
Parents stand up!

A mother's tale



Part 1, chapter 1 to 15

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1. Prologue

“Dogmatics, conceived as immutable doctrines, is not confined to the Church. They rule everywhere, in the army, in the courtroom, in the school.”

Jan Ligthart, In Sweden, 1911

In our small house the fire is burning in the kitchen because winter is not over yet. Every day at about two o'clock we feel the heat of the sun increasing, but to my husband's delight it is absolutely necessary by five o'clock to light the fire. My grandson looks at me expectantly. In his blue eyes I recognize something that makes me melancholy. I allow it for a moment. Just a moment. Fortunately, his compelling hand gets me out of my thoughts in time. Come on grandma, play with me, it says. And I let myself be drawn. To his blocks. We build a tower.

Oh little boy, you have a whole life before you. It looks so wonderful now, that life. Safe with mom and dad, who will do everything for you. Your world is your toy, your garden, your sandbox. You don't know about all the worries that are yet to come, as you grow and your world expands. Luckily not! If you already knew how much energy it will take to discover who you want to be, to be able to resist the merry-go-round, to hold your ground a little, to be a little happy, then you might never have started this life at all. But hey, you don't have a choice. You have not been asked in advance. You are here! And you start with it. With all the fire you have in you. You will be unstoppable in your efforts to become happy. But will you know when you are? Will you recognize it? Or will you one day, after much hard work, look back with regret, because the happiness is gone without you realizing that you ever had it, and suddenly you have to fight, for your children, for your life and worldly goods.

And yet, like all foolish parents and grandparents, we hope that you will be fighting for a beautiful life. A full life. Because look how clever you are already! You immediately see how you can prevent the structure from falling over. Or, much more fun, how to make it collapse with a thunderous roar! What a pleasure!

My heart bleeds and glows, with love, with pride, with expectation and with sorrow. This beautiful child. I want to protect it, prevent it from having to grow, from having to go out into the world, from getting spoiled. Who gives me guarantees? Who will make my worries go away? All those organizations, all those authorities that have interfered with us. That

told me that if I would listen, follow their advice, that I would be a good mother, and things would be fine. People who are paid to fail, who don't know any better themselves, who have nothing but their dehumanized expertise and stupid bureaucracy. Aren't we all an indispensable part of the production system of education and care? Mother, child and society? With every fiber we weave into the blanket of the system that should warm us and protect us from the cold. But it only suffocates and kills. Escape it! Child grow up strong-willed! Don't be fooled! Be independent. Be independent!

An impossible task. How can you tell a child to be suspicious when I know that suspicion is the beginning of all misery? How do you teach a child to be careful when his open-mindedness is the most valuable thing he possesses? How do you teach a child to be cautious when everyone knows it puts the brake on that wonderful curiosity?

I myself was an obedient, gullible fool. The greater the pain and disappointment. And then you become bitter. There is no escaping it. I realize it all too well. Getting old has many drawbacks. The physical wear-and-tear is the least of it. The head suffers the worst damage, it has to drag along memories of all sorts, and it is the first to cry out for peace. If only we could listen to it. If only we could be wise and sensible when it concerns ourselves. I fear that I have never gained that wisdom and that peace has not yet been granted to me. Or rather, that I don't permit myself any peace. I do that myself. "You're doing it all to yourself," my mother used to cry. But I can't make my head stop thinking. Or I'd have to cut it off. How many times have I dreamed of just that. Do away with the head, with this life, with the memories, the injustice. How tired I have been. And how resilient humans are. How dull a misery that resilience is. Always struggling to ones feet, always having to go on, always wanting to go on!

I prepare for my little boy, my Pat, a delicious white sandwich without crusts with cheese spread and cut it into small pieces. The radiant child pricks the pieces one by one on the small fork and stuffs them into his mouth.

'Oh, what a treat you have there!'. Jan, my rock and my support, the love of my life, comes into the kitchen and with his enormous hands tickles Pat on his small belly. Pat screeches with pleasure and returns the crushed breadpieces to freedom. They fall on his plate and on the table. "What am I doing?" Grandpa carefully puts the messed up pieces of bread back into Pats mouth. His eyes betray the pleasure he takes in this. Always stirring things up a bit. Having fun. His greatest gift.

He looks serious for a moment. "Are you going to act on it? " He has that typical look that says: I don't want to interfere, but please, don't do it, don't do it!

One thing that the years have brought me is that I have become milder. I used to get on my highest horse, but now I don't want to spoil his relaxing moment with his grandson. "I'm not going to put them in their place, no. Is that what you mean?"

"They're too stupid to worry about. You know that. You won't change it."

'No.'

"I've made a different decision."

He lifts Pat high into the air.

"His food will come out again if you do that," I warn him.

"Oh that mustn't be, that mustn't be," he babbles to the child and he lands spluttering kisses on the little neck. Pat screams with pleasure.

