

WALK AWAY

MARC HENDRIKS



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<https://www.visitnijmegen.com/>

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These are works of fiction, but Nijmegen and The Walk of the World do exist. Obviously.

The same goes for most other locations and businesses mentioned herein. Exceptions: Madame Mingmei's Cabinet of Necessities, The Bronze Gladiolus Inn, Riverview Keep, and the village of Reddenburg.

- M.H.

**DEAR
JENNIFER**

Listen to Samantha's Road Trip Mixtape:



“Falsehood flies, and the truth comes limping after it.”

- Jonathan Swift

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

- Henry G. Bohn

“Later she remembered all the hours of the afternoon as happy—one of those uneventful times that seem at the moment only a link between past and future pleasure, but turn out to have been the pleasure itself.”

- F. Scott Fitzgerald

“The skeptic does not mean him who doubts, but him who investigates or researches, as opposed to him who asserts and thinks that he has found.”

- Miguel de Unamuno

“The best sermons are lived, not preached.”

- Anonymous

Friday, July 9, 1999

Dear Diary,

My name is Samantha Willems, and today is my 21st birthday!

In my opinion, poems and songs have overhyped this so-called milestone in human maturation. They sold reaching what once was the age of majority as something people would notice.

There goes Samantha Willems. My, she must have turned twenty-one! Doesn't she look and sound especially adult?

As if.

I can't say I feel different than yesterday, and I didn't see physical changes when I got dressed this morning. My body was still of average height and shape, curvy in almost every desired place. My face, as oval as the night before, was clean. No acne, no pimples, no blemishes of any sort. Same heavy-lidded blue-greenish eyes, same button nose, same pale complexion, same bow-shaped lips, same jet-black hair. (Long and straight. No bangs.)

What else can I tell you? I have a fifty-year-old father. Matthias by name, plumber by trade. My mother, mortuary beautician Melanie, 48, is a Rotterdam native from whom I inherited the folksy drawl many deem irksome. The three of us live in a tract house on a quiet street in Reddenburg, Gelderland. With a population of 4765, it's a commuter suburb developed in the seventies for people employed in Wijchen, Nijmegen, and Arnhem.

Oh, I forgot to mention my boyfriend, Carel Maas. He's

twenty-two years old and works as a car mechanic in town.

I'm writing this from my bedroom, which I have furnished and decorated to my liking with a storage bed, a vanity doubling as a computer desk, blue carpeting, floral wallpaper (almond blossom), and posters of the bands Luscious Jackson and All Saints.

I'm a tad out of sorts, for this birthday should've coincided with returning from a gap year in Canada and applying for the Nursing program at HAN University of Applied Sciences in Nijmegen. The master plan I'd concocted years ago to finance ninety percent of the trip and my college tuition: save every cent I was making as a part-time checkout girl at Jan de Ruyter's variety store. My parents had promised to pony up the remaining ten percent if I agreed to one proviso: Don't buy, never mind ask for, pricey nonessentials. Then I graduated from high school, and Jan was happy to employ me full-time for the summer. Mom and Dad expected me to chip in at home from then on, rendering our deal nonsensical. Instead of being able to set money aside, I broke even every month.

Long story short: Canada became *Cananjet*, and I didn't enroll at HAN.

Let's not dwell on such setbacks. Not at once, anyway.

You, Diary, were the first present I unwrapped when I got home from the store. I've always thought of diaries as autobiographies of self-centered bores, and I had to choke back a dismissive chortle. Sorry about that, but it'd be counterproductive to be anything but frank with you from the get-go. Don't fret, because it didn't take me long to embrace the idea of you as a mute confidante. I'm happy enough, but we all need a sympathetic ear now and again. The thing is, people always

endeavor to console downhearted friends with token words. That's well-intentioned, but sometimes all a gal wants is to blow off steam. And that, Dear Diary, gives you your value.

At any rate, this is all for now. I'm off to celebrate with my friends Katja and Cindy. First stop: our suburban town's poor excuse for a movie theater to catch the eight-fifteen showing of *Cruel Intentions*. We'll see where the rest of the evening takes us. (Nowhere special, I think. Jigging on a hay cart is about as exciting as Reddenburg nightlife gets.) Come what may, I won't need to hit the sheets at a reasonable time—tomorrow marks the beginning of two weeks off from work!

Yours,
Samantha

Friday, July 9, 1999 (later)

Dear Diary,

Most of my friends' parents enforce an 'as long as you live under our roof, you'll abide by our rules' policy. In practice, this means a minimum of privacy and a dearth of privileges. The message is loud and clear: Elders deserve respect; youngsters must earn it.

My parents are strict too, but many rules went out the window when I became a moneymaker. And today, in addition to you and copies of the Robin Cook novels *Toxin* and *Vector*, they gifted me my own set of keys for the house's night latches. From now on, I can come and go as I please. I took immediate advantage of it tonight by sneaking Carel into the

house. (I expected him to be a no-show on my birthday bash due to a late shift at the garage, but he pulled up on his motor-bike when the girls and I were polishing off our wine coolers and take-out cheeseburgers in the park's gazebo. It was gift time: Katja and Cindy had pooled their money together to buy me the Natalie Imbruglia album *Left of the Middle*; Carel presented me with a pair of Lois flared jeans.)

I believe Mom and Dad would've let my boyfriend spend the night, but secrecy seemed proper conduct since he and I were tipsy and in the mood for lovemaking. Furthermore, isn't it so that certain activities are more gratifying when undertaken without express permission?

I enjoyed Carel taking charge; I was okay with him using too much tongue while kissing; I tolerated that he damn near turned the blowjob into pharyngeal mutilation and the fingering into cervix bruising; I condoned him taking Polaroids of my naughty bits; I allowed him to suck and knead my boobs with ferocity, but I protested when he attempted to board me from the rear. I let him weeks ago, a momentary lapse in judgment I still regret, so I told Carel the back entrance was closed for repairs and maintenance.

He stole out of the house after having missionary-style sex with me and finishing on my pubic hair.

How romantic, don't you think?

In any case, I'm tired out. Sweet dreams!

Yours,

Samantha

Saturday, July 10, 1999

Dear Diary,

Something has happened, something terrible, and unless I cease writing on these pages, upholders of the law will eventually read and use you against me. That said, I want to put down the truth, and nothing but. If or when the time comes, I'll turn you over to the authorities with my head held up high.

It's incautious to let the currently hypothetical police detective (or an intern tasked with the detail) know that I'm cognizant of a possible readership. He or she might assume that what follows is of dubious veracity and perhaps made out of whole cloth. I'm not going to feign ignorance. I'll continue being candid and won't even blot out the embarrassing specifics about my body and sex life. The following is also bound to reveal what a ditz I can be. But, hey, I *do* know the difference between *whose* and *who's*; *they're*, *their*, and *there*; *it's* and *its*, and even *hung* and *hanged*. Don't you think that counts for something? Yeah, me neither.

Before I go into the crux of the matter, let me share with you fragments of a TV interview from a few years ago. It made such an impression on me that I videotaped the rerun and transcribed it. I took the notes with me when I left the house earlier today and shall glue an excerpt on the next couple of pages. I promise its relevance will come into play soon enough.

A little context first: Somewhere in the spring of 1990, two crooks hoping to make a big splash broke into the house of an

Amsterdam-based banker. I don't know the first thing about banking (or robbery), but the logic seems faulty. It's like assuming Tommy Hilfiger has a wealth of dresses and stone-washed jeans strewn around in his den. Anyhow, when the criminals forced their way into the mansion, they didn't find the manager—he was away on business—or a safe, but the man's pregnant wife. They screamed in her face that they wanted cash on the double. When she couldn't meet their demands, one of the crooks shot her in the gut. The woman died along with her unborn child. The police succeeded in hunting down the perps, locked up the gunman, and threw away the key. His partner copped a plea and got ten to fifteen. Years later, the banker agreed to a TV interview with an award-winning American journalist. (If memory serves, it was either Barbara Walters or Jane Pauley.) The man looked healthy enough, an illusion shattered by an onscreen picture of him in happier times—he had aged twenty years in five. He answered some questions before launching into the monologue hereunder.

It never goes away. I mean, look, you shouldn't think like this--it's a one-way ticket to insanity, but you can't help fantasizing about being there with her, you know. And in these daydreams, the most splendid outcome is that you manage to save them. The next best thing: die with them. And, yes, when the police inform you, you go through all these stages of grief, and at a certain point, you're able to acknowledge what happened, accept what happened ... recognize the truth of it, see

it for what it is. But even then, the sorrow and anger don't go away. You carry them with you. And you can never really go on with your life. I mean, you do go on, right? You get up in the morning and go about your business. Sleepwalking in a way, but those around you are relieved and happy to see you like that, doing regular things again: "He's over it." And that's a relief to you, too, because that's when they stop tiptoeing around you and no longer look at you with pity in their eyes. But you're not over it. You go about your day, yeah, but the sorrow and the anger and the regret are always with you, as constant as the survivor's guilt. Later rather than sooner, maybe six months after that world-shattering night, there is the first laugh. The first genuine laugh in response to a joke or a sitcom. And you realize: I'm doing okay. And that realization puts a stop to it. Why should you be enjoying yourself while your family is dead and buried? And you cry, and you perhaps kick a wall or even slap yourself. But soon after, a week or so later, you catch yourself feeling okay once again. And the intervals between those evanescent moments or flashes of ... emotional steadiness ... become shorter. And every such moment is always followed by anger, sorrow, regret, and guilt. You still don't think you deserve contentment, but before long, you stop kicking the walls, and you no longer give yourself a bruise. It's the new normal. People look at you and see a normal individual. Someone who's overcome

a tragedy. But you didn't overcome. You do your best to try to live your life, and you take it one day at a time.

Heartbreaking, isn't it?

I'll get back to this later. Now on to business.

Carel is dead.

I was about to get in the shower this morning when the doorbell rang. Thinking Mom or Dad had forgotten something (they were out visiting), I looked out the bathroom window and saw Carel on the porch. Wrapping a towel around me, I darted down the stairs to let him in.

Carel entered the foyer with his lips twisted into an amused grin. If it wasn't a hope of more sex that had made him come over, his expression and body language communicated that getting it on again was his new objective.

You ask me, guys aren't illiterate when it comes to romance, but they oftentimes just want to get their rocks off and are incapable of reason when in that frame of mind.

I wasn't in the mood. I *do* get aroused on the regular ... but not as often as the average guy in his prime.

I asked Carel what he wanted. Still brandishing that grin, he took off his netback cap and said, "What with the absence of Mr. and Mrs. Cockblock, I figured you and I could have a little more horizontal fun."

I rolled my eyes and started up the stairs.

"What, you don't care for the horizontal part?" Carel called after me. "*No problemo*, we can do it against the window and amuse that old man gardening next door."

Ugh.

I entered my bedroom and threw on a peignoir before dropping the towel.

Carel came in behind me, snaked an arm around my waist, and pulled me close for a kiss. When he attempted to doff the peignoir, I disengaged myself and said I wasn't feeling it.

"Maybe these scans of last night's Polaroids will toughen your pacifiers," he said as he withdrew a recordable CD from one of his cargo shorts' pockets and sat down at the vanity to start up my laptop computer.

I took the opportunity to throw on a white shirt-black shrug combo and wriggle into my new jeans. They were a snug fit around my waist but too long; only my toes peeped out from under the leg openings. I sighed. Did my generous bf still not know my dress size? He could've checked the label of one of my other jeans or straight out asked me.

Folding back the trousers' hemlines, I took an over-the-shoulder glance at Carel, who'd put the CD-R into the disk drive and was now opening files. His Greek god physique made him superficially attractive, but his gait and posture tended to be gangly. For whatever reason, I suddenly considered this a shortcoming. The ring through his left eyebrow now struck me as silly. His spiky hair, chestnut with frosted tips, looked stupid. That lopsided grin began to annoy me. The less said about his mesh shirt, the better. I felt a pang of dislike, wanted him gone. Maybe for keeps.

I thought back on how he and I had met. A story riddled with cliches, I'm not proud to admit. One fateful day, back in the summer of '95, I was breaking in new pumps, my thoughts vacillating between 'These look cute as hell' and 'To hell with these torture devices.' I lost my balance when one

heel got caught between cobblestones, but two male arms held me steady before I could collide headfirst with the pavement. I looked up and saw Carel smiling down at me. He introduced himself and offered to buy me a coffee. By the time we left the patio café, I was already head over heels. In saving me from falling, he had swept me off my feet. My parents' disapproval of Carel (their verdict: he was too boorish) only cemented my keenness to go steady with him. What can I say? I wasn't a demanding teenager.

My meditations were broken when Carel turned away from the computer. His face reflected both disappointment about me getting dressed and hope that the clothes might come off again in a tick. "Take a gander," he said, pointing a finger gun at the computer screen.

"Yeah, you're a regular Anton Corbijn," I replied indifferently after a peek at the snapshot of me on my back, boobs out. These photos were for him to enjoy. In private.

When I headed for the hallway, offering to go fix him a lumberjack's breakfast, he pushed up from the chair and closed in on me. "C'mon, babe," he whined, putting the cap back on his head. "I wanna make it with you."

"Duly noted," I said, keeping the chagrin out of my voice. "Another time, okay?"

"Please?" he muttered.

"Come off it, Carel," I snarled. "Sheesh!"

Carel's face clouded over in disgruntlement. "Have you been running around on me, huh? Are you sweet on someone else or something?"

In short: I wasn't. Full version: I'd gotten pretty chummy with my co-worker Thomas over the past month. We hadn't

done anything inappropriate (I don't count the a-beat-too-long-hug-in-swimwear at the end of our team outing to recreational lake Berendonck last week), but I'm not a saint and can't deny feeling attracted to his mature and gentle temperament. Carel, in contrast, was what you'd call a bad boy. Like most of them, he lacked refinement, drove a muscle car—in his case, a Plymouth Barracuda—and had a big mouth on him. But in my experience, toughness is a pose. When all is said and done, bad boys just want to hang out with their buds, play video games, and shotgun beers. Oh, and bang their girl. And if she won't put out, they'll sulk.

All bark, no bite.

But as the song goes, you never can tell.

"What are you doing?" I asked when Carel plumped himself back down in the chair and opened Outlook. Ignoring me, he clicked *compose message*, selected all my contacts, and then moved the cursor to *add attachments*.

The penny dropped.

"No!" I bellowed.

He stood up, seized me by the shoulders, and steered me to the desk. Despite the struggle I put up, he placed his hand on top of mine and pressed my fingers on the mouse to add photos from the CD to the outgoing e-mail. My tear-welled eyes darted over the names of the recipients: Dad, Jan de Ruyter, colleagues (including Thomas), and my friends.

"Stop adding nudes of yourself, stop adding nudes of yourself," Carel faux-rapped tauntingly. He administered the coup de grâce by pressing my finger down on the mouse one last time.

Message sent.

Carel released me from his iron grip and laughed in my face. And then his head caved in on itself.

Out of the blue, no forewarning whatsoever. Nothing had hit him, and I hadn't touched him. Nevertheless, his head imploded as though unseen hands had applied severe pressure from every angle. It was such a spectacle that I didn't comprehend it at first. Rooted to the spot, I pictured balloons deflating, people crushing beer cans, and time-lapse videos of grapes shriveling into raisins. Then I remembered nine-year-old me pushing Malibu Barbie's face in. Mom had rounded on me, reiterating how pricey these 'damn dolls' were. (About twenty mowed lawns in preadolescent currency.) It was fine, though, a two-finger squeeze and—*plop!*—Barbie was good as new.

But Carel's head wasn't hollow rubber. He wouldn't ever be in mint condition again. His cap had flown off; bloody yuck glopped out where his facial bones had broken through tissue and skin. He crumpled to the floor.

It wasn't over. Carel's body gave a Lazarus reflex: His hands formed impotent claws, and bubbly saliva formed on the slits that had been lips. Soon, he flatlined.

Even when it sank in that Carel was indeed stone-cold dead, I didn't scream.

I hadn't forgotten about the e-mail chock-full of nude images, so I composed and sent a message in the hope that it would prevent people near and dear to me from getting an eyeful.

Hi all, my account was hacked. Don't open the last email. It might contain a virus. - Sam

I had no way of knowing if anyone had already opened the

previous e-mail, but the lack of replies (so far) tempered my concern.

Now I had to shift my attention back to Carel.

Here's where the story about the banker comes in. When I watched the interview around my seventeenth birthday, I couldn't help thinking how I'd feel if someone harmed Carel. Seventeen-year-olds don't take puppy love lightly. To them, it's a sacred union. The sad fact that heartbreak is the leading cause of suicide in teenagers underpins this.

Seventeen-year-old me would never have guessed that our all-consuming relationship was destined to morph into an on-and-off thing with zero chance of lasting, that Carel would indeed die, that he'd snuff it as my boy *fiend*, that I'd witness his death with a sense of detachment. Don't get me wrong, it sickened me. Scared me. Confused me. But anger and hurt muted sadness.

What would the authorities make of what had transpired here? Everyone behaves differently under duress, yes, but my phlegmatic comportment wouldn't be lost on cops. And they'd find out about the damn e-mail. They'd surmise I'd had a motive to hurt Carel.

I've never needed to skip a meal or wear hand-me-downs, but the Willems clan is anything but affluent. My point: I'd be liable to end up with a court-appointed public defender, one of those last-to-graduate types.

Reason enough to skip town.

I didn't want my parents to worry more than necessary, so I wrote them a note and put it on my desk.

Mom, Dad, I did not do this to Carel. I can't explain what hap-

pened. I think it's best to go away and get my head clear. I'm not running, I won't be gone forever. Love, Sam

I decided to alter my appearance and found just the thing in one of my storage bed drawers: a hair dye kit. Strawberry-blond. An unused impulse purchase dating back to the summer of '98.

I'd never used such a product. Not on myself, not on a friend. It turned out to be a time-consuming operation, one I carried out in the shower cubicle to avoid spilling any of the product on non-washable objects. I tried to wing it, thinking I couldn't concentrate on the instruction sheet. When it became apparent I didn't know what I was doing, I stepped out of the shower with a grunt and grabbed the cuticle clippers from the shelf. The less hair to dye, the better!

The idea was to emulate the shoulder-length coif actress Selma Blair had rocked in *Cruel Intentions*, but the result was fated to look like a hack job.

As a worrywart with an overactive imagination, I never fail to picture the worst possible outcome. What if my parents returned home before I had the chance to leave? And I can tell you from experience, Diary, it's no fun standing in the shower, naked and vulnerable, while there's a dead body in the adjacent room. Every time I closed my eyes to massage a liquid product into my scalp, I was scared out of my mind that Caryl would burst in.

Should've poked me with a stick to make sure I was dead for real, bitch, he'd garble, leaking gray matter on the bathroom tiles.

Ugh.

Four plastic bottles—pre-color treatment, developer, color creme, conditioner—and thirty minutes later, I emerged from the shower as a blonde. After blow-drying and brushing my hair, I jammed the clipped tresses down one of the empty bottles, put the dye kit back inside the drawer, and moved in front of the vanity.

