Foreword

There are lives that don't follow a straight path but twist and turn like the Westerschelde during a storm. My life is one of them. Born in The Hague, right out of the Schilderswijk, with my feet on the ground and my hands hard at work from an early age. What began in the noisy heart of the city eventually found its way to the quiet fields of Zeeland—where I finally put down roots, though certainly not without struggle.

I am a Hagenees. And Hagenezen don't mince words. So don't expect sugarcoating, no polished language, no masks. I call people by their names. I say things the way they are. Straightforward, as it should be. Sometimes blunt, often honest, always with a reason.

This is not a sob story. Not a lament. This is the story of someone who got up time and time again. Someone who faced life with humor and guts, even when it turned dark. From infections to deafness—and believe me, that deafness hit me harder than the cancer ever did. But also: the joy of a successful repair. A customer who came back. An unexpected hug. A well-timed joke that cut through the heaviness of the day.

And then there are the people who made a difference. Some I still see regularly. Some are no longer here. One of them is Maurice Gijzels. A man I had known for years, who—at just the right moment—gave me his trust and the chance to start my own shop. Without his support, things might have turned out very differently. Maurice deserves a bow. Not loud or theatrical, but straight from the heart.

But above all: Anita. My wife, my anchor, my mirror, my sounding board. The one who knew me before I truly knew myself. The one who stayed, even when I lost myself for a while. She was there in my darkest days, challenged me when I was stuck, looked at me in silence when words failed. For every burst of anger, every painful decision, every farewell or fear—she stood by me. Not with big gestures, but with presence. Always. Unconditionally. Where others might have walked away, she stood firm. No applause, no spotlight, but the indispensable force behind this entire story. Without her, I wouldn't be standing here today. Period.

And let's be clear: this book will not be a list of misfortunes. It is an ode to perseverance. To humor. To character. To love. To people like you and me, who keep standing—in The Hague, in Sluis, or anywhere else.

And yes, this story also includes the battles behind the scenes: the financial chaos caused by those who should have guided me, the sleepless nights spent fixing what accountants and "experts" had tangled into knots. I will tell you how I put my own books straight when even professional organizations failed to do so. That too is part of my fight: not just against illness, but against injustice, bureaucracy, and incompetence.

So buckle up. This story goes far beyond medical files or certificates. It is a journey filled with anecdotes, truths, misunderstandings, friendships, and sometimes a laugh so hard it hurt. But above all: it is real.

Prologue

Some people write books to make themselves look better than they are. I'm not going to do that. I don't believe in polished stories. I want to show the rough edges instead. The doubt. The anger. The mistakes I made. The moments when I had no clue anymore. But also the things that truly matter: a coffee with an old customer, a handshake from a stranger, a smile on a rotten day.

This book isn't meant to impress. It's meant to be real. To show how life can be brutally hard—and how you keep going anyway. Because you have to. Because giving up is not an option. Because even when your body stops cooperating, your mind keeps fighting. Because every setback is a choice: go down or move forward.

I'm not writing this just for myself, but also for my grandchildren—so they'll know who their grandpa really was. Not the version on Facebook or at birthday parties, but the man behind the smile. The man who sometimes wrestled with life but never gave up. The man who'd rather march forward with a big mouth than fade away quietly.

And I'm writing this for everyone who wonders how to stay standing when life knocks you down. For everyone who, like me, believes that with a loud mouth, a warm heart and a bit of humor, you can get pretty far.

And maybe a little bit for those few people who never forgot me—even when I was down. For the ones I stayed for, in my own way. Straightforward, sometimes clumsy, but always real.

Deaf, Disabled, but Never Defeated

My Fight After Cancer – and the Road to Survival and Success

The Inspiring Story of Never Giving Up

Chapter 1 – Schilderswijk Roots

Birth and Family

I was born on January 4, 1961, in the Zuidwal Hospital in The Hague, the oldest of six children. We lived in Jan de Baanstraat, right in the heart of the Schilderswijk. A real working-class neighborhood. Hague street slang, doors always open, and constant noise in the streets.

Next to us lived the Bowin family, also a big clan. The kids played outside, kicked footballs between parked bikes, and yelled up at the windows: *"Mammaaaa, can I stay outside a little longer?!"*

Our own family consisted of my father, my mother, and the six of us: myself (Kees), my twin brother Fred (ten minutes younger), and my brothers and sisters Marga (†), Thea, Frits, and Raymond. It was chaos, but we had each other's backs. Everyone had their role, and as the oldest I often carried extra responsibility. Every evening at six o'clock the window would fly open and my mother's unmistakable Hague voice would echo through the street: *"Keesje! Freddy! Marga! Fritsje! Thea! Raymond! Dinnerrrr!!"*

The Schilderswijk in the 1960s

The Schilderswijk in the '60s was raw, lively, and tough. The post-war crisis still hung in the air.

Many families lived with six, seven, or even more kids in cramped upstairs flats without a bathroom, often without hot water. Bedrooms were shared with brothers or sisters, and privacy simply didn't exist. The houses were noisy, the alleys narrow, but the hearts were big.

The neighborhood had a rough edge—it was known as one of the most dangerous places in the Netherlands—but there was also camaraderie. Everyone knew each other, helped each other when needed, and fought just as hard again the next day. That was simply part of life.

It was survival with a smile, laughing through the tears, and never letting yourself be defeated. That was the Schilderswijk. Despite the tough life, there was togetherness: no one was left out.

Everyone belonged, and the street raised you just as much as your parents did. You learned fast, because if you didn't, the street itself would set you straight.

The Schilderswijk was a school of life—a place where your character was shaped with a kick up the backside and a generous laugh.

3. Home and Upbringing

At home, we didn't have much. My mother could work magic with whatever was available:

oatmeal, bread porridge, and during the week the leftover gravy from Sunday's roast would be poured over the potatoes again. Custard or cheap pudding went straight onto the same plate as dinner—even if that plate wasn't finished yet. That's just how it was. We didn't complain, we laughed.

My father worked hard—in construction, in the harbor, as a bouncer, cleaning ships with chemical residues, and later through an agency in the hospitality industry. He was handsome, charismatic, funny, but he struggled with alcohol. *"Keesie, go get your father from the pub,"* my mother would often say. And off I went, little legs carrying me to drag my dad home from his favorite bar in time for dinner.

He could tell jokes like no other, had the gift of the gab, and lived for being around people. He was proud of his kids, bragging in the pub about how well Marga could sing or how Fred could box. As if he himself carried stage fright, he always needed to be liked. We kids often got approached because Dad had left another unpaid tab somewhere—at the pub, the milkman's, or even the stamp collector's.

I still remember his cremation: barely anyone showed up for the ceremony in the hall, but the free drinks afterward? Packed to the brim. That was my father in a nutshell.

Meanwhile, my mother made the most beautiful clothes. She was an incredible knitter and eventually even had a knitting machine. In the time of *Starsky and Hutch*, I proudly strutted around in the exact same cardigan Starsky wore—handmade by my mom.

My grandparents on my mother's side were divorced. That meant I had two grandpas and two grandmas: *little grandma and grandpa Willemsen*, and *big grandma and grandpa Piet van Kralingen*. At grandpa Willemsen's—with his dog, pigeons, and his Zündapp moped—we really felt like kids. I don't have warm memories of little grandma, but at big grandma's in Scheveningen there was always warmth and welcome. Grandpa Piet, though, was a grumbler and drank too much—not fond memories of him.

My father's parents I only knew from photos. What I do know is that he often clashed with his mother. When he came back from sailing the high seas and heard that she had died, he jumped crying over the fence of the Eik en Duinen cemetery, shouting: *"My mother, my mother!"* That image is burned into my memory. Sometimes we visited her grave, and as a child I'd see an open grave with a loose lid—it fueled some of my darkest childhood fears.

4. Boxing and Building Character

Fear wasn't allowed in our house. My father made sure of that. For him, boxing was the best school of life, and every boy in our family was required to learn it. I was never great at it—Fred, my twin brother, was the real talent—but it taught me to stand my ground. To this day, I'm not afraid of taking a hit.

The boxing gym had been founded in 1959 by Leen Hoogenband and for years it was tucked away in the Achter Raamstraat. Kathy Houwaart's younger brother trained there, and soon enough her father Harry took over as coach. In The Hague, boxing was *the* working-class sport.

But to be honest, it wasn't really my world. Shouting mothers yelling *"Hit him in the face!"*, folding chairs flying through the air... sometimes more fights broke out outside the ring than inside it. That rough-and-tumble working-class scene—loud, raw, and chaotic—just didn't suit me. I preferred normality.

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5. Family Bonds and Clashes

We also had an aunt, Aunt Hetty—the very definition of frugality. At Easter we got Christmas wreath cookies, and at Christmas we got Easter eggs—always white and stale. You weren't allowed into her living room. The Bakelite chairs were still covered in their original plastic, as if the movers could show up any day. While others had already switched to top loaders or even front-loading washing machines, she was still scrubbing away in a zinc washtub.

We didn't see them often. Either my father was fighting with his brother, or with his sister. Usually, it had something to do with an alleged inheritance from Austria, which—if you believed my father—had been stolen by the two of them. Whether that inheritance ever really existed? No one knows.

What I do know is this: I looked up to Uncle Hans. He was a man who stood for his family, his club, and his word. He lived for his children and, later, his grandchildren—whereas my father lived more for his drinking buddies and pub regulars, people who ultimately abandoned him. Maybe that's where, amid the noise and chaos of my own childhood, I first learned the difference between living in disorder and living with direction.

Uncle Hans was a house painter by trade, but he wore his tie tight under his chin like an aristocrat. He was chairman of football club VDS and sat on the housing commission. A proud man. A man of principle. And above all, a man who was always there for his family.

Maybe that's when I first realized that having a compass in life is worth more than surviving the chaos.

6. School and Corporal Punishment

I first went to preschool run by nuns, and later to the Van Ostade School—right next to the public bathhouse, through an iron door on the right. My teachers were Mr. Adema and Miss Zoete. With her, I was even allowed to stay for lunch, which back then was something very special.

Fred, my twin brother, was less lucky. He had lessons from Aad de Mos, who preferred football to teaching—probably explains why Fred had to repeat that year.

At school we still used ink pens and inkwells—ballpoint pens hadn't been invented yet. And corporal punishment? That was perfectly normal. A slap across the ear, a cuff on the head, a ruler smacked across your fingers. No discussion, no warnings—just *whack!* It was part of daily life.

My father, too, had quick hands. Sometimes he would even come at you in a boxing stance. Then we'd be sent upstairs to the attic—a cold, uninsulated space where you'd sit among old wartime newspapers, staring up at the pots and pans. It wasn't a "time-out corner," it was survival.

And yet, there was warmth too. Drawing, crafts, Saint Nicholas celebrations at school. And on Wednesdays: bathhouse day. The whole class showering in a circle, one single bar of Sunlight soap for everything. Yes, *everything*. Nowadays, people would be horrified.

Public bathhouse – the entrance to my school was just to the right of it

7. Kamperen en zomers aan de Rottemeren

Vakantie, dat betekende voor ons geen vliegreizen of hotels, maar kamperen. Eerst met het hele gezin, later met alleen mijn broer Fred en uiteindelijk ook met jeugdvriend Ed. De Rottemeren – een uitgestrekt gebied van meren en natuur tussen Bleiswijk, Zevenhuizen en Oud Verlaat – werd onze zomerse speelplaats. Hier heb ik leren zwemmen, leren vissen, en geleerd hoe je een tent overeind houdt als alles verregent.

Soms dreven we letterlijk met het opblaasbed uit de tent, zo heftig kon het weer omslaan. Maar dat drukte de pret nooit. Rondom ons barstte het van de Hagenaars die net als wij de stad even wilden ontvluchten.

Echte foto van mijn ouders en ik en mijn broers en tante

We kookten op een campingstelletje, standaardmenu: een blikje soep, een bord spaghetti, frietjes of macaroni. Het maakte niet uit. We waren eruit. Vrij. Zelfstandig. Mannen in wording.Later gingen Fred en ik zelfs met z'n tweeën op zomervakantie, zonder ouders. We verdienden geld met tomaten plukken bij een tuinder. Fred had het na drie dagen al gezien – hij kon de lucht niet aan, en die kassen waren bloedheet. Je kwam eruit alsof je in een gifwolk had gestaan: groen uitgeslagen, plakkerig, stinkend. Fred was geen doordouwer. Ik wel. Ik dacht: "Als ik dit niet volhoud, dan is er geen camping. Geen patatje. Geen vrijheid." Dus ik beet door. Werken voor je vrijheid – dat leer je snel op jonge leeftijd.

Van het verdiende geld deden we iets bijzonders: met de museumkaart reisden we kriskras door Nederland, op zoek naar historie. Samen met Ed – die later mijn zwager zou worden – bezochten we vrijwel elk museum en kasteel dat we konden vinden. De mooiste vond ik die van Hugo de Groot. De magie van geschiedenis, de geur van oude muren, het idee dat daar ooit écht iemand geleefd had – het sprak tot de verbeelding.

Na een aantal zomers aan de Rottemeren, kwam ome Gijs met een goedkopere optie: een bos in Putte, net over de grens bij België. Daar stond een oude, afgedankte schoolbus die dienstdeed als vakantieverblijf voor mijn ouders. Wij sliepen in een klein tentje vlak erbij. De omgeving was prachtig: vennetjes om in te zwemmen, kersenbomen bij de boer waar we mochten plukken, en militaire oefeningen in de bossen die ons als kinderen tot de verbeelding spraken. 's Nachts hoorde je de wilde zwijnen door de struiken schuren en soms schrokken we ons rot als er ineens een schijnwerper aanging.

Wat we toen nog niet wisten: zijn werkgever dumpte daar olie uit vrachtwagens in het bos. Illegaal, natuurlijk. Later hoorden we daarvan, en ineens keek je met andere ogen naar dat idyllische stukje natuur.