He doesn't want to ask. He doesn't want to know what my decision is. I have learned to wait. He will ask. Later. At a time when he thinks he's strong enough to talk me out of it. I don't want to tire him. Worry him. His worries are always about me. Am I getting desperate? Am I getting too sad? Will it cost me too much, this decision of mine? Does he have to protect me with all his might? No my love, my everything. There is no point. You know it's no use. If I know what I want to do, I will do it. Even if I have to drop dead. What's the point of life if you don't fight for it? I know that like no other.

A few years ago I had started a book. A book that would tell everything I wanted to say. Every aspect was covered. Every aspect I had been concerned about at least. But circumstances forced me to give up. An event that was so bad that I could not continue. My heart was too broken. Why should I care any more about those idiots?

Jan and I held onto each other during those difficult times. We didn't let go. And we just went on living. The air just went into our lungs. Our hearts just kept beating even though they were broken. And our child gave us a grandson. Who can resist such a thing? This sunshine in our lives, that must make you happy. That is bound to make you happy. You should. You should. And we are.

Yesterday I had two ladies visit me. They belonged to some organization that deals with research, with education, with government, with making reports, with the money-guzzling nonsense the world is fooled by every day. They conducted a survey, for the government of course, the umpteenth, into the fate of children who do not fit into the education system. They had heard from some official that I had a story to tell about the subject. Because my son, there was some issue with him, wasn't there?

The boundless stupidity.

I spoke to them but, as always, none of my answers matched the questions they asked. I answered them but they did not hear what I said. I explained to them what had gone wrong, but they had no idea what I was talking about. I gained my experience in my world, not in theirs. Mine is an unknown world because it does not exist in the world of training, protocols, jargon, legislation and regulations. And so it has always been as I recall. When I had finished teasing them with my cynicism, when they began to shuffle uncomfortably and the younger of the two began to utter her rehearsed pleasantries, "Thank you for this conversation. You have helped us a lot. Would you like to be kept informed of the

research?” and I had assured them that I would very much like to know what the research would yield, I had made up my mind. I would finish the book. I have to tell what I know, or what I think I know, and then I'll stop. One more chapter. I can do it now. I owe it to myself and to Jan and the children.

2. Introduction

My name is Marta van den Burght. I am married to Jan Troost, who is a mate in the commercial navy. Together we have brought three children to adulthood. Sam, Peter and Ingeborg. Of course I was partly alone in this task, because a sailor spends about two thirds of the year at sea.

Raising children should be a pleasant challenge for every parent. Our eldest son struggled through primary and secondary school with trial and error and our unfailing support. Our second son Peter was a special child from the start. Now I must say I find this a ridiculous statement. All human children are special, as my mother would say. But I don't know how else to describe it. Special is not welcome these days. It is inconvenient. It turns into a file that is moved from table to table and eventually disappears into an archive in the basement.

Peter was a special child. To us. To his loving family. Just as special as his older brother, but very different.

From the day he took his first small step into a school building, there was a problem. From that moment on, every week there was a problem. Can mum come over for a talk, we're wondering about something? As a young mother, laying awake at night, I would wonder who exactly 'we' were. The entire school? All the teachers? Do they all talk about my child over coffee? My child, who is apparently different from the rest?

Education for all children is the gift of modern times. My father told me so many times. It offers equal opportunities for a good life, for freedom of choice, for equality. That last one, equality, is a tricky one. My child was anything but equal to his peers. Throughout his school years, he was the exception, the troublemaker, the child that was taken aside. The contrast between my experiences and the equality that the wonderful education of our time is supposed to provide, suddenly became apparent to me when I read Bertha von Suttner. And that may strike you as quite odd. Bertha von Suttner wrote about the wars of the nineteenth century. She lived from 1843 to 1914. In her book *'Die Waffen nieder'* (*Lay down your arms!*), she demonstrates how the reasons for going to war were not necessarily determined by very grave threatening events that would have justified the sacrifice of human life. No, going to war in those days was a normal activity for heads of state, to secure the social status of the elite.

In the nineteenth century, people like Henri Dunant started writing about the horrors of the battlefield, and some time later Bertha von Suttner exposed the inherent self-interest of the elite in her book. She called for an independent court that would resolve conflicts between countries in a peaceful manner. Perhaps von Suttner's plea was heard, because at that time the emerging industry offered a much more lucrative way of making money and attaining status. There was a reason to change the system.

Industry did not need soldiers but skilled labor. It was economically important that people should go to school. A new era had begun, a new social order was going to determine society's conditions. A new social order with its own casualties.

From 1901 onwards, all children in the Netherlands had to go to school until they were twelve years old. With the democratization of education after the Second World War, the authorities aimed to reduce differences and give children from lower-classes the chance to escape their background. The compulsory school age was raised to 16 and later even 18. Opportunity became an imperative. A whole army of educational specialists came to be, all owing their legitimacy to those children that cannot meet the necessary requirements. Today this is a self-affirming business model.