I *did* look different today. The new do was presentable, but I couldn't relax my facial muscles. Every inch of my body was covered in gooseflesh, and beads of sweat kept forming on my temples.

(Thank God I already had my period last week. I wouldn't be able to deal with *that* hassle on top of everything else.)

I tried not to peek at Carel's corpse and his nightmarishly disfigured head as I donned a hooded sweater (so people in the neighborhood wouldn't notice my blond, shorter hair) and wind pants. I shouldered my schoolbag (containing you, an old Discman, *Toxin*, *Vector*, pencil case, and my wallet), put on my caramel-hued sunglasses, and took one last look around the room to ascertain I hadn't missed or forgotten anything.

Once outside, I felt like a neon sign flashing the word 'guilty.'

There goes Samantha Willems. She's obviously on the run!

I stopped at a green van parked in front of our garden fence to check the disguise for my disguise in the side-view mirror. Marginally comforted, I reseated the shades on my nose and pressed on.

I wanted to sneak past Old Man Sanders, who was doing yard work on a kneeling cushion, but it occurred to me that the police might come to suspect my parents of foul play.

They killed their daughter and the boyfriend, made the girl's body disappear, and contrived to pin the boy's death on the 'missing' girl!

I didn't want that to happen, so I made my presence known.

"Hi, Mr. Sanders."

"Hi there, Sam," he said, squinting his eyes against the sun.

"Looks like you're going on a trip."

"You bet," I said loud enough to draw the casual attention of other neighbors performing outside chores. Mission accomplished, I wished Mr. Sanders a good day and moved on down the road to the ATM outside the old post office. I withdrew five hundred guilders, the amount I'd saved up since 1997. What a shame to spend it on hiding.

Hoping I wouldn't bump into an acquaintance, I went inside a thrift store and selected scanty garments, cheap footwear (flip-flops and espadrilles), an imitation leather envelope bag, a denim rucksack, a makeup kit, and a few other odds and ends.

The only other person present was the cashier, an out-of-town temp who bagged my stuff without taking his eyes off the magazine he was perusing.

I used a coin-operated toilet stall up the street to get down to my underwear, take off my bra, slip into the new outfit, and put my baggy old clothes back on over it.

At the train station, I bought a ticket to Amsterdam. Another waste of money, because I was going to step off in Nijmegen.

When I sank into a seat in the rear section of the train's last car, there was a chance to relax. Sleep held the promise of nightmares and the prospect of jolting awake with a banshee scream. I was equally unenthusiastic about staying conscious for the duration of the trip. I'd think, I'd worry, I'd doubt my

decision to beat feet.

I came up with the following theories about what happened back home:

1. I was—or still am—controlled by an agency beyond current human knowledge. To put it bluntly: demonic possession. Here's the nub of the matter: I'm a cafeteria Catholic, a salad bar Christian for whom religion is more tradition than conviction. (I *did* unearth my Saint Christopher pendant before hitting the trail.) I've never needed religion to give meaning to my existence, so it'd be hypocritical of me, I think, to consider spiritual explanations.

2. There had been someone in the room with Carel and me. Didn't I describe Carel's death as unseen hands crushing his skull? An invisible man is a leap, I know. Then again, how likely is it that someone's head implodes like *that*?

3. A fugue state. This disorder involves a traumatic experience setting off dissociation, memory lapses, and the desire to pull up stakes. I can't tick all the boxes, but my mind could be playing all sorts of tricks on me.

I've never consulted a shrink, but this doesn't mean I never needed one. On the contrary, I could have used counseling when I was about ten. For reasons unclear to me, I had become convinced I lacked the physical capacity to swallow food. Scared witless by the likelihood of choking on a bite of Salisbury steak or some such, I quit eating solids and limited myself to liquid sustenance and mashed or otherwise broken-down food items: broth, applesauce, the odd serving of scrambled eggs. Anything chunkier than that, I believed,