

Behind my front door

The sequel

TRUUSJE VAN ZANTEN

BEHIND MY FRONT DOOR

THE SEQUEL

Behind my front door - The sequel

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For Dineke

Prolog

I have known Truusje van Zanten since 2014, when her sister Dineke, a former colleague, casually mentioned to me: 'My sister has written a book. Could you take a look at it?'

The manuscript I read back then turned into a heartbreaking book: *Behind My Front Door*, in which Truusje, speaking loudly and clearly in her own voice, shared the horrors of domestic violence that she had experienced along with her two young children. She had to deal with various organizations: the police, foster care, the Youth Care Agency, the Victim Support Fund, the Child Protection Board, judges, lawyers, and bailiffs. Everyone tried their best, but many failed due to a lack of empathy and cooperation.

Behind My Front Door was not an accusation, but it did hold a mirror up to all the well-meaning institutions.

Truusje's book was eagerly read by many professionals dealing with such issues. Libraries acquired the book. Truusje regularly gave lectures at various organizations, such as the police academy, and participated in research in this field. She also contributed to workshops.

Now, over six years later, it is time for Behind My Front Door – The Sequel, which reports on the further developments. Most of the trauma has been processed, the children are partly growing up in family homes and with foster parents, and they regularly come home. Many things are going well, but not everything. Truusje is still struggling with the consequences of the traumatic experiences she and, especially, her children endured. She is confronted with the randomness and bias of social workers, who are constantly replaced, and her daughter's future is a particular source of concern. It is difficult to always make the right choices. Not everyone helps, and not everyone is on her side. This makes shaping her own life—now with a new man, a new house, and kind neighbors—anything but easy.

In Behind My Front Door – The Sequel, Truusje once again tells her story in her distinctive style, openly and honestly, about the challenges she faces, the setbacks she endures, and how she copes with them. Job loss, wrongful dismissal, uninterested lawyers, biased foster care workers, unpleasant foster parents, but also much friendship, studying, and a new job.

We get to know Truusje again as a fearless, courageous woman who fights for the well-being of her children.

For privacy reasons, all names in this book are fictional, except for Truusje herself, her sister Dineke, and her brother-in-law Marc.

Joost Nillissen
Publisher

2015

Empty beds

Helplessly, I stare at the empty beds of my children, trying to imagine what it would be like if they were living at home again.

Years ago, in the best interest of my little ones, I made the difficult decision to let them grow up in foster families. I resolved to be the perfect Mom from a distance for Martijn and Karlijn—and I am! Not only do I cover all their needs and frequently buy them heaps of clothes, but I also attend all their matches, meetings, and discussions. I do everything for my children.

Martijn is 13 and seems genuinely happy in the family home where he lives with a few other kids. Every two weeks, he comes to spend the weekend with us. Karlijn, who is 9, has been living with two foster mothers for several years. Sadly, I only get to see my sweet daughter once a month. I would love to see her more often, but according to her foster mothers, she's not ready for that yet. Of course, we're grateful that she's doing well and experiencing so much of the world, but it hurts that she can't come home as often as Martijn.

Still, I've come to realize that distance can foster closeness. This is reflected in the strong bond I share with my children—we get along so well. Martijn is so comfortable with us that, after some weekends, he'll say, 'Mom, I've had enough of you for now. I want to go back,' before giving me a big hug. In that sense, he's a real mama's boy, and I couldn't be prouder,

In July 2014, I married Joris, my rock and greatest support. Together, we've sorted everything out—we're debt-free and building a future together. And yet, as I stare at those empty beds, I feel like something's missing. Couldn't my children live at home again? The stress and hardships are behind us now, aren't they?

I have legal custody of my children and could bring them home, but would that be the right thing to do? Deep down, I worry that I might not be a good Mom. The three of us have endured so much, processing countless traumas, and we all seem to benefit from our current arrangement: Martijn in his family home, Karlijn with her

foster mothers, and me with Joris in our small but cozy rented apartment.

Children aren't toys. I can't simply uproot them from the environments they've known for so long, where they've built their social lives. It would feel as if I were undoing everything, I've worked so hard to give them over the years.

As these doubts swirl in my mind, Joris comes to stand beside me. He holds me tightly, understanding exactly what I'm grappling with. He knows I want nothing more than to bring my children home, where they belong.

Together, we weigh the pros and cons. It's an agonizing decision to make. After long and careful thought, I arrive at the same conclusion—in the best interest of my children. I push aside my own desires and decide, once again, not to bring them home. The thought of pulling them away from their familiar lives is unbearable.

Joris sits beside me on the couch, and together we share a quiet sadness. We both wish things were different. We long to be together as a 'real' family. But in my heart, I know that we already are—a real family, a truly special family.

Diagnoses

In the meantime, my body has been protesting more and more, and for months, I've become a regular visitor to the doctor. Yet, no one seems to figure out why everything hurts so much or why I'm losing strength. One afternoon, desperate for answers, I decided to search online. I needed to understand what was happening to my body. I quickly stumbled upon a site about fibromyalgia. After reading through it repeatedly, I sent the link to my sister, Dineke, and asked her, 'What do you think about this?'

Dineke read it a few times and agreed that I should discuss it with the doctor. The next day, I made an appointment, and by the afternoon, I was sitting in the doctor's office. I explained what I had found and suggested that we investigate further. The doctor

looked at me with a somber expression and said, ‘If this is true, it will haunt you for the rest of your life. You’ll have to deal with it every day.’

Two weeks later, I was in the hospital undergoing tests. The diagnosis: fibromyalgia. Joris and I went home feeling deeply disappointed because, by then, I’d read enough to understand the implications. The advice was to follow an eight-week therapy program to learn how to manage the condition. I joined a therapy group, where I received plenty of tips and advice. However, I often found myself irritated by the other participants who only complained and refused to try anything because of the pain. I, on the other hand, continued living my life as much as possible, even though I often pushed myself too far and ended up in more pain. I was determined not to become one of those women who had no life left and drowned in self-pity.

Fortunately, my workplace was understanding. After a full day of therapy, I could take the next day off to rest. During therapy, many puzzle pieces fell into place, and I learned a great deal about my condition. However, the doctors also considered me a special case because of my ADHD. My mind raced ahead, while my body struggled to keep up—a difficult combination to manage. I quickly understood what the doctor meant when he warned me. I feel it every day, as my mind often moves faster than my body can handle. It’s heartbreaking to realize that I can no longer do things the way I used to. I’m learning to cope with the pain, but it’s not easy.

One morning, I woke up with excruciating abdominal pain. I could barely walk. After Joris left for work, I tried to do a few household tasks, but the pain was unbearable. I felt like I was going to faint. This wasn’t the pain I was used to; this was something different. I called the doctor and managed to get an immediate appointment. The two-minute walk to the clinic took me fifteen minutes. I was hunched over in pain, barely able to move.

At the clinic, I was placed in a chair, but I couldn’t sit upright and slumped sideways. After half an hour, I dragged myself to the assistant to ask where the doctor was. Seeing my pale face, she

went pale herself and stammered, ‘I’m so sorry—I forgot about you. I’ll get the doctor right away.’ I staggered back to my seat, but before I could sit down, the doctor appeared.

With the help of another staff member, they laid me on the treatment table. The pain was unbearable, and tears streamed down my face. The doctor pressed on to the exact spot that made me scream in agony. ‘It’s an inflamed appendix,’ she said. ‘You need to go to the hospital immediately.’ She called ahead to the hospital while I called Joris and Dineke.

The walk home took nearly twenty minutes, and just as I reached the front yard, Joris arrived with screeching tires. He helped me into the car, and Dineke drove us straight to the hospital.

Everything happened quickly after that. Before I knew it, I was being rushed into surgery. The appendix had to come out—now.

I woke up the next day, and after managing a trip to the bathroom, I was cleared to go home. But I didn’t want to. I wanted to see my children. They had planned to come home that weekend, but of course, that wasn’t possible now. Joris carefully drove us to the children, and despite the pain and my swollen ‘pink piggy belly’ I managed to get out of the car. The children were visibly upset to see me in pain, but they couldn’t help but laugh at my belly. They gently gave me hugs and kisses.

After a week, I was back to running errands and managing my daily tasks. But wow—what a trial it had been.

Dad

Our dad still enjoys his new home thoroughly. Although he has mostly recovered from his stroke, he is now dealing with mild dementia. One Sunday, he proudly announces that he has a girlfriend in his living group. Curious, we ask who she is, and without hesitation, he grabs his walker and insists we follow him to meet her. Beaming with pride, he introduces her, and when he thinks we aren’t looking, they share a kiss. His girlfriend has an intellectual disability, and they both giggle shyly about the kiss.

The entire living group is incredibly sweet; each resident has something special about them. It doesn't take long for Dineke and me to form a bond with every one of them. There's Cor, for example, a towering man who cannot speak and uses a wheelchair, but with whom we still share plenty of laughs and find ways to communicate. And then there's Marie, who loves doing puzzles—simple children's puzzles that she completes with great enthusiasm. Whenever Joris and I bring the kids for a visit on weekends, Marie immediately asks them to puzzle with her. Martijn and Karlijn humor her by pretending they don't know how to puzzle, insisting they can't figure out where the pieces go. This makes Marie's day as she excitedly takes on the role of teacher, guiding them through each piece.

In December, Dad and his living group attend a special holiday trip to a hotel where Sinterklaas and his helpers spoil the residents with gifts and delicious treats. That evening, Dineke calls me.

'Trusje, they're taking Dad to the hospital. Something's wrong with his leg.'

I immediately ask which hospital and rush there as fast as I can. Upon arrival, before we can even process what's happening, a doctor approaches us. He explains that Dad has a blocked artery and warns us that the chances of him surviving the surgery due to the anesthesia are very slim. Heartbroken, we say our goodbyes, even though Dad doesn't fully grasp what's going on and seems more interested in the commotion around him.

After three agonizing hours of waiting, the doctor finally informs us that Dad survived the surgery and is in recovery. We're overwhelmed with relief. However, just over a week later, we're called back to the hospital—this time, a blood vessel in his other leg is blocked. Once again, we must prepare to say goodbye, and once again, against all odds, Dad wakes up after the operation. Although we're grateful for more time with him, Dineke and I can't help but feel conflicted. Dad's quality of life has deteriorated significantly. His dementia has taken a firm hold, leaving him bedridden and disconnected from the world around him. It's unbearable to witness his suffering.

Martijn and Karlijn are too young to fully understand what's happening with their grandfather. This sometimes leads to tension, as Martijn struggles with the attention Grandpa receives, feeling overshadowed. We can't blame him—his perspective is limited, and he sees things differently.

For Christmas, we visit the hospital with a pile of gifts for Dad. The children proudly hand him all the presents at once. Although Dad doesn't fully understand why he's receiving them, he smiles broadly as he unwraps each gift with their help.

At home, we celebrate Christmas with Dineke and Marc. The evening is filled with laughter, gift exchanges, and a flurry of wrapping paper flying everywhere. Our bellies are full from the delicious meal and drinks. Still, Dineke and I can't ignore the heavy reality that this will likely be our last Christmas with Dad.

Dineke and I didn't have an easy childhood. Our parents made countless mistakes—so severe that if today's child protection services had existed back then, we wouldn't have remained in their care. Looking back, we recognize that our parents acted based on what they believed was right, even if it wasn't. They simply didn't know better.

In a strange way, I'm grateful for the hardships we endured—the nights we went to bed hungry, the times we were berated or mistreated, and the times our bread lacked even a simple spread. These experiences shaped who I am today, both because of and in spite of their inadequate parenting.

I've made a conscious effort to raise my children differently. I've never hit them, belittled them, or yelled at them. There has always been food on the table, even if it's just four slices of bread with spread. I'm certain of this: I'm grateful to my parents for what they put us through, as it taught me what not to do.

We also ring in the New Year with Dineke and Marc. Joris has bought an enormous stash of fireworks, and together with Marc and Martijn, he sets off a massive smoke bomb we've made. Soon, the entire street is engulfed in smoke. The neighbors come out to watch, cheering, and asking how we made it. They even suggest organizing a synchronized display next year.

Despite the heaviness in our hearts, we hold on to a glimmer of hope that 2016 will be a better year.

2016