The system of care and education has become firmly entrenched in our economy. It needs victims for its existence. And this factuality prevents structural changes to the system, changes that would actually improve the lives of many children. The economy has no use for change. The victims of our educational system are the necessary link in our education-care industry.

I happened to read von Suttner's book after a horrible experience with Peter's school. It had been on my bedside table for a while.

Peter had turned eighteen. Almost immediately after his birthday, I was invited to school for an interview. I didn't know what this interview would be about, but interviews at school were an everyday occurrence, so I just went. With the courage of desperation. Jan was at sea.

I reported to the nice secretary in the hall and she went to fetch the schooldirector. Suddenly, an eerie feeling crept up on me. Why did the director have to be fetched? The invitation had come from the mentor. Director X joined me in the hall and shook my hand warmly. 'Come with me, please. We are upstairs.' We? I asked: 'We? Who is we?'

'Don't worry', he said. He led me into a room where the mentor, the care coordinator and the BP* were already seated. The headmaster sat down next to them and I had to take my place opposite this tribunal. And that was exactly what it was. The headmaster delivered a sermon lasting several minutes. I was to understand that the school had done more than enough, the others nodded eagerly, it was now time for us (who did he mean by 'us?') to explore other possibilities for Peter. 'But what possibilities do you have in mind?' I asked. 'He doesn't have his diploma yet, does he?' At that moment I still thought that the director

included the school team with 'us'. But that was a mistake. I have made many in my career as a mother.

The whole team, as the headmaster explained and again everyone nodded eagerly, was of the same opinion: Peter would never get his diploma anyway. So we might as well stop now. The school was actually obliged by law to stop because Peter was 18. I was kindly asked to have Peter deregistered. Later I learned that this was not true at all. The school was under no obligation by law at all. If I had been more assertive I would have grasped that immediately. If they were obliged by law, the headmaster wouldn't have had to ask me to deregister my child. But which mother takes a course 'Be smarter than the school director'? Or: 'Know your legislation' and the follow-up course 'Don't be tricked!' I had no defence. They all agreed. Including the BPO employee who really should have stood up for me and especially for Peter. But I only realised that when I had long since returned home. I thought of it at night. When I woke up and the thoughts jumped up at me. What should I do? Where was this leading? We had told Peter that school was very important. That he should try to persevere. With a diploma, he could achieve things. Get a job. Without a diploma, that was much more difficult. Come on, son, hang in there. And he went. Sometimes he didn't. And we pleaded for him at school. I wrote letters. I explained. Peter had undergone tests. There were reports. Surely the school could use this to determine what kind of support was needed? How many times had I been obliged to listen to the mentor, the care coordinator, that there was a limit to what they could do. That Peter was not their only pupil. And each time I asked myself: but what do you actually do? And now, all of a sudden, it was over. It came like a bolt from the blue. I wasn't prepared for it at all. I hoped that Jan would call. I hadn't heard from him in over a week. They were crossing the Atlantic Ocean at that time. Almost Antwerp. Then he would call. I cried that night. I was desperate.

From the moment he was expelled from school, Peter hid in his room and cut himself off from me. He had persisted because he believed in Jan and me. All those tests, therapies, talks. It must have driven him mad. We drove him mad. Dragging him about. From one place to another. Really, son, there is a point to all this! It will help you go up in the world!

And then he had to leave after all. He was simply expelled from school. And I had no more defence. I couldn't help him anymore. The school didn't want him anymore. Where had I gone wrong? Could I have prevented this? When it happened, Jan was not home. Could he have done something about it? Would he have put his foot down? When I ask him now, he answers reassuringly: I mustn't worry about it anymore, I mustn't think that anything I could have done would have changed the outcome.

In the weeks following the meeting with the school tribunal, I sank into despondency. I would sit on the kitchen stool and stare out the window, or lie on the sofa and just fall asleep, because, like Peter, I could no longer sleep at night. We led our own lives, separate from each other. He lived in one room, I lived in the room next to his. Every now and then Ingeborg would whirl through, see our faces and vanish to her friends. Sam was busy with

his studies. He had discovered partying. He and Peter were growing apart. I saw it happen. Where had their closeness gone?

Bertha was on my bedside table. I started reading for distraction, because I needed a terrible story to put my desperate feelings into perspective. But to my surprise what I found in von Suttner's war story from more than a hundred years ago, were similarities. I saw similarities in the ways structures get entrenched in society, how they become part of an economy. How people hold onto things that have always been so and therefore must be as it should be, because remember, we also had to go to school, and great-grandfather was a soldier too. And if half the population succumbs, boys die, people get sick, food runs out, still things are right and proper just the way they are.

Bertha von Suttner gave me an insight. I suddenly saw just how impossible our struggle is. We are just a cog in the wheel. We are nothing but cannon fodder for the people who make their living off us. You may find it preposