was somewhere near the front, which meant that I, sitting right at the back, could see no more of her than her brown hair that reached her shoulders and a part of her expensive dress. Expensive, but hideous in my view.

It was a perfect day for Irene to receive an impression of our glorious school: before noon the majority of the students had either been sent to the corridor, to the naughty corner, or had been in brief but painful contact with a ruler. Unfortunately I was part of the last group: I was bored, so I had dipped the long hair of the girl sitting in front of me into my inkwell. To my great disappointment neither the teacher nor the girl had been amused. Next to me Henri had made a disapproving noise before turning into a stone statue, frozen and staring ahead. He may have committed all sorts of God-forbidden foolery with me after school, but he certainly acted like a saint in class, for he feared the teacher more than anyone else.

The teacher's name was Mr. Donker and Mr. Donker was the reason why every child in the Golden Town hated school. Everyone agreed that there was no stricter teacher in the whole of Holland, if not Europe. Mr. Donker was a heartless, cruel man in his forties with a temper that everyone feared and an iron look that everyone avoided. He looked like a monk, bony and mean, as he sat behind his desk with the air of a Caesar, holding a ruler that seemed to be glued to his hand. Both the iron look and the ruler were designed to discourage students from the very idea of cheating in his classroom. Since he was a deeply spiritual man, saying that he only worked for God and certainly not the headmaster, the mayor or indeed even the government, he ordered us to read long passages out of the Bible in the morning and hit us with his ruler as soon as we committed the unforgivable sin of pronouncing a word wrong. Half of the students at our school stuttered because of him.

On his desk, where it was nearest to his ruler-free-hand, stood a stuffed toy that stared at us threateningly. It was a bird filled with

sand, the *pechvogel*, and Mr. Donker had a gift for tossing it across the classroom at the speed of light. This, by itself, was not so bad, but being forced to return the bird and coming within the ruler's reach was where the rub lay.

Mr. Donker never stood up during class: he seemed to be glued to his seat and the only moment that he left the classroom was during lunch, when he locked the door behind him and the whole class sighed in relief. This was when our classroom turned into a food auction. Quickly lunchboxes were conjured out of school bags; fruit and bread placed on desks for show; cans filled with yoghurt and milk were opened. Everyone started trading and bargaining away. I don't remember much about these food auctions, perhaps because I was the only one who almost never traded – not because the others did not like me, but more because no one wanted to have the slightly mouldy bread that my mother put in my school bag every morning. I remember that Piet de Wit, the boy sitting in front of me, had the loudest voice and was in charge of the whole thing. I remember that Irene had a chocolate bar with her that day, which was still rarely seen around that time, and everyone wanted to trade with her. I remember the familiar sound of the heavy footsteps in the hallway, almost like a military two-step which could only mean one thing

“Oi! The teacher is coming!”

As if struck by lightning everyone quickly resumed their seats. Food was put back in lunchboxes and bags, some dared to take a last bite or quickly put something in their mouths. Then the teacher entered, casting us steely looks, and resumed his lesson, which went on and on until he finally rang his bell, and we all ran outside as quickly as possible, afraid that would call us back and carry on for a few more hours. This went on for a couple of weeks, without me learning anything new about Irene. I sometimes saw her cycling through town or going into a shop, but we never spoke to each other then, nor did we at school.

Things changed when after an incident involving Henri and me – I can't even remember which one, there are so many – the teach-

er announced that we were a bad influence on each other and were not in any way suitable to sit together any longer and he immediately established new seating arrangements. Henri was seated somewhere in the front, disappearing out of my line of sight, and Irene was to sit next to me. She turned out to be rather clever and even flashed a kind smile occasionally, but I was shy around her and we did not say much to each other.

But once in a while she would push her maths test to the side of the table, just so I could read her answers. Sometimes she shared her chocolate bar with me. She always cycled home after school and I, who did not have a bicycle, watched her disappear out of sight with a considerable amount of jealousy. And then, one afternoon in May, I was walking home when Irene cycled past. She suddenly stopped and said, "Hey, you don't have a bicycle, do you?"

"No," I replied.

"Shall I teach you how to ride?"

And I replied in the affirmative without hesitation and it was after approximately three hours that I cycled through the Golden Town like a maniac, with Irene sitting behind me on the luggage rack, no doubt fearing for her life. It was during these cycling lessons that we became friends.

I do not have many clear memories of my childhood, no conversations or detailed scenes that I could narrate for you, but unfortunately I only have blurry images: Irene giving me her old dresses. The garbage collector's dog chasing Henri. We played lots of games – tag, hide and seek, card games – and on Wednesday we played soccer. I remember this, because Wednesday was market morning. Every Wednesday, you see, when the street lamps were still burning and a cold fog hovered over quiet streets where the windows were still closed, farmers, grocers and blacksmiths came to our town to sell their produce. We always played soccer in a narrow street not far away from the market and where high above our heads the laundry was hanging out to dry on clotheslines.

Theo Prins and Henri usually showed up, and sometimes Piet de Wit too. Irene frequently watched. The teams were neither picked nor selected, but drawn by lot, which we did not do for the sake of fairness, but because no one wanted to team up with Piet as he was mean, fat and a very bad soccer player. The memories of those soccer games are very clear, probably because we played so often. I still see Henri carrying a stone towards the middle of the street. It was supposed to mark out the goal – usually, however, we just tripped over it. I still see Theo scrutinizing the old, dirty ball and asking why all the air was slowly escaping.

“The garbage collector’s bloody dog,” I had replied.

“Oh yeah, I can see the bite marks!”

Once Piet kicked the ball and hit the greengrocer on the head. In pain the large, bald man, who had no doubt been on his way to the market, dropped the sack he had been carrying and dozens of green apples scattered over the paved street.

“Free apples!” I remember Piet bellowing. “Get as much as you can!” and we all began running down the street, stuffing apples in our pockets while we were chased by the furious greengrocer who did not want to give up his beloved apples just yet. We followed a narrow road that ended at the market, where the greengrocer’s wife, alarmed by her husband’s cries of – “The thieves, Mariam, stop the thieves!” – began chasing us with an old broom. That was the last time we allowed Piet de Wit to play with us.

Interestingly I remember each one of Aunt Marga’s visits. I have already mentioned her before and that she lived in the States, the New World. She had married a rich American after the Great War and only visited ‘the low lands,’ once or twice a year, which were literally and figuratively ‘low’ according to her. My parents dreaded these visits, mostly because Aunt Marga was smug and rich and had the irritating habit of comparing the Netherlands to the States, but to me they were always tremendous occasions, simply because she was my best hope of not ending up as a hairdresser. I do not precisely recall how, though I do think that a few bottles of



gin and lots of begging were involved, but somehow I persuaded her to finance my studies.

After primary school Irene and I had gone to secondary school, whereas Henri had followed in his father's footsteps and gone into the book selling business. As for the rest of my friends, I don't really know. Piet de Wit, I think, went to work somewhere and Theo Prins moved away. His father had died (slipped on the new ferry and unfortunately fatally injured his head) and suddenly he and his mother were gone, to Leiden it was said, though no one seemed to know for certain. I felt sorry for him and I missed him at first, but the years passed as they do and after a while Theo became just another one of my childhood memories: blurry and vague, but which I associated with a feeling of nostalgia.

The jobs I had are not really worth mentioning. First I worked in a cigar shop, which is the reason why all my clothes permanently carried the stinging smell of tobacco. Then I began to work for the confectioner, who also sold ice cream in the summer. While striking a large gong I pushed a heavy ice cream cart along streets. In the early thirties an ice cream cost only a few cents – the chocolate flavor was something very special – and I was often surrounded by little children. Occasionally I gave the poorer ones amongst them ice cream for free, which ultimately got me fired. But I could not have cared less. I have little interest in submitting to authority, as you will later find out.

We were sixteen when Irene and I spontaneously decided to go camping. Irene's father had a tent and we strapped it to the luggage rack of one of our bicycles and cycled all the way to Belgium. Crossing the border turned out to be harder than expected, because you apparently needed a permission slip signed by your parents. We begged and pleaded and finally got the security man to go to his office and make a phone call to his boss, at which point we ran across the border and quickly cycled away.

It was a great holiday. We avoided camping sites, but usually put up our tent in the middle of a field or, after asking the own-

ers, in the backyard of a house. I recall once putting up the tent in a large field, in the midst of a couple of peacefully grazing and ruminating cows, and it began to rain in the evening. We dug a large hole around our tent and woke up to the angry bellowing of a farmer the following morning. "How dare you! Digging holes in my field! Get out of here, you young devils!" And we went out, innocently holding up our shovels and said, "But we're Dutch! We are dike builders! It's what we *do*!" The farmer found this explanation so amusing that he invited us to have breakfast with his family. In the end we stayed there for a few days, because the roof of our tent was covered with large holes after a hail storm, and we slept on the hay in one of the farmer's dark barns and were allowed to join them for dinner every evening.

We returned after two weeks, with a broken tent and enough stories to fill a book. I would love to tell you a few, but unfortunately we do not have the time now. Instead let us move forward in time. The early thirties. Large factories replaced the little blacksmiths forges and the newly invented margarine replaced the farmers' homemade butter. I witnessed the opening of the new cable ferry; shortly afterwards, the first cars appeared, and a little while later the first man took a driving test in our town. It was Irene's father and his car got stuck on the bridge. Back then the driver was still tested by the mayor, who stood on the first floor of the Town Hall and checked by looking out of the window, to see if the driver could maneuver his car, huffing and puffing, to the church and back without problems. However, the narrow streets were not built for cars and Mr. Driessen got stuck – fortunately though exactly at the spot where the mayor could not see him. Irene and I, who both had been watching, ran over there and started to shove the car across the bridge. The mayor noticed nothing and Mr. Driessen passed the test. From that day onwards I was always allowed to stay for dinner. They lived just outside town, in a large house where it was always chilly and where hollow voices echoed through the frequently empty hallways. I did not like Irene's mother and her father was hardly ever home, and

when he was, he always talked about politics. The NSB this and the NSB that and didn't we know how great that party was? I almost never listened. I was not interested in politics then and how could I have foreseen that not even ten years later, the fact that Mr. Driessen was a member would become such an alarming problem for all of us?

After I had graduated I received a letter from Aunt Marga in which she made clear that she would indeed finance my studies, but only if I would study Law at the university in Leiden. I was a little perplexed. I had always seen myself studying Dutch or English Literature and this was something so completely different that it made me doubt whether it was a good idea to study at all. But then again, I thought, what difference does it really make, Law and Literature, they both start with the same capital letter and all studies involve science and doing research and getting a degree. Law or Literature: in the end I would most likely still end up as a secretary. Women might have had the vote, but at the end of the day they were not equal when it came to society, everybody knew that. Besides, Irene went to study Philosophy and what could you do with that? Become a philosopher?

I wrote my aunt a thank you note, and then, a few months later, another letter followed in which I informed her that I had passed the entrance examination. And so, after having called the Golden Town my safe haven for twenty solid years, I left and would not come back until the early forties, after we'd been dragged into the war and everything about the once-so-golden Town, especially my memories, seemed to be permeated with a dark sense of dreariness.

So I moved to Leiden, truly a breathtaking city, alive with the spirit of the golden age and set around a confusing labyrinth of canals. The beating heart of the Netherlands it is said – though mostly by people who live there.

What shall I tell you about it? Birthplace of Rembrandt; many hidden courtyards, narrow alleyways and dirty canals; lots of bicycles; and of course the oldest university of the Netherlands.

I don't know why, but it took a surprisingly long time before I finally felt at home in Leiden. I suppose this had little to do with the city itself though, but more with my forced choice in studies. Law turned out to be, in my view at least, dry, boring and wickedly difficult. I did not like my fellow Law students, nor did they seem to like me much. I certainly had nothing in common with them.

I am not proud of this, but I developed a habit of falling asleep during lectures. Afterwards I wandered through the cobbled streets and along the narrow canals and frequently ended up at the literature faculty. I would look at the building for a moment and then walk back to my flat and read about Law, staring at the page until the sun went down and it was too dark for me to see anything.

The flat, by the way, I found just as depressing as my studies. I had rented a small, cheap flat near the university, but it smelled of beer and cigarettes and my flatmate seemed to dislike me. In November the flat above mine burned down, along with the hallway and the stairway, and after it had been announced that the entire building had to be renovated, everyone had to move out. Irene had rented a much bigger flat near the university and she let me stay there until I had found a new place.

In late November I wrote my aunt a letter, saying that I was

grateful but that Law was not for me and could I study Dutch Literature instead? After a few weeks I received a letter from the USA, in which it was made very clear to me that I was expected to carry on, otherwise, my aunt told me, she would consider it a waste to finance my education. ‘What is it with this lady and law?’ Irene asked me once and I shrugged, because I did not know. My aunt had high hopes for me apparently. *Just think about it, Charlotte*, she told me in one of the letters, *you could work for the League of Nations later, wouldn’t that be fantastic?* I doubted that it would ever come to that, but despite suffering hardships I still carried on with my studies. I did not complain, but I was not exactly cheerful either.

A memory of an incident in October 1937. I find it remarkable, considering that this day lies so far back in the past, that I still remember the exact date. It was October twentieth, a grey rainy day, and the sun was setting when Irene and I were walking home and she suddenly said, “Will you come to the library with me? I have to get a book before tomorrow.”

“I’m afraid it might already be closed.”

“Let’s try anyway. Maybe we’ll be lucky.”

By a fortunate coincidence the doors were indeed open and Irene and I – both soaking wet, because this was Holland, so God forbid the sun would shine in October – entered the university library hallway. Irene shook her umbrella like a dog shakes off water from its fur, soaking my skirt even more, and ignoring my grimace she rushed through the door and into the warm library, shutting out the sound of raindrops hitting the pavement.

The Leiden University Library is one of the largest libraries in Holland and is divided into several buildings that are spread all over the city. ‘A waste of space’, Irene called it. She wasn’t particularly interested in the fact that the library held one of the largest book collections in Holland, or come to think of it, she might not have been interested in books at all.

I have collected a number of close friends over the years, some of whom you have yet to meet, but not one had both a personal-

ity and the many interests that came with it, that were so different from my own. They almost reflected mine. Irene was social and easy-going, talented in telling people what they wanted to hear, though unable to think critically herself. Her face was not pretty perhaps, but instead unique and interesting, which I considered to be a greater worth, and she did not speak highly of her father, but nonetheless always seemed to want to please him.

I, however, had always tried my very best not to please my parents in any way at all. I had a more rebellious but settled character, and though I did not speak highly of university yet, I certainly loved the library. It was my refuge, where the peaceful sound of the fire crackling and the hum of quiet chatter drowned the sound of rain rippling against the roof. It was the kind of place that smelled of old paper and birch wood, as I sat there, not doing what I was supposed to be doing – reading about law – but instead diving into the works of Charles Dickens and Shakespeare. It was the kind of place that had a rich history, dating all the way back to the 16th century, when William of Orange presented the university with its first book. The kind of place that I knew Irene would detest. I was therefore not very surprised that Irene's facial expression reminded of swallowing sour milk as she scanned the library, her eyes wandering over the books with pure disinterest.

It was dark, and hollow, and silent. The library was empty but for a small group of students who sat at a battered wooden table near the window. One was a small, chubby man with red hair and freckles, who wore round glasses that made his eyes appear huge in comparison to his heart-shaped face. He was peering over a maths calculation that was over two pages long and his pointed nose, which was richly decorated with at least two, if not three ink stains, nearly touched the paper.

Next to him sat a student with broad shoulders and a handsome face, who, accompanied by lots of deep sighs, was skimming through a book. He seemed to be trying his best not to fall asleep and each time that this nearly happened, he began, with more sighs, to count how many pages he still had to read. There was