FINALLY LIVING

From the cupboard under the stairs
to a life of helping others

MICHEL PEEN

Finally Living

Michel Peen

Original Dutch edition published in 2026 under the title Ik leef eindelijk.

Parts of My Own World were written in 2016.

For this book, the life story was brought up to date through 2026 and edited for publication while preserving Michel's own voice.

This is a personal memoir. Events are described as Michel remembers and experienced them.

Where necessary, the names of private individuals and identifying details have been omitted, changed or combined.

Dialogue has been reconstructed from memory. This book does not provide legal or medical advice.

Cover photograph: Michel Peen's family archive. Solar eclipse photograph: Michel Peen.

ISBN 9789465548449

© 2026 Michel Peen. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reused commercially without permission.

For my mother

for the animals who stayed

and for everyone who has ever felt trapped

CONTENTS

Foreword....8
A Word to the Reader....11
Part One My Own World....13
1 Born on 16 April 1980....14
2 My Childhood....15
3 Visiting My Grandparents....23
4 Going to School....26
5 Pain....31
6 Work....33
7 Depression and Smoking Weed....35
8 The Assessment Centre....38
9 Hanging Around....40
10 Joint the Club....43
11 The Neighbours....47
12 Ipse de Bruggen....49
13 A Move I Had to Make....57
14 The Moon....60
15 Drink Got Its Grip on Me....63
16 PTSD....65
17 A Helpful Friend....67

CONTENTS

18 Girlfriends....69
19 When You're Winning You Have Friends....72
20 Animals....79
21 It's All Right Like This....81
Part Two What I Understand Now....85
22 Bas and the Bagpipes....86
23 Moving Isn't the Same as Escaping....88
24 Bullying Doesn't Stop at the School Gate....90
25 Why I Sought Numbness....93
26 My Life as a Hermit....96
27 Looking Back on Ipse....98
Part Three Finding My Voice Again....100
28 Living Under Financial Administration....101
29 On Paper It Does Exist....103
30 The Third of April....104
31 The Seventh of July....105
32 Living for the First Time....107
Part Four Animals People and Connection....109
33 My Mother....110
34 The Day Everything Changed....111

CONTENTS

35 Care and Boundaries....113
36 Animals Speak Without Words....114
37 Rocky and Kitty....115
38 Ron Noah and Tygo....116
39 The Radio Stayed On....117
Looking Up....118
40 The Aerial....119
Part Five Why I Help....120
41 Trapped....121
42 My Method for Building a Case File....122
43 Not a Lawyer....123
44 Examples Without Names....124
45 Housing and Fairness....125
46 Public Information as a Tool....126
47 The Limits of Helping....127
Part Six Rock and Roll and Archives....128
48 Herman....129
49 Unknown Brood....130
50 The Presleys....131
51 Fact Feeling and Suspicion....134

CONTENTS

Part Seven What Others Can Take from This.....135
52 What Schools Need to See.....136
53 What Support Professionals Need to Know.....137
54 What Recovery Really Takes.....138
55 What Organisations Can Learn.....139
56 For Anyone Trapped Right Now.....140
57 Finally Living.....141
Closing Words.....143
Practical Appendix.....145
A Case File in Ten Steps.....146
A Letter People Can Read.....147
Signs of Long-Term Bullying.....148
When Words Won't Come.....149
The Main Timeline.....150
Acknowledgements.....152

Foreword

This book began in 2016. Back then, I wrote that I had come full circle. That was how it felt. I wrote about my childhood, school, drugs, drink, care services, friendships and animals. No fancy words. Just the way it came out of me. Straight to the point. Sometimes with a tear, sometimes with a joke at a moment when you think: is that actually allowed? As far as I'm concerned, yes. Humour has often kept me going.

Only it turned out that the circle wasn't a circle. Life carried on. There were more years when I felt locked up again. No longer literally in a cupboard under the stairs, but in fear, rules, silence, dependence and the feeling that other people were deciding how I should live. I often lived like a hermit. Door shut. Curtains shut too, so to speak. People outside, animals inside. That felt safer.

