

Life Cycle V3

By

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Day 1: Heusden

(Locked Up Inside)

Tensions in the Smith bedroom began rising an hour after than the sun's rays had silently ruptured their sleep, evicting the night from their eyes and the cobbled streets beyond the curtains. Outside their friend's ancient house, the rest of Heusden, a tiny fortified village nestling in the watery arms of the river Maas near Eindhoven, was waking more gently from its slumbering.

"But Sam, they are *your* friends too – we've known most of them for at least ten years now. And we've been cycling with them for what, at least five or six now?" Chris whispered his argument at his wife through the quilt, resisting the desire to pound his fists into the mattress in case their hosts heard. Neither Sam nor Chris wanted anyone to know their secret; the awful truth that they were less than the perfect couple their friends thought they were. Neither believed they could make it through the next ten days without giving it away.

Sam had hidden herself behind the curtain and was staring out the window across the garden, through the pear trees at the end: letting her eyes and mind wander out the back gate and head off towards the enormous grass banks that run around the village: banks that do their best to keep the outside world out. She knew the argument she'd been having with herself was just a cover for her real feelings, she knew that it was too late to avoid starting their annual cycling holiday, and she knew she couldn't avoid the inevitable confrontation with Chris. She just hoped that it wouldn't come before they got back to Cambridge.

"God, why the hell didn't I just stay at home like I promised myself?" she asked herself as she twisted herself up in the curtain. But she knew that Chris couldn't have come out here on his own and try to trick the others with a tale of a fake injury – she knew he couldn't lie his way out of a paper bag. She wasn't worried that coming would be hell on wheels for him, but she didn't want to lie to people she cared about; a group that Chris no longer fitted into.

Sam and Chris hadn't shared a bedroom let alone a bed for the best part of a year now – apart from that recent incident with the wine, and incident that made her shudder to think about. Nausea and disgust surged through her body and mind. Spending the next few weeks sleeping in the same bed and tent was going to be hell. Which is probably why she felt so angry with herself now: now that she was being forced into bed with him, within accidental touching distance of the man she loathed. At least the tent, though inescapable and claustrophobically small, she would be insulated from contact by her sleeping bag. And the cycling and sea air would put her to sleep very quickly. She was overwhelmed with the desire to escape the bedroom and Chris.

"Why didn't I just bloody well stick to my plan and tell him I wanted to leave a month ago? What kind of fucking idiot am I?"

Sam kicked herself up and down the garden path as her eyes clambered up and over the fortifications.

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Chris and Sam had been coming to the Netherlands for many years, spending several summers cycling through the Dutch countryside, following paths that meander along the canals and through the polders. They'd often end up at a campsite on the coast of Zeeland in the south west or somewhere near the border with Germany in the east

The village of Heusden was a beautiful place to start any trip, and small enough to get to know its every lane and corner even though the couple were not actually there for more than four whole days every time they came. The peace and quiet Sam found sitting in the hidden corner she'd found by the little harbour was one of the highlights of her year, and was one of the reasons she came back year after year. Given the choice she would have happily sat there for the whole two weeks, reading and watching the massive barges charging slowly by. Watching their wakes rippling out from the centre of the canal to disappear into the reeds, which danced and swayed, then slowly fell back to sleep. Her mind followed their rhythm; her eyes lost in the water, her thoughts silenced.

Yes, she loved the people she'd got to know in the Netherlands, and really enjoyed the conversations they had as they sliced through the flat lands on their bikes, but for her, what was most important was the feeling of being removed from the outside world. A world that had been relentlessly shouldering its way through her soul, scattering her thoughts and feelings leaving them splattered and trampled into the mud of the modern world.

Last year's trip had been normal enough; they'd driven the bikes down to Maastricht and cycled around the hilly Limburg's landscape and across the borders into Belgium and Germany. Fortunately the troubles that'd stolen their marriage started after they'd returned, tired but happy, to Cambridge. Their Dutch friends had been very understanding about their double tragedy when it happened several months later and did what they could to send them support and love. But the distance between Sam and Chris and their friends them was a veil between what their friends knew and reality. A veil that hid the guilt and anger that twisted and squeezed Chris and Sam's love until it was no more.



From their bedroom window she could see herself standing on the grass in her bare feet, savouring its cold luxury. From the top of the huge fortifications she could stare southwards for miles, the flat land only ending when it disappeared under the rows of trees lingering on the horizon. A strong westerly wind blew by; she cast her mind out onto it, scattering her thoughts, thoughts that stabbed her mercilessly with their barbed questions about Chris and babies and their demands that she do something about her future, a future where there was nothing but flat fields and alone female figure heading away. As she walked into the wind she felt each razor word as they blew out of her thoughts and flew screaming into oblivion. She stopped on the steep slope at a point where she felt no one could see her, crouched down, wrapping her arms around her knees, then screamed at the trees that had gathered for safety far away at the edge of the world. She could see the wind of her voice racing over the water, ploughing across the fields, skimming the tops of the villages, as it flew over them. She could hear it howling as it wrapped itself around the branches, twisting and turning and crying its way back to haunt her. Her tears flooded down into the calm blue water below her feet, each drop making its way home through the reeds, drowning themselves in the welcoming darkness. She cried until she was thirsty, until her emotions were no more than dry and twisted stumps of trees lost in the desert; until all that was left of her was a cold and everlasting emptiness.

"I am such a fucking moron!" she whispered to herself as she dragged her dried out corpse back through the trees and up the garden into their bedroom. A tear threatened her cheek; she closed her eyes and rolled down the shutter.

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Chris had dozed off again, surfacing as the sound of the words 'fucking moron!' wormed and scratched their way into his brain. He lay perfectly still, trying to work out whether the words were part of the dream he was relieved to have escaped from, or had actually come out of Sam's mouth. Neither seemed likely: he hardly ever remembered dreams and Sam never swore, and almost never called anyone by anything more than their actual name. He understood Sam's attitude towards him, how it had changed because of that dreadful night when all was lost. And that was a night that few people - and thankfully none that lived across the channel, knew about.

A few weeks after that bloody night, he'd begun to have the curious feeling that he was being followed by something he could never quite see, something that remained beyond any kind of experience that would allow him to be able to define it. And because it remained beyond the realms of definition, it was also beyond being something he cared about, and so it slipped quietly out of his mind and life. Having decided there was nothing to do apart from ignore it, he got on with his life. But after several months this thing had blossomed into something more tangible. Nothing that he could put his hands on, nothing he could dissect and examine, nothing he could scrunch up into a tight ball and throw away. But it was there anyway, like a shadow following him around, day and night, tugging at his feet. And, having started life at home, it had then migrated to his office and had begun popping up in meetings: worst of all it sat behind him all the way home in the car, silently pointing out the many minor errors he made during the thirty minute drive.

One day a month or so ago he realised he could see it, well a sort of fuzzy outline, that randomly solidified into something approaching human form. It made its first appearance at the tail end of another drunken argument with Sam, who stalked off to bed leaving him alone in the sitting room watching the football. He'd been out drinking on his

own again, as he had been doing ever since his father had died. At first the shape was nothing more than a slight flickering out of the corner of his eye, a flickering that mutated into a full blown vibration that hovered just off the floor. This wasn't something he could see directly, something that had colour or substance. It was more like the haze that belly-dances its way out of hot tarmac road and sneaks off into the hedgerows as you drive through its shimmering form and on to your destination. Only a thousand times denser and oscillating at a far higher speed.

What really irritated him about it was the whispering.

At first he thought he was hearing music from somewhere else, the neighbour's garden perhaps, or a passing four-wheel drive jukebox, but he soon realised that, although distant and indistinct, the volume never really changed. It had a pattern too, beginning with a gentle buzzing sounds that ebbed and flowed, gradually building to a crescendo that pricked and punctured and scratched into him, before dying away to almost nothing. After a brief respite, it would start again, only stopping when he drowned it out with loud music or the TV or by drinking himself to sleep again.

In the last month or so the vibrations and whispers had amalgamated into something more solid, into a 'thing'. A thing with nicely balanced proportions that were familiar in some vague way. After a while he began to realise this thing had moulded itself into a person; a female and someone he knew: it was Sam. But why her when she was on the verge of leaving? Another puzzle he couldn't work out. Whatever it was, he wasn't going to let it drive him back to drinking. That ugly, dark and twisted chapter of his life was, like so many other things he didn't want to think about, buried.

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Having showered and dressed Sam and Chris found themselves reluctantly together in the kitchen with their long-time friends and hosts Walter and Ingrid Bloemen. The conversation was, thankfully, all about the bike ride and the course the route would take. The Bloemens had decided, as chief route designers, not to fix every last kilometre this year, instead offering the possibility of following a general direction west towards Zeeland. Walter had, mischievously, decided that he would add a further twist by not sharing the details of the route itself, only giving the name of the next stop, which could easily be forty or more kilometres away. Only Harrie, another of the group and someone who's knowledge of the region's history was encyclopaedic, knew anything about where they were going. His job was to regale their foreign guests with as many details of the places they visited as he could before their eyes glazed over and sleep claimed them.

"I think it's a good idea, and much more fun," said Chris brightly, "what about you Sam?" he asked, anxious to draw her back into the world, towards him.

Sam's head was back by the river but she forced herself to paddle back to the kitchen table, where she pretended to have been lost in the task of arranging marmalade on her toast. In the background, the clattering of coffee being made filled the silence.

"Oh, I'm flexible," she said after deciding the pause had been stretched to its limit.

"If everyone else's happy, then I'm happy," she lied cheerily enough, cloaking her real feelings in a layer of crumbs, the sweetness of the marmalade smothering her bitterness.

Chris looked at her across his coffee, investigating her eyes for signs that this morning's argument was just one lonely rain cloud on an otherwise sunny day.

"Well, I think that this year we can concentrate less on counting kilometres and do some things, as you would say, 'just for the hell of it.'" said Walter, splashing merrily through his guest's emotional puddles.

"Sometimes I think we forget that we can also just wander about, as you say, and take our time to explore some paths just to see where they go."

"Yes, totally agree," Chris left the story behind Sam's eyes alone and switched his mind onto Walter's idea.

"We sometimes don't see what's around us," he said, "I think concentrating on travelling instead of arriving would make a very pleasant change. I thought it also good to try and spend as much time riding next to the canals and the sea. The fields can be a little dull sometimes."

He was keen to get on with the cycling and didn't feel like talking too much either, given the tension between him and Sam, but they hadn't had much time to talk to their hosts the previous day because of their delayed flight into Eindhoven.

Sam had drifted further back in time and was in Stansted airport again. They were waiting for their temporarily-on-hold flight. Chris was nose-deep in a photography magazine. Sam was lost in a long series of dreams and prayers designed to cancel the flight altogether or to allow her to somehow magically escape back home alone, together with her already packed suitcase.

The air around them crackled with an announcement; it came with a Dutch accent.

"Ja, I think it's wonderful idea, I'd rather be cycling around the fields and canals than sitting all day on the beach," Ingrid said as she handed Sam a cup of tea. "If I remember correctly Sam, it was your suggestion to go to Zeeland wasn't it?"

"Was it?" she said, reluctantly allowing herself to be drawn back into the conversation, the kitchen and her marriage. She looked deep into her tea as she tried to leave the world behind. "What time will the others arrive?"

Her question was designed to start a conversation that the others could take over in while her mind took the scenic route into oblivion.

"An uur max I think, we'll let them have a little rest before we go, so there's no hurry." Ingrid leaned over the table towards Sam, slyly trying to bring her back to their kitchen, already alert to the unspoken conversation her guests were having.

"More tea Sam?"

"I think I'll finish packing then check my bike, actually," she said as she stood up to leave. "Thanks for breakfast," she said smiling to her hosts who ignored the fact that she seemed to have forgotten her husband was there.

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Sam had just finished preparing her things when Chris came into the room: she pushed past him and was out the door before he could speak.

"Going to check the bike, tyres looked a bit flat last night," she said over her shoulder as she hurried down the stairs.

Chris stood and watched her through the oscillating whispers, his brain shouting thoughts his heart was unwilling to hear.

"Just off to check my brakes, back in five minutes," she said as she sailed through the kitchen and into the garden where her bike was waiting. Walter and Ingrid smiled, but said nothing as she disappeared out the door.

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Sam hurtled over the cobbles, up the path that climbs up the side of the embankment, past the car park, then swung left past the big black windmill and along the path between a tiny harbour and the shipyard on her right. It was still too early for sightseers and the only locals were near the car park calling their dogs as they screamed around the grassy fortifications.

Within two minutes of leaving she dropped her bike to the ground and almost fell down the bank towards the river, towards her sanctuary.

She set the alarm on her phone, allowing herself ten minutes, then crouched down on the grass, still cold from the night air, and pushed herself back into a small hollow between some thick bushes, smiling as the branches stab into her ribs, "safe at last!" She wiggled her whole body in until only her feet were sticking out. From within the dark interior of her leafy refuge all she could see was the bank dropping down to the canal, the swaying reeds and the cold dark water as it rolls by. She couldn't be seen by anyone who isn't sat on a barge in the middle of the Maas. Bringing her knees up to her face, she wrapped her arms around her legs and checked her watch: nine minutes left.

A cool breeze scattered the long grass; Sam allows it to sneak off with her thoughts as she pulls her clothes off and dives into the endless water.

Down, down, down she plunges; the cold ripples through her naked body, her red hair flows out behind her, curling and swirling in the currents. She flicks her feet and in a few seconds is on the river bed. The mud is soft and inviting. She slips her hands into it pressing down as it sucks her arms under, twisting her around as it greedily drinks her in until her whole body is absorbed, until all her thoughts and emotions have been drowned or buried, until all that's left are the beautiful green eyes that stare up through the mud

and silt into the sky, through the clouds and out through the stratosphere, until she has all but lost herself.

A large barge passes overhead, the noise from its swirling propeller blades bubbling into her ears. Through the glass hull she can see the captain tapping his watch.

"Twee minuten," he mouths to her holding up his wrist, "two minutes," he repeats as his face turns into a clock.

She sees the barge's propellers clattering by and feels its weight pressing the water down onto her body as it lies under the mud.

A few seconds later the alarm on her phone beeps and vibrates through her hand up her arm and into her brain: she's back on land, dry, clothed. She checks her soul, it is clean, empty: it tingles and sparkles with the anticipation of life.

Two and a half minutes later she is back at the Bloemen's. Ingrid intercepts her as she pushes her bike around to the back of the house.

"Everything ok with you and your brakes Sam?" she wonders.

"Yes, brilliant, I'm raring to go; I'm going to start packing the panniers now."

The cold mud bath has cleansed every pore, her mind and her soul; she can feel life surging through her, her feet dance around uncontrollably inside her shoes, anxious to get pedalling.

"And if the rest of you aren't ready to go in five minutes, you'll have to catch me up!" She smiles and Ingrid loses the will to interrogate her guest any further.

## Day 2: Heusden to Willemstad

### (Signs are Lost)

The eight of them headed over the Maas on the N267 and turned off onto the N831 and left onto Hoofdstraat, planning to follow it down to Drongelen and the ferry back across the Maas. None of this was entirely necessary, but as Walter had decided they should ride a more spontaneous route, and that the beginning was a great place for such spontaneity to start.

"Going north instead of south west is an excellent way to begin," he had said to everyone as they climbed onto their bikes, "but maybe cutting back across the Maas on the ferry 11 kilometres later is a *little* bit mad." He smiled to himself as he lead the others along Burchtstraat and out of the town.

Chris and Sam had spread themselves out through the other riders, Sam towards the rear where she could keep an eye on Chris; she didn't want him suddenly appearing alongside her until she was ready to return that part of her universe. Swishing alongside her was, Esther, whose limitless happiness, Sam had discovered, was balanced by bouts of depression that could drown an entire family.

"So, have you made any life-changing decisions recently that I ought to know about?" Esther asked, knowing that asking was unnecessary as Sam always told her everything that had happened during the twelve months that they hadn't seen each other.

"Well yes, I did make 'the big decision,'" she whispered as the bikes swerved about, "but I'm afraid I chickened out when it came to the crunch."

"What do chickens have to do with it?"

"I'm mean when it came to jumping I couldn't jump."

"Ja, ok, well, jumping is a big step isn't it? And you're definitely sure that jumping is the right thing?" She didn't wait for Sam to answer. "When we first met you, you were so in love, and you'd been married for two years already."

Sam's eyes drifted left across the fields towards the Maas. Despite the blue sky it was still a bit hazy at ground level. Away in the distance she could see a huge barge moving down the river towards them.

"Yes, well, that was before we got the news, before Chris wandered off into his own world and shut the door on me." Sam slammed her own door on the rest of that story, a story she didn't want to discuss with anyone, ever.

"Tja, is it really that bad Sam? Do you not think that you are seeing it far worse than it is?"

"To be honest Essie, I've given up caring whether I'm right or wrong, I just want out." The barge ploughed through its foaming bow wave, its black hull impossibly low in the water.

"But is your marriage not worth saving? Remember, there was a time when you two were stuck together at the hips and your whole future was going to be one long adventure, together."

"That seems like a lifetime ago, I'm not sure I see any excitement in our future, let alone adventure. He's been so useless since, well, you know..." She paused, reluctant to fall into that nightmare again and to start peeling off the layers of their shattered marriage. He says nothing to me about anything that matters between us, then wonders why I get cross with him." Sam deliberately hid the details again: she wasn't in the mood for digging into the grave of their relationship. Even so, she wondered how long she could skate around the issues and not fall through the ice.

She watched the barge as it passed, squinting at the lone figure in the cabin, wondering how he'd get the little car off the back when he next stopped. She watched the fluttering red, white and blue flag fluttering and cracking over the boiling wake.

"Cows!" a voice warned from the front to a counterpoint of bicycle bells.

As they slowed and bunched Sam found herself veering left to avoid Roger, who'd braked too hard and accidentally inserted himself between her and Esther.

"Sorry, but I had to separate you two otherwise Essie would keep you for herself for the next forty kilometres. Roger slowed until all three riders were level.

"You know Esther, you're a lovely woman but you always want all the sweets in the box."

Both women knew that Roger had a crush on Sam: Roger had no idea that they both knew, even less that it was obvious to anyone who cared to see. He was jealous of their closeness and spent most of the time they all normally spent cycling together in the summer plotting ways of getting her on his own. So far he'd only been successful once or twice, but hadn't lasted long enough for him to say or do anything that would have offended Sam, mainly because she saw it coming and steered him into safer waters. The incident at the party was a different kettle of fish, but Sam being Sam had glossed over it and it was a small, dark secret that only the two of them knew about.

"Tell me Sam, what have you been doing for the last year or so, and more importantly, why don't you move out here full time. You know you love it."

Roger was absolutely right, she loved her holidays here, the people, the water, she could lose herself in both, but she wasn't sure she could make the leap to living abroad full time. And all three of them knew that he hoped that Sam's love of the Netherlands would

translate into a lust for him: it was only Roger refused to believe the latter would never happen.

"Roger, as much as I like it here, I'm pretty much an English rose at heart, and anyway it'd be easier to climb mount Everest than learn Dutch well enough to get a job."

"Ja, ja, but we both know dat is niet waar, simply not true," he argued back, "I hear you in the shops, you do very well. A few proper lessons and we'd soon make a Dutch Tulip out of you!"

"Well it's nice of you to say so but..."

"But nothing, we all of us here know all sorts of people in business or in education, where you could work the whole day long in the English, no problem."

Roger's determination to override her arguments was a new thing, and unexpected twist to a story that was already pretty screwed up: Sam hadn't seen it coming and didn't need it now, especially as she was still sparkly from this morning's cleansing.

Esther rode in to head Roger off.

"Don't listen to him, he's got a new job in the tourist office," she said and swerved towards him, squeezing him back out of the conversation. Roger wobbled off to his left forcing Sam out onto the grass: she braked and fell in behind him as they rattled over a cow grid. Esther slipped back to join her, waving her hand at Sam, slowing her down as the others sped up again.

"Listen, I know what's going through Roger's mind, and I can see why he likes you. But I'm always wondering why he isn't satisfied with Moniek, she's such a lovely person."

"Yes, why's he like that, and why does he keep chasing me?"

"Well you're a pretty face for a start. You're foreign, and therefore 'exotic', but who knows why he's not satisfied at home: it's not the first time he's chased after someone."

"Really, God, what happened? Did Moniek find out?" Sam's surprise chased away her amusement at being thought exotic. But she wasn't really surprised; she already knew what Roger was capable of.

"Oh, I don't really know, I was away at the time and when I was back all was normal again. I hadn't see them for a month or so. All I can say is that there was definitely some tension between them, and Roger was being more attentive than was, perhaps, normal for him."

"Poor Moniek, did you ever speak to her about it?"

"No, I was too late really, and she's not a person who shouts her business off the roof."

Sam was also someone not given to rooftop shouting either, preferring to drag her shadows deep into her internal world, where she was in control; where she rolled the pain, the confusion, the disappointment up into tight little balls of negative energy that she spat out towards the sun where they sparked and burned like fireworks.

"Like me then, I suppose," she said after a short pause. "Sometimes it's just better to bottle it all up, distil it down to its essence and cry it all away."

"You may be right, but I always think it's better to talk than to let it grow inside you like a baby devil feeding off your soul."

Esther sounded confident, convinced, but both women knew how deep the holes they could fall into were. Sam started pondering the idea of being eaten alive from the inside by a gestating devil foetus, but quickly gave up. She'd been through enough of those ravenous fiends in real life.

"Mmm, perhaps you're right," she said, reaching for her water bottle."

The whispering of the cool air filled the silence as she watched a small herd of Friesians mowing the grass by the edge of the canal. Everywhere she looked orderly rows of trees lined the borders of the orderly fields. Glancing up through the bikes and riders she saw Chris the near the front with Moniek. A thought knifed into her.

"God, you don't think Moniek would think that I was trying to interfere with their marriage do you?"

"Nee, absolutely not. She's far too smart to think you'd do anything to encourage him. If she notices, she'll know who's to blame, don't you worry."

As the bikes ploughed through the tiny village of Drongelen Chris was tucked in behind Walter chatting to Moniek. They'd been catching up on nearly twenty four months worth of news, an exchange that had sliced back and forth as each new story from one sparked the birth of a new tale in the other. Nothing had been said about Roger's escapades, but Chris, who knew that there was always something afoot with her husband, knew now wasn't the time to mention them. Too many ears too close together, too much chance of half started and never finished conversations; of feelings left high and dry on the dyke. And anyway, it wasn't really his business – it was up to Moniek to start that ball rolling. Safer that way too, he knew opening up someone else's can of worms could easily end up opening your own.

They continued through the village then turned right into Kruisstraat and headed up the Waarederweg, the path paralleling the Maas that was high enough above it to allow those riding on it look westwards along it for several kilometres. Abandoning the Maas for a few kilometres they pedalled along Meeuwensedijk through a ribbon of houses and farm buildings skirted by trees that defined where home ended and work began; trees that gathered in knots in small fields populated with Shetland ponies, goats and sheep. At the

junction at the end they rolled left into Zuiderbroekesdijk, and the last kilometre before the ferry.

They crossed the narrow bridge over the Noorderafwateringskanaal and rolled down to the concrete slope that disappeared into the Maas. The ferry was halfway to the other side when they arrived. For the first time since they had left they were able to gather as a group. Jumping off their bikes they gathered on the concrete that sloped down into the water and watched the yellow ferry making its leisurely way across to the other side. Bottles of water and sandwiches appeared from Ingrid's panniers.

"Alstublieft" she said, handing them around: she may no longer be in her kitchen, but she was still the host.

Roger circled the pack trying to get closer to Sam but was thwarted by both Esther and Chris who stood guard on her in the centre. Esther's husband Harrie stood in front of them with his back towards the ferry.

"Zo, how are your legs after the first fifteen kilometres? Or have you been practising this time?"

Harrie smiled as he quizzed them, he knew that they'd have been out on their bikes as often as they could. But he also knew that the Netherlands had more than twice as many cycle paths as the UK, which, as he pointed out, "Isn't bad for a country that's less than half the size."

"That's as maybe," Chris countered with a smile, "but British cyclists just use the roads, like normal nations do."

"Ja, ja, but that is very dangerous, too many cars, too many fast cars and *big* lorries also."

Harrie teased them both, knowing full well that four-wheeled road users were just part of the landscape as far as cycling in the UK was concerned.

"What you always forget Harrie, though it gives me no real pleasure to remind you," Chris' smile undermining his sincerity, "is the amount of Dutch people who end up in the canals – especially in the winter. How many drowned this year?"

Harrie feigned shock and horror at the thought of his countrymen perishing in the icy canals, but he had to admit it was true.

"Ja, ok, dat is true, we may not have to spend time dodging cars and lorries, but you must steer a safe and certain course between the canals. They're not, as you say, very user-friendly for the unwary or too-rapid cyclist."

At the edge of the group Moniek was speaking quietly to Roger while Walter and Ingrid studied a map they were careful to make sure the others couldn't see. Walter folded it away as the ferry returned, scrapping onto the concrete behind them. As soon as the barriers opened they pushed their bikes onboard, followed by a couple of cars and four club cyclists, their hi-tech racers gleaming in the sun. Chris and Sam looked at them silently, admiring the bikes and the luxury of being able to ride them so easily.

"Ja, beautiful aren't they?" Harrie asked. "A bit more expensive than my race fiets, I think."

"Indeed," Chris replied, "I'd love to be able to get out here on one of those instead of chugging along on one of these heavy old things."

He gestured towards their pile of touring bikes, each stacked to the gunnels with bags, each weighing almost as much as their riders.

"Tja, then you should move over here, then you could spend every weekend flying through the fields and the polders."

"God you haven't got a job with the tourist board too have you?" laughed Sam.

Chris and Harrie looked at her curiously, "And?" their eyes asked.

"I've already had Roger suggesting the same thing."

"Oh?, said Harrie in that curiously Dutch way of expressing surprise while suggesting they already knew about it and were therefore not surprised at all. "Well you ought to think about it – after all, you've been coming here at least once a year for nearly a decade, haven't you? No one keeps returning back somewhere without a good reason. I can't believe it's just the cycling holidays – so it must be the country, its people, no?"

"Yes," said Chris quickly, a touch frazzled at finding out about Roger, whom he'd suspected had a thing for Sam, you could see it in his eyes he thought, "yes, that's right, definitely. And it's not like we haven't thought about it, but the time's not right now," he said, anxiously shutting the door on that line of thinking. His answer was steered by his subconscious in the direction of Sam's oscillating hologram. Sam and Chris both felt the blinding flash of over-exposed emotions and turned away to fuss over their bikes.

"You don't have any other commitments do you?" said Harrie, oblivious to the storm he'd caused as he jabbed his thinking unconsciously into the heart of their problem, the reason why their marriage had twisted so far out of shape; oblivious to the signal the turned backs were giving.

The continued checking and re-checking already firmly fixed straps, locks and buckles, each wondering how much of their stock answer they have to stutter out. But Harrie came to their rescue, picking up on the timing issue.

"Ah, ja, but when *is* it the right time?" he asked, fiddling with the straps on his panniers. Chris straightened up and looked towards the shore.

"Well not now; now it's time for us to get off the ferry and back on the road," said Walter as the barriers began opening. Relief flooded through the unhappy couple.

They were now back on the same side of the Maas as their starting point, and slightly less than twenty kilometres further to the west.

"Hey Walter, that was a long ride to nowhere," said Moniek, "And now?"

"Now we go on a bit of a wander, starting on the Veerweg, then right onto the Overdiepskade just before we get to the Oude Maas, then follow that until we see some boats, that's all I have to say on the matter."

"Boats you say?" Roger wondered, "well, we don't see too many of those around here do we?"

A stream of quiet laughter leaked out of the group.

"So, next stop the sea then?" Sam suggested. "Good job I packed plenty of chocolate." She smiled to herself as they all bumped and wobbled off the metal deck, up the concrete slope and out onto the road.

As they set off again Sam and Chris slotted in behind Walter and Ingrid, who took the lead, slowly following the in the wake of four racing cyclists who were already half way around the first bend 100 metres away. As the Maas disappeared into the trees lining the road Moniek and Roger, who were bringing up the rear slowed as she whispered her angry thoughts at him.

"Why do you make it so obvious Roger?"

Roger look away past the trees and across the fields that stretched off into the distance, wishing he was nearer the horizon himself. Whatever he felt about Moniek, he knew she was someone who wouldn't easily forgive an indiscretion – especially one that

could be seen as far away as Amsterdam. He felt inclined to defend himself but that would be as pointless as trying to stop an avalanche.

As the group gathered speed they cycled past a lonely memorial to a Canadian pilot shot down during WWII. Harrie pointed it out with more than a little sadness, telling Sam and Chris that it was one of many that litter the Dutch countryside. Moniek didn't notice, she was still busy with Roger.

"Don't bother trying to pretend you weren't. Jesus, we're not even one morning into the trip and already you're humiliating me! And how the hell do you think she feels about it, eh?" She spat the words out and would have kicked him if it wouldn't have sent her wobbling off across the road. Roger kept his eyes stuck to the tarmac and his bike running along the edge of the dotted white lines that marked out the cycle lane. He kept his mouth shut and waited for the glacier of her anger to finish scouring his psyche.

"Listen you bloody idiot, if you flirt with her again you'll be in trouble – and if I even *think* you've laid a hand on her during this trip..." she paused to let him begin to image the horrors that would await such an error, "...because if you do you'll need your tent for longer than this trip – do I make myself clear!?"

She fired her frozen warning shots directly into his soul and sped off to the front, leaving Roger to ponder how to best skate over the ice of their relationship for the next week without making the frozen depths that surrounded them obvious to anyone else.

"Hey Walter, you'd better have somewhere good in mind for lunch, and I don't mean a chip van on the side of the road," said Moniek as she caught up with him.

She'd pulled up just behind Walter and Ingrid and alongside Chris, who moved to his right and braked gently to stop himself crowding Sam out onto the grass. The bikes behind

him reshuffled themselves as they took avoiding action, dropping back and returning Roger, who'd detached himself from the rest, to the fold.

"That's it Chris, ladies first!" Moniek's good humour disguised her true feelings, and her intentions, as she pretended that checkmating him was nothing more than accidental.

"Whoops!" she looked across at Sam and smiled.

"Whoops indeed!" she laughed back.

"I've been talking to Roger," she said, cutting straight to the chase.

"That's nice," Sam felt her cheeks reddening at Moniek's straightforward manner.

"He won't be bothering you again, and if he does, let me know ok?"

Sam laughed, she felt slightly ashamed, as if she was the one with something to feel guilty about.

"Honestly, there's no need, it was just touch of over-enthusiasm that's all."

"Ja, bedankt, but we both know that's not true. And to tell you the truth, I've had enough of his behaviour."

Her mind ran through the list of previous incidences: true this one was very minor, but it was the beginning of the end for her, the last few inches of a door being closed on something she had almost no control over.

"I've told him before what will happen if he doesn't stop, and I am not going to let him ruin *our* relationship."

She smiled across at Sam who smiled shyly back, not really sure what Moniek meant by 'our relationship'. There was an undercurrent that buffeted her subconscious but refused to reveal itself. She liked Moniek, but sometimes she didn't feel she could show her an honest face. Not because she didn't like her, but because she felt there was more to Moniek than she wanted to discover. And perhaps something more to herself that was

too difficult, too challenging, to think about. Whatever it was could wait – forever hopefully.

She was suddenly struck by the implications of Moniek's thinking, that if Roger continued his advances towards her, then she would be a pivotal point in their relationship ending. Panic set in, her pedals turned faster.

"Really, it wasn't anything Moniek. Certainly nothing that should," she hesitated, searching for a softer way of saying it, not wanting to use the words that surrounded so much of the carcass of her own marriage, "uh, interfere with your relationship."

"Interfere my arse!" Moniek said bitterly.

"Look, don't worry about it. He's been burning his fire over other women for the last five years, now I'm going to take that fire and throw it in the canal, put it out once and for ever."

She paused as they swerved away from each other for a few seconds.

"You just happen to find yourself at that point in our life, it's not your fault what he does. Tja, but I'm not surprised he's been on to you already; he's such a fool..."

Her voice trailed away into sadness as she lost herself in the road whizzing past under their wheels, their bright spokes blurring and glittering in the sun.

It was a beautiful day, sunny, warm – even the wind that normally slices across the flat fields was obliging unruffled today. Sam stared across the furrows left in the earth by tractor wheels, following them up to the edges of the tiny white paths whose only traffic was farm machinery, rooks and ravens. She loved it all. Moniek's eyes saw the lonely trees and ramshackle buildings that teetered on the edge of disintegration and destruction; the large clouds constantly rolling and reforming like terrifying childhood monsters climbing and billowing darkly towards her.

"I think to myself, what have I done, what happened that made him change? Am I really so bad?"

She threw the question over towards Sam and watched a few of the dotted white lines falling under her wheels, blurring into the past, disappearing behind her, taking Roger with them.

"But I don't want you to be mixed up in the mess Sam. I like you and when the stink of this shit is gone, I want us still to be friends. So you have to know that, and you have to know that I do not hold you responsible for anything Roger chooses to do, *de sukkel*."

There it is again," Sam thought, "that curious and slightly thrilling feeling, and what did Moniek mean by 'like'? Or am I just reading too much into it?" She stared at Ingrid's back wheel, her brain clicking around with it. "It doesn't feel that way." Her mind wandered over the possibility that had sneaked into her mind, a feeling that shimmered into a reality of its own accord and without her agreement. Her cogs whirred as the pieces she didn't want to acknowledge slipped into place. "A relationship with another woman?"

"*Fietsen – bikes!*" shouted a voice from behind: everyone automatically moved to the right as another squad of racing bikes flew past, overtaking them as if they were as immobile as the trees lining the road.

Chris watched the sun and wind burnt faces as they sped past and shrank away to nothing, oblivious to the meandering tourists now that the path was clear. He wondered why anyone would want to cycle so much and never really see anywhere, to be so focussed on the road and speed alone.

"You don't look like you wished you were with them," said Harrie. "They'll do half our whole tour in a morning you know."

"God Harrie, no! I'd much rather be sat here relaxing and enjoying the view and a pleasant conversation."

"Ah ja, but if you could do both, I mean a cycle tour and racing?"

"No, still not interested. I'm sure they're having fun, but for me cycling is either about getting from A to B, or it's about being on holiday – either way I want to enjoy it. I *love* their bikes, but look at their faces, you can't tell me *they're* enjoying themselves. It looks more like a battle for life than fun."

"*Tja*, but no. You have to get into their way of thinking," Harrie was someone who liked speed work. "All it is, is a different way of thinking, two different goals if you like. And remember, they don't have to see the countryside as they go by, they see that every day of course, so their goal is to go somewhere far away as quickly as they can, a lot of kilometres in as few minutes as possible, there's a great deal of satisfaction in doing that you know."

Chris still wasn't buying it. "Killing yourself for pleasure you mean?"

"In the achievement of pushing yourself and finding out that you can do it, going beyond the limits of what you think your brain and body can do."

"Ah yes," said Chris, "the old 'I climb mountains because they're there' argument. Well you may be right, but I don't count being exhausted and covered in sweat as one of life's little pleasures."

"Life's little pleasures?" he thought to himself as fragments of him and Sam naked together tumbled through his brain.

"No, not if you put it like that, but that soon goes. Well, maybe it is a bit pointless in some respects, but I do it regularly and I *love* it! Yes, it's tiring, but once I'm over that, then I feel very pleased that I went out and did it, despite sometimes not wanting to. And you

have to remember that many of these riders are doing it as a sport, so many times they will be on training rides."

He slowed down, talking of racing had started a minor adrenalin rush in him which had seeped out of his body and swirled around and ensnared Chris as well. Both were nudging up behind Sam and Moniek. Harrie laughed.

"Heh, look, I only have to talk to you about racing Chris and you speed up – maybe you're really a racer at heart!"

"I don't think so," laughed Chris, "And if I was, the race is over now! Still, I wouldn't mind one of those nice new racers, they make my bike look 100 years old."

As the words lost themselves in the wind he realised he was looking at Sam's back. Something stabbed him gently in the heart: he didn't want to think of Sam and him and the word 'over' in the same sentence.

His sadness was interrupted by Harrie's voice.

"Ships ahoy!"

"*Ja ja*," Walter called over his shoulder, "I've seen them!"

A few seconds later everyone was crunching down through their gears as they rolled up a sudden incline in the road that took them over a bridge and onto the Polanenweg. After coasting along on the flat road for so long, the sudden burst of effort needed caught Sam and Chris out. They slowed dramatically causing those behind to scatter across the empty road, filling the air with warnings and Delft-blue swearing.

"*Let op!*" "*Godverdomme!*" Shouted Harrie and Roger as everyone did their best to avoid each other. Brakes squealed and they all came to a standstill at the beginning of the bridge. Walter, who'd remained out of harm's way at the front span around to see what had happened. Harrie was leaning over his bike checking the back wheel.

"Harrie, is everything alright?"

"*Jahoor*, it's all ok."

"*Goed*. Now everyone, as we've all decided to stop for a rest, let's take some photos to give us something to look at when we're too old to ride anymore."

"I thought you Dutchies were buried on your bikes," Sam said cheerily to him.

"Only the ones that fall into the canals," he laughed back.

"Right now, everyone line up against the barrier."

"Look out Moniek," said Esther, who'd been squashed against the rails as everyone manoeuvred themselves into the photos. "I want to stand behind you, not in the canal."

"Oops! Sorry," said Moniek as Esther slipped past her to stand by Harrie.

Moniek had inserted herself between Sam and Chris and put her arms around both. She gave Sam a gentle squeeze that raised her eyebrows just as Walter pressed the shutter. At the click of the shutter, Sam sprang sideways, anxious to escape the compromising fingers before anyone noticed. Behind them rows of orderly yachts bobbed in their moorings, the wind whipping and twanging their ropes and rigging. Everyone turned to lean over the rails and look at the rows of boats lined up along the edge of the canal about 100 yards away.

"Next time we come we're travelling on one of those Walter!" said Chris, waving his arm down towards them. "Bugger this cycling lark."

"*Ja*, maybe you can sail over in your yacht and we can meet you in Heusden if you like," replied Walter as he finished packing his camera away. "It can sleep eight I believe?"

"Oh at least," Chris said with a smile as he jumped back in the saddle, "I'll check with the captain next time I'm on board."

They shot down the steep drop on other side of the bridge and headed off in the general direction of the A59 and Waspik. As the motorway came into view at the end of the Polanenweg, they peeled off to the right, past the haven then turning sharp right into a hamlet consisting of warehouses, a few homes and many boats standing in gardens or filling the little harbour that bulged out of the canal and into the fields.

"This is a romantic route Walter, I'm in love with the warehouses," said Roger as he caught up with the leaders. "No wonder you won't tell us where we going..."

"*Nee*, perhaps not, but I have got a surprise, a secret place even you don't know about."

"*Echt waar?*"

"Yes, *really*."

"Look out everyone," shouted Walter over his shoulder, "we have to go left just up ahead."

Everyone looked up and to the left: all they could see was a line of warehouses and articulated lorries.

"Still not looking good Walt," said Roger. "Ingrid, does he always lie like this? And with guests also?"

"Ha ha, ja, all the time, but I have faith in him, and so far that's worked," she shouted back across Walter as he slowed and started moving to the left.

"OK, everyone, get ready to turn light into the Dijkeindenweg... here!"

They all leaned left and slipped across into what looked like a road that would take them around the back of the warehouses.

"Looking good so far," shouted Chris from near the back.

Walter said nothing but sped up, stretching the complaints out until they were too thin to hear any more. The road turned left, Walter stayed right and disappeared into the trees, his tyres scratching into the gravel path and spitting stones out behind them, the pebbles clicking on the metal wheels as they ricocheted away into the grass.

"I hope that this is worth all the extra effort Walter," shouted Harrie. Walter said nothing, increasing his speed by way of reply.

At the end of the path he swerved right and headed for the trees, seeing if his sudden burst of speed would shake off the complainers. The others were not far behind but Harrie and Roger were closing in fast. He accelerated once again, zipping along the narrow track between the trees, then disappeared into them as he turned sharp left.

By the time the others had caught up, he'd parked his bike and was walking across the open grass towards the small lake hidden among a cluster of trees doing their best to block the noise from the nearby motorway.

"Snel, get a move on!" he shouted as the rest of the group slowly dismounted and reluctantly wandered over to where he was standing.

"The Zandput," he said proudly as he swung his arm around as if introducing someone at the royal court.

"Literally, the sand pit," he explained his non-plussed guests, who were further confused by the almost entire absence of sand.

"Well, you certainly have discovered a little treasure here Walter," said Harrie as he filed it away his mental database under 'places of interest: lakes: secreted'.

"Wow, this is nice," said Chris glancing around the great square patch of water.

"Peaceful too, if you can ignore the cars on the motorway."

"Nice beach," said Sam as she crouched down on the sliver of sand Walter was waiting on.

"Are there fish in it?" she asked as she dug her fingers into it and scrunched up a palmful.

She wondered if it would be possible to escape here from Heusden if things got too bad next year, then immediately reminded herself that there would be no next year.

"Naturally," he said, "and if you come here nice and early you can often see a, how do you say? Oh yes, a heron, a big grey heron, fishing along the far edge, up there to the right," he pointed to the bank on the far side.

"Really?" she asked, her mind already beginning to wander out in the dark water, her ripples shaking the clouds and sky into life.

The voices around her faded as her ears filled with cold blue water, their words caught up the bubbles that funnelled up from her nose to explode silently above her into a drier world; a world not of her choosing.

She rolled over onto her back and kicked away from the edge, watching the others shimmering as they disappeared. Then all she could see was the magnifying water and the sun dashing its sparkling children off the surface. She stopped kicking and began sinking, her legs and arms outstretched, spinning slowly towards the bottom. She rolled again and kicked downwards towards the bottom. Calmness enveloped her: the stain of Roger's unwanted advances was washed away, the chattering confusion her conversations with Moniek fell silent. The water, cleansing, calming; calling her home.

She knew she could never drown, it was her element, her beginning. She wafted her tail fin left and right and sped towards the far edge. Coming up from the depths she could see someone already standing on the bank, motionless, waiting. A tall, slim figure in a grey

suit bent its neck slowly towards her, she watched its head distorting through the water's rippling surface – too late! She saw the heron's beak pierce the water, spiking down towards her.

"...is its story up to now. Ok, time to move on." Walter's voice cut through her reverie returning her to the safety of the water's sandy edge, the others and reality.

"Where to now?" asked Chris as he stared down at Sam, wondering where the faraway look in her eyes had taken her.

"First to Ramsdonkveer, then to the haven at Drimmelen and lunch."

"Great, will we be seeing Darth Vader?" asked Harrie, who quietly delighted in the surreality of normality. "He's always up to his neck in it," he laughed by way of explanation as Sam and Chris tried not to exchange puzzled glances.

"Ja," said Walter, "and the old fort, but we won't be stopping. The haven is still nearly 20 kilometres and I'm getting hungry."

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The kilometres rolled up as they swished down the narrow roads between the long straight fields. Stands of corn waved lazily from the edges of channels that surrounded them, imprisoning them like cheerful welcoming Triffids. Cornflowers, poppies, buttercups and other brightly coloured flowers of all kinds sparkled from the grassy verges; above them, the screams of seagulls ripped holes in the otherwise silent sky.

The empty roads took them back towards the Maas behind a dyke until Walter and Ingrid led them to the right across a cattle grid and onto a narrow path along the grassy top.

"Watch out for the sheep," Walter warned as their tyres squished a path through a carpet of fresh green droppings.

Sheep stood scattered around the dyke or lay in small groups idly chewing the grass and staring across the Maas, unable to decide whether it really was greener on the other side. They littered the path and eyed the riders up as they cruised by but didn't move: despite the phalanx of metal and people heading towards them, they feared no one, gave no ground. A couple of bouts of emergency braking later everyone vibrated across another cattle grid and back down on to the road.

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"Careful you two," Harrie kindly advised Sam and Chris as they rode through the concrete pillars supporting the A27 several metres above, "You're going to have a *close encounter* when we get around the corner."

"What *are* you going on about?" asked Chris whose mind had been preoccupied with wondering what how the annoyingly fuzzy thing had tracked him down and now seemed to be holidaying with him.

Harrie smiled as they emerged from the concrete forest.

"Look to the right after we go around this next bend. You tell me if you can't see Darth Vader!" Sam and Chris exchanged glances across the ice, then looked to the right. Chris saw it first.

"Hilarious, that's him all right!"

Sam wondered what the hell they were going on about: all she saw was the empty buildings of the old Louwman car museum.

In front of her Chris and Harrie were laughing and waiving, obviously engrossed in a conversation that was way beyond her knowledge, and interest, of science fiction films. A front tyre slowly came into vision on her left, it was Esther.

"Hello Essie, are you also a fan of science fiction films?"

"God no! I have taste and intelligence..." she let the rest of the insult hang on the breeze. "I take it you're not then?"

Sam laughed and remembered seeing Chris's small collection of sci-fi models for the first time. They'd both started university at the same time and had met at a fresher's party. The attraction was immediate and deep.

"No, far from it. Chris's always been into such things though, but that sort of tailed off after we met." She realised the implications of her words, remembering happier and more physical times together, and felt the red on her cheeks deepening.

"Well, whatever you did," said Esther, "turning him away from that sort of fixation can only be a good thing."

Sam nodded and remembered how much fun they'd had weaning and winking each other out of the private worlds both inhabited for much of their teenage lives.

"The joke is that the round white building with the big, black windows is Darth Vader, well the top of his head anyway, the rest is buried underground." Esther's matter of fact explanation putting out Sam's fires before they had chance to spark.

"It's not even accurate, let alone funny," she went on, "Vader always wore a black helmet, not a white one."

Sam answered by changing the subject. "Where's this fort then? Harrie gave me the impression that it was in the town."

"Well, not really, it was on the edge a hundred years ago, but the town has grown and now it's surrounded by houses and industrial terrain, you know factories, industry."

"But we'll be there in a few minutes and you can see it yourself. It's not much to look at now, it's, how you say, decrepit?"

"Ah, derelict I think you mean."

"Ja, dat is it, derelict. It's just round the corner here on the right."

The bikes followed the path slowly round to the left so that they could see the low brick building that had once been part of the town's fortifications. There was nothing much to see from the outside. It was low and heavy, its angled sides built to frustrate frontal assaults and the small, arched windows that looked up and down the Maasdijk as it curved past offered no way in – assuming you could get over the moat that surrounded almost the entire building.

"And there it is, gone, just like Chris and..." Sam stopped herself from going down that road; she clung instead to the warm afterglow of her trip to the depths of the Zandput. She trailed everyone around to the right, over the Burgsebrug, and down the other side into Geertruidenberg. They followed the A623 over a canal that ran almost due north back to the Maas for a few kilometres, then doubled back along the smaller Brugseweg down to the canal. Roger wondered out loud how much more Walter's mysterious route would involve going backwards.

"This is a tour of the water, so we cycle by it as much as possible, even if it does add a few more kilometres," he answered. "Are you worried you haven't enough kilometres in your legs now then? Getting too old for such things Roger?" he smiled.

"Any time you feel like a race let me know," Roger offered back and sped off down towards the path that ran alongside the canal.

The path ran parallel with the canal that lay a few metres below them on their right. There was just enough room for two bikes to be side by side but oncoming dog walkers and other cyclists forced them into single file. An enormous black barge chugged slowly through the water towards them. Where the canal rejoined the Maas they stopped and

got off to walk through a gate, then remounted and headed around the boat yards and marinas and up to the harbour.

"We'll park the bikes behind the cafe over there," said Walter pointing towards a path a between a row of buildings, "we can sit outside watch the river and the boats as we eat." The others murmured their approval as he led them off to lunch.

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After lunch and a stroll around the water's edge, the group mounted up and headed out through the village of Oude Drimmelen, along the Ruilverkavel Weg, then right onto the Koekoeweg and back into the countryside. The road ran along and below a dyke but Walter soon had everyone cycling along the top of it. From there they could see the Maas, as it merged with its many other branches and widened out into the many little islands that made up the south west end of the Biesbosch national park.

Walter had slipped back in the order until both Sam and Chris were in front of him. "Can you two see that over there, those little islands out in the middle?" he asked them, knowing they could hardly see him let alone where he was pointing.

"Yes, sort of, why?" asked Chris.

"That's where we're going."

"Not today I hope," laughed Sam, "I haven't brought my boat!"

"Very funny, but no, we'll not need a boat. We'll cross back on a very fine brugge in a week or so's time."

"Ok then, where are we off to now – assuming you're allowed to tell us?"

"Oh a beautiful fortress town of, well I can't tell you that of course, but it's about another 35 kilometres."

"Is it similar to Heusden?" asked Chris.

"Similar, with all the fortifications and water, built on the river with a small harbour – very beautiful, but an entirely different shape. I won't say much more now as Harrie will be annoyed if I steal his thunder and tell you all about it. But it's fascinating, almost the entire history of the Netherlands in one small but very pretty box."

"Mmm, sounds intriguing," said Chris thoughtfully as he avoided a sheep that stared inquisitively at him as he went past; its letter-box eyes giving nothing away.

A few kilometres later the Moerdijkbruggen came into view. Sam immediately wanted to cross it to shorten the trip and escape home. "Hey Walter, is that the bridge we'll crossing over on?" she shouted up their leader who was returned to the front.

"No," he shouted back, rolling over to the left of the road and slowing down.

"That's the A16, which goes North to Rotterdam and south to Breda and Antwerp."

"Oh, Antwerp, now there's a beautiful city," she said enthusiastically.

"That's right; didn't you and Chris go there a few years ago?"

Sam didn't want to remember going to Antwerp with Chris – it was a happy memory: a bloody awful happy memory that made her realise how bloody awful the present was. It was a memory that jumped with joy when all she wanted to do was jump off of this shitty little ledge and into a bright new tomorrow. And she knew Walter wasn't going to let that sliver of happiness slip away without comment: she had to act fast before he dragged her and Chris into a conversation neither wanted.

"Yes, it was fabulous," she said, carefully avoiding any direct references to her or Chris, "Wasn't my grandfather there before he liberated Holland?"

She knew she was wrong, but didn't know if Walter would notice that her mistake was deliberate. If he did, he didn't let on.

"Nee, nee, he went to Belgium *afterwards*. Tja Sam, I'm surprised you don't remember these things better."

The cyclists entered a short tunnel that echoed with the traffic rumbling along on the A16 overhead.

Sam wasn't sure if he really meant that, or whether he was testing her: either way, she wasn't going to ask. Instead, she took the chance to drag the centre of the conversation even further away from her and Chris.

"Oh yes, sorry – I think you probably know more about him than I do, he was always a bit of a stranger to his grandchildren."

"Doesn't your father talk about him?" Walter enquired.

"Not really, and not for a long time."

"Dat is, indeed, a pity."

"Yes, indeed, but I'm not sure he told my father very much either. Some veterans wanted to leave the war behind once it was over."

"Ja, ours was a very different experience of course. But that's all in the past now, thankfully."

The open fields gave way to farm buildings and small industrial units, funnelling them into the village of Moerdijk. Sam and Chris silently imagined the countryside littered and scarred with the nazi war machine, wondering how awful life must have been for the Dutch as the fascist boot was planted very firmly in their fields and homes. Walter returned to the role of pathfinder again.

"Sorry, I have now to lead us through the village. We can talk more about your grandfather later if you like."

"Yes, no worries," she said, happy the diversion had worked.

Before Chris could say anything she braked and fell back towards Harrie and Esther who were riding behind her.

"Hey Harrie, Walter said you could tell us something about where we're going." She immediately realised that half of the 'we' was just in front, and listening. She saw Chris's brake blocks squeezing the metal rim and kicked herself for being so careless. But on the village road there wasn't enough room for four abreast and Esther sped up to catch Chris before he joined the group.

"Oh, where are we going then?"

"No idea, all Walter said was that it was like Heusden, that's all."

"Well there's much to tell," Harrie began, "it has a long and glorious history: people have been in the area for about 6,500 years, and de Duitsers, the Germans, were there for most of the war."

"Really!?" Sam asked, enthusiastically, then immediately told herself off for being so insensitive about something – the invasion and occupation - that had brought so much misery and suffering to the Dutch. If Harrie had been affected by Sam's faux pas he didn't show it.

"Ja, really. And they left something behind for us to enjoy."

"Gosh, what was that then?"

"Tja, well not much really, I'll tell you more about it tonight at dinner. And tomorrow we'll all be going to the museum and for a nice walk around the vesting, so you will see what the defenders and the attackers have done for the town."

"Ok then, sounds like dinner's going to be fascinating."

"Why else would I be invited onto one of these trips?" Harrie asked, "If not to make sure they are fascinating?"

"Ha ha, yes, why else?" Sam laughed. "Um, what's a 'vesting?'"

"Oh, dat is what we call the fortifications around places like Willemstad and Heusden. The Netherland has dozens of them, really beautiful but you can only see how beautiful from the air."

A few minutes later they exchanged the village for the fields and eventually found themselves whizzing along the Zuidelijke Randweg, the edge of a huge industrial area dominated by a massive oil refinery. The whole area was colonized by networks of tiny drainage canals and rusting railway lines where wagons stood tethered together among the weeds that had grown up between their wheels. The cycle path ran in a dead straight line for over two kilometres before it turned north and became the Westelijke Randweg. A few minutes later the village of Klundert came into view. Before they hit the village Walter turned everyone right and down to the village of Noordschans, then left along the Buitendijk Weg to the tiny village of Tonnekreek and the Oostdijk – a long and straight road that brought them into Willemstad behind the Orangemolen via the fields and trees that kept the Maas from swamping the town.



The camping site was typically Dutch: tidy and well ordered; the many facilities clean and well maintained. Although small, it was landscaped and ordered, and was already home to all sorts of campervans, caravans and tents. On one side a short stretch of water, part of the original fortifications, served as both a swimming pool and boating pond. A sign by the entrance said the town centre could be reached in ten minutes by bike.

After setting up the tents, they rode into the town to have dinner in a restaurant next to the little harbour on the Benedenkade. With a little shuffling around, they arranged the tables so they could all eat with a reasonable view over the boats and yachts

moored a few metres away. As soon as they'd ordered, Harrie began rolling out some of the city's history.

"So, what do you want to know about this place?" he asked, a pre-amble that suggested the others had a choice in the matter. "I can give you the short verhaal or the long verhaal."

"The short story," shouted a chorus of voices, "please!" added Esther, who had long ago learned all she needed to know about her own history.

"Tja! Well, I'm not sure if I have the desire now," Harrie said, feigning hurt.

"Ok," said Esther, taking charge of story time, "we all know you know everything there is to know about our lovely country, and tell it so beautifully too." She looked lovingly at her sad husband.

"But we have a lot of other things to talk about, so better if you keep it to the short verhaal now, you can fill in the details when we walk around the town tomorrow."

Harrie contemplated the idea as he sipped his beer.

"Well, ok then, though don't expect me to waste as much as one detail tomorrow." He looked up with a smile and raised his glass, "Nou, proost allemaal!"

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A couple of hours and more than enough beer later the group mounted up and headed back towards the camp site. A few minutes into the ride Sam started feeling sick and stopped. The others, still refreshed from the food and alcohol, slowly realised something was wrong and ground to a halt a few metres further up.

"Is everything all right?" Walter called back.

"It's ok," Moniek, who'd been cycling behind Sam, shouted back. "Sam's feeling a bit queasy that's all. I'll stay with her and we'll walk back together."

By then Chris had arrived, unable to ignore his wife's problem but reluctant to be too inquisitive and risk being rejected again. He asked with his eyes.

Sam glanced up at him, her eyes telling him to go. "It's ok, I'm just feeling a little sick, probably ate too much that's all. Nothing to worry about, so why don't you go on and we'll catch you up."

Chris looked at her, he didn't feel like arguing with her about staying behind to help – do that and expose the pretence of their marriage – so nodded his agreement and rode off into the night with the others, leaving her with Moniek.

"Are you really alright Sam?"

"Yes, I think I need to walk a little, my stomach's feeling a little queasy. I think the pressure of pushing on the pedals is too much after all that food and drink." She was puzzled: she hadn't had that much to eat or drink; in fact the alcohol had been the least agreeable part of the meal.

"Well it's not far, we can walk together; we'll be there in ten minutes or so."

"Thanks Moniek, I'll try to make it one go."

"Jahoor, good."

As they walked back along the path running through the trees and the night Sam's mind wandered back to an incident with Chris a couple of months ago. They'd been to a film, a fairly erotic romance, with friends, then all gone back to their house where far too much drink had been consumed. During the drinking the film had been reviewed in great detail, though they'd all skated gently over the sex scenes with much smiling and feelings of muted excitement. Later, after the friends had gone, and the alcohol had finished penetrating their defences, they danced naked in the moonlight and made love on the sitting room floor. Given their track record at getting pregnant, they hadn't bothered with

contraception. It was the first time in six months that they'd slept together, and the only time since that awful night, the night their marriage collapsed into Hell's basement.

Breakfast the day after the previous night's mistake was eaten in stony silence, their eyes didn't meet once before Chris left for work, and once he'd gone Sam took a long, slow bath to try to liberate herself of her annoyance at letting 'that' happen again. Not that she'd promised herself that it wouldn't, there was no need. It was another thing that was dead. Burrowing deep into the warmth and the silence, she lost herself in the soft labyrinths of Spanish poetry translated into the iron of Anglo-Saxon syllables.

As she and Moniek pushed the bikes back, she wondered if the two things were connected: it had been many weeks since her last period, but that was nothing unusual, part of 'their' problem in fact. No, her body was just not used to all the cycling and alcohol she thought to herself, dismissing the idea of conceiving as being far too unlikely. The fact that she had hardly reacted to the possibility of being pregnant now was proof enough to her that she wasn't.

They arrived back at the tents ten minutes after everyone else. Chris, Walter and Ingrid were chatting when they walked up. "Is everything all right Sam?" Chris asked, his voice a mixture of guilt and confusion.

"Yes, nothing to worry about, just felt a little sick, too much beer probably." She dealt with his enquiry as quickly and politely as she could get away with, then scanned the other's faces to see if a grilling were on the cards. Chris gave a sort of half smile, the expression of someone not sure how to deal with what he thought the others might be thinking. No one spoke. A pause suggested itself: Sam killed it before it could embarrass anyone.

"But I'm feeling much better for having walked for a while. And Moniek helped take my mind off it." She wasn't trying to make Chris feel any better, but wanted to suggest that all's well that ends well so let's all go to bed and forget about it, as quickly as possible please.

"Good," said Ingrid looking into Sam's eyes, "well you don't look so bad now. We wouldn't want anyone getting ill so early in the trip, or at all."

They all agreed that wouldn't be good: Sam decided that was enough of that conversation. "Well I'm going clean my teeth, then I'm off to bed, I'll see you all in the morning," she said to Walter and Ingrid.

"Now, where's our wash stuff?" she asked Chris before anyone could say anything more.

## Day 3: Willemstad to Oudorp

### (Dark in the Daytime)

The next morning Sam was up early. She'd slept without waking but the confines of their two-person tent now that she was, were a little too claustrophobic for two people with one big problem. Chris didn't share her feelings, though his own feelings for the opportunity to be close to the woman he loved were diminished because she had made hers unmistakably and painfully clear. The sound of his gentle breathing was too much for her. She unzipped her sleeping bag as quietly as possible, pulled on her jeans, then slipped out of the tent. Chris stirred, opening half of an inquisitive eye as she closed the flap behind her.

"Just off to the loo, won't be long," she lied. Chris rolled down the shutter on his eye and slipped back into a dreamless heaven.

After visiting the toilet, she went around the back of the building to make sure no one could see her as she walked down to the little lake. She stopped at the top of the bank that ran down to a small wooden jetty that ran parallel to it. A dozen or so rowing boats were tied to it, but beyond that the little lake was empty, its surface flat, dark, inviting.

It was a just after 7.15 and few people were up. Those that were, were caught up in their own morning thoughts and needs: the lake was all hers.

She stepped into one of the boats, untied it and pushed off, heading for the middle, about 30 feet out. As she got closer she pulled the oars in and let the boat drift lazily into a spin and come idly to a stop. With a little effort she was able to lie down in the bottom: from the water's edge she was invisible. Closing her eyes she sank down through the planks of the hull and into the chilly waters beneath.

The water electrified her: she descended, spinning round and round, her arms spread out, her feet pointing downwards, sinking like an underwater helicopter. She landed on the grey metal hull of a German U-boat, her feet causing two green blips on the radar deep within the craft. A torpedo slipped out of its tube and asked her where the babies were hiding before exploding as it smashed through a window and into her house. She rolled out across the front garden and ran into the street leaving Chris spinning and whirring, a clockwork figure coiled and tense and screwed tightly to the kitchen wall.



Chris woke and vaguely heard Sam saying she'd be back soon, then drifted back in the luxurious warmth of his sleeping bag into silent slumber. Outside, the world and some of the campsite residents moved quietly about their business. But his dreams filled with the sound of feet upon gravel, lightweight doors shutting and commands being quietly uttered to children and dogs. Gradually any hope he had of returning to the sanctuary of sleep were chased away. He lay staring up at the orange canvas a foot or so above him trying to be annoyed about not being able to escape the world, but he was too apathetic to care really.

A sound separated itself from the others that scurried up and down beyond his world. It buzzed in a lo-fi manner, reminding him of the radio at his grandparent's house. His father's parents had a TV but were in love with the radio, and particularly their own mammoth radiogram version. Evenings and meals were spent listening to the endless variety of crackles, screams and whines it produced. Foreign voices would loom out of the ether, shooting past like trains in the night that did battle with other foreign voices, or were drowned in screeches and groans that smelled of burning valves.

"It's like listening to the end of the world," his father would say, covering his ears with his hands as his grandfather slowly turned the dial in search of sounds from countries far away in other galaxies.

He never quite understood his father, but as a child he could remember the laughter and the bizarre and fantastic stories he would invent to liven up a boring car journey, or to send him to sleep with.

His father, who had died far too young and for no good reason – or at least not one with a convincing explanation - cast a very dark shadow over the last year of Chris's life. It was also the reason why Sam and Chris's marriage was now nothing more than a series of empty ragged rooms in an abandoned house.

Chris tried to stop himself thinking but it was already too late: to spare his father even one thought was to have one thought too many. To think about his father was to think about the last time he and Sam had lost a baby; and to think about that was to think about how he'd lost Sam. It was not pretty and it was, as he told himself again and again, all his fault.

"Is there no end to this?" he wondered to himself as he rolled over onto his stomach and buried his face in his arms.

Outside the buzzing grew louder, he squeezed his arms over his ears but the noise only got louder as it span through the fabric of the tent and planted itself squarely in the middle of his back.

He felt is pushing him gently up and down.

"Go away, goddamit, go away!" he screamed inside his head.

"Chris, Chris – are you awake?"

Sam's voice filtered through his arms and into his ears: he hesitated.

"Chris?"

He lifted his head; the buzzing had stopped.

"What, oh, it's you, yes, morning." Despite sharing a tent, he was still surprised to realise that it was her talking to him. Not that he would allow himself to make the mistake of believing that such an act meant anything at all. "How is it outside?"

"Cool at the moment, but sunny. Come on, the other's are up and Ingrid's already half way through cooking breakfast - let's go and get some."

For a brief moment the world seemed normal, but both knew that was an illusion that would dissolve as quickly and as surely as the sun rose.

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After breakfast they headed back into town for a wander around the walls and a visit to the museum, the Mauritshuis. Harrie was already mentally honing his story and looked like as happy as vampire in a blood bank: they'd hardly finished locking up their bikes when he launched into the first layer of information.

"The museum building dates back to the 1620s and used to be, amongst other things, the stadhuis, where the local government met, until the late 90s," he explained, draping his arms around Sam and Chris's shoulders and guiding them forwards, "but now it's a museum."

"Fascinating," said Chris as he stared up at its many-shuttered windows.

"Indeed, but you can also rent it out for parties, weddings, that sort of thing."

An hour later and everyone met for coffee in the museum's cafe. Harrie went off to organise the refreshments while Sam and Chris plonked themselves down at a table already occupied by Walter, Ingrid, and the others.

"It didn't take you lot long to disappear did it?" Chris asked, "It was very kind of you to let Harrie take advantage of the bloody foreigners."

"We thought it best if he was able to concentrate his energies on you, rather than wasting it on us," smiled Roger, "after all, you've so much to learn."

The others laughed as Sam and Chris pondered the generosity bestowed upon them. Harrie appeared with a tray laden with coffee, tea and cakes.

"Help yourselves," he suggested, "and eat up. You'll need it for the walk around the fortifications."

"You must have been doing an excellent job Harrie," said Esther, "Sam and Chris have just been telling us how much they enjoyed your guided tour." Her smile undermined her story. No that Harrie was inclined to believe his wife. Sam and Chris, finding themselves put on the spot, took the diplomatic route out.

"Oh yes," said Chris, "we've learnt a lot."

"Indeed, especially that story about the old statute, the um, what did you call it again? The Man in chair or something?"

Everyone except Chris and Harrie burst out laughing at Sam's efforts to repeat the word. Harrie breathed deeply and allowed the laughing to stop.

"Het Mannetje van Willemstad," he said slowly, "It's 6,500 years old."

"Yes, that's it" Sam said, "Het Manniechair van Willemstad."

A look of pain crossed Harrie's face but he resisted the desire to try and improve her pronunciation. Instead he drank his coffee and stabbed his fork into a slice of chocolate cake. Chris wondered if he should try and stretch Sam's joke a little further but he knew that no matter what anyone else did, Sam would only resent him for doing it.

Having finished with the museum, they left and followed Harrie and Walter across the car park to a small park bordered by a dyke covered with trees. A small path took them along the top of the old fortifications a few minutes' walk away. Much of the path was under a canopy of trees but the far end was open and clearly showed the remains of the building activities of the unwelcome visitors from WWII. They paused on the grassy roof of a bunker the Germans had built on top of the original walls, and looked down through the trees to the water.

"It's hard to imagine what that must of been like to live with," said Sam, "I mean, towns and cities all over England were bombed – and of course London was nearly flattened – but to have them here, living on your doorstep must have been awful."

"Well they came in all high and mighty, but when they left they were running scared – and they had a long way to run," said Walter with a subtle hint of satisfaction.

For a few moments all were lost in their thoughts and for once Sam wasn't tempted to allow her imagination to splash around in the water. She'd seen enough of enemy submarines for one day.

"Right everyone," said Walter, taking charge again, "let's go along here to the right, there some more relics from WWII there. And from there we can walk back to the harbour where I believe lunch will be found."

The mood of the group lifted at the thought of lunch and thirty minutes later they found themselves back at the harbour.

They seated themselves outside a restaurant on a corner of the harbour, where they could see the boats tied up there and into the fortifications behind them. Beyond the harbour walls lay the grey and massive waters of the Holland's Diep – the wide stretch of water that they'd be crossing on the last leg of their tour in about a week's time.

"I'd suggest having a nice big lunch today," said Walter, "we've got a long ride this afternoon and I for one want to be sat on the beach before the sun goes down."

"Dat sounds like a threat Walter," said Moniek, "I hope you've planned at least one coffee break along the way."

"Tja, well we'll have to wait and see how hard you have all worked."

"Where are we going next then Walter?" asked Chris, certain that he'd have no idea where it would be, even if he'd heard of it.

"Ouddorp, we'll be pitching up our tents there," Walter said with a small smile.

"Maar, that is more than 50 kilometres," protested Moniek, "I'll die without at least one coffee somewhere along the road!"

"And I'll explode if I don't get at least one toilet break!" laughed Chris.

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An hour and a half later they were many miles up the road, heading over the A29 and the sea towards the Overflakkee, the most northerly of the main islands that make up Zeeland. The cycle path running alongside the motorway gave them excellent views north over the Noorder Voorhaven, through its giant hi-tech windmills northwards towards Rotterdam. The Noorder and Zuider Voorhavens were part of the defences that were built after the area was decimated by floods in 1953. These gave the giant barges that passed through them access to the waters surrounding all of Zeeland's islands and to the canals that cut and dissected the rest of the country.

Harrie, naturally, felt duty-bound to fill in the gaps of his English audience's knowledge of the area.

"Yes, it was horrible, shocking, hundreds of people died in the flood and much was lost, some lost everything. This is all part of the Delta Works that were built to make sure

that it can never happen again," he said, pointing towards the massive structures they were cycling over. "This is just one small part. We'll be seeing a lot more of them during our trip."



As they rode on the group stretched, and closed up and clumped together in twos or threes, mixing and matching, joining and leaving conversations, hanging back to enjoy watching the flat land silently passing. Every so often Roger or Harrie would shoot off ahead and lie in wait for the others, standing patiently at the side of the road, camera in hand.

As the miles slipped passed a rhythm was found and a pattern set; they relaxed into their ride and themselves, and found the group forming into a team apart from the other cyclists they encountered.

After taking some photos of the bikes zipping past, Roger remounted and raced off to catch up. He'd seen Sam and Chris were at the back, noticed that they weren't talking – his sharp eyes and lustful mind saw and knew that neither seemed happy in each other's company. As he raced up behind them, he was already imaging himself luring Sam off to somewhere more private, his wife's warning a thought long-faded from his mind.