On 3 April 2024, the court order placing my finances under administration was lifted. That gave me back my independence, but the real turning point came later. I was still using and withdrawing from the world. On paper, I was free. In my head and in everyday life, not quite yet.

The real change began on 7 July 2025, when I stopped drinking alcohol and using hard drugs. I still smoke a joint before bed. When my mother had an accident in October 2025, everything gathered pace. I had to read medical documents, keep track of appointments, understand letters and question organisations. Hiding away wasn't an option. My mother needed me, and I discovered that I could stand my ground.

I found my voice again. Quietly at first. Then a little louder. Sometimes perhaps a bit too loud, but a radio has a volume knob too, and I still had to learn where it was.

I learnt to put case files together. I learnt to read letters the way someone else solves a puzzle. I began asking questions. I wanted to know who had made a decision, why, when and on what grounds. Not to pick a fight, but because uncertainty can make people feel small. I knew that feeling. I knew what it was to be trapped, too.

Then people started coming to me with their stories. People up against a housing association, a council, a care institution or another organisation. They no longer knew where to begin. I helped them. Not because I'm a lawyer, because I'm not. I helped because I know what it feels like when nobody listens and your case file seems bigger than you are.

Something has changed since then. For the first time in my life, I no longer feel as though I'm merely surviving. I'm living. I can enjoy things. Helping others is a big part of that. When someone finally gets a clear picture after weeks of tension, receives an answer or feels a little confidence return, it does something for me too. Then the things I've been through haven't only left pain behind. Something good can come out of them as well.

So this book isn't a tale of self-pity. I'm not a figure to be pitied. I have, however, been through things that no child and no adult should have to experience. I'm telling you about them because silence protects the wrong people, and because recognising yourself in

someone else's story can sometimes make the first tiny opening in a closed door.

I wrote part of this book back in 2016. For publication, unnecessary repetition was removed and sentences were clarified where they got in the way of the story. My voice hasn't been polished smooth. Sometimes I write in short, raw or jumpy bursts, because that's how my memories come to me. The anger, humour and doubt are part of me. Later in the book, an older Michel looks back on what happened and tells you how his life went on.

If you recognise yourself in parts of this story, I hope you remember one thing. Being trapped doesn't mean you're finished. An opening can appear somewhere. Sometimes through one person. Sometimes through an animal. Sometimes through music. Sometimes through a microphone. And sometimes through finally putting everything down on paper.

Michel Peen

A Word to the Reader

This book contains memories of child abuse, bullying, fear, depression, self-harm, addiction and thoughts of death. I write honestly about them, but not to make them sound bigger or more attractive than they were. Quite the opposite. Numbing yourself solves nothing. Violence against a child is never that child's fault. Bullying isn't a joke when the person enduring it no longer dares to live.

Where I write about other people and organisations, I am describing my own memories, experiences and interpretation. This book is my life story, not an objective factual report, a court ruling or an investigation by a journalist. Memories of a childhood full of tension don't always come with a calendar in which every hour has been neatly ticked off. Sometimes I remember exactly how a room smelt or how footsteps sounded on the stairs, but not whether I was six, seven or eight. That doesn't make the feeling any less real. So I don't pretend that I can prove everything down to the minute.

Private individuals who have not given verifiable permission are referred to without their full names or under pseudonyms. Where necessary, identifying details have been omitted, changed or combined. Conversations have been reconstructed from memory, so they are not verbatim transcripts. Stories about people I helped later have also been stripped of identifying details. Their problems aren't mine to make public. The lesson can be shared. Their private lives cannot.

Read at your own pace. Put the book down if a chapter hits too close to home. Talk to someone you trust. Immediate danger calls for help, not shame.

Thinking about suicide? In the Netherlands, you can contact the suicide prevention service 113 or chat at 113.nl. For advice about domestic violence or child abuse, Veilig Thuis is available free and anonymously, day and night, on 0800-2000. Call 112 in an emergency. Readers outside the Netherlands should contact their own local crisis services or emergency number.

PART ONE

My Own World

My story up to 2016

CHAPTER 1

Born on 16 April 1980

My mother had already been in hospital for four weeks before I was born.

I arrived five weeks early. When I popped out, I was blue, wasn't getting enough oxygen and was far too small and light. They put me straight into an incubator.

For the first two days after my birth, my mother wasn't allowed to see me. That made her sad and pretty angry.

After three difficult weeks, I was finally allowed to go home.

For the first two years, I cried an awful lot. Whenever my mother wanted a little rest, I often kept her awake. Did I already know what life had in store for me? That question has just occurred to me.

We lived in an upstairs flat on Putsebocht in the south of Rotterdam. The living room was at the front, with another room in the middle and, at the back, a room with a box bed and a tiny kitchen. My grandfather turned the box bed into a shower. In the eighties, that was quite a luxury.

The toilet was still out in the stairwell. It's bizarre when you think about what those houses used to be like. You could hear everything through the walls, too, so sleeping wasn't always easy.

Once I was a little bigger and could just about stand on my own two feet, I loved watching the cars go past.

CHAPTER 2

My Childhood

At the very beginning of my childhood, I was fairly happy. I got on well with the other children at nursery. I loved playing with pedal go-karts and those little bikes.

I'm about four or five, a quiet little boy living in his own world. I'm sitting in the living room with my toy cars. As I remember it, my biological father can't stand me playing. He's been drinking, he sounds aggressive and he calls me names. I don't understand why.

I carry on playing. Suddenly he comes rushing towards me, grabs my arm hard and drags me to the stairs. I have to go upstairs.

I'm crying in my bedroom. Downstairs I can hear my mother shouting at my father. I creep over to the stairs, sit down and listen to what they're saying.

I don't understand much of it, but I know perfectly well that it's about me.

My mother protects and defends me. My father is aggressive towards her too, and I feel powerless. After an argument, he often leaves for the pub where he spends so much time. When it's time for bed, my mother always comes to check on me. A kiss and a stroke of my hair. She's caught in a struggle herself, one that isn't making her happy. I spend a lot of time playing and cycling outside because home doesn't feel safe. Along Groene Hilledijk and through the playground, towards Zuiderpark and Ahoy, sometimes for hours. When there's football at De Kuip, there are lots of supporters outside. One of them offers me a

drink. I've been taught never to accept anything from strangers, so even when he puts a cola in front of me, I don't dare take a sip. Afterwards I still have to go home, however much I dread it. If my father isn't there, I eat peacefully with my mother. Sometimes Bennie, our cat, joins us. My father usually eats with his plate on his lap because he doesn't want to sit at the table with us.

When the three of us do sit at the table together, an argument almost always starts. If I don't clear my plate, my father comes towards me threateningly. If I protest, he pinches my nose shut so that my mouth opens and forces me to eat.

My mother and I visit the Efteling theme park together. Long Neck, the dragon and the Fairy Tale Forest: I find it all fascinating, but the Big Bad Wolf scares the life out of me. I dream about him for days. From my bed, I keep watching the bedroom door as though he might walk in at any moment. I struggle to sleep, and I wet the bed too. Sometimes, to be honest, that's a reason to be allowed to call my mother. I get a bedwetting alarm. Great fun: first it's warm, then it's cold, and then you're literally left in the piss. When I hear footsteps on the stairs, I hope it's my mother, or at a pinch Little Red Riding Hood. Luckily, it's usually my mother. 'It's all right, sweetheart. Nothing's wrong. Go back to sleep.'

My bedroom isn't insulated and has single glazing. In winter, icicles hang from the window and sometimes even from the ceiling. Sometimes I sleep in five T-shirts, five jumpers, gloves, a hat and a pile of blankets. Not exactly pleasant, I can tell you, but we have to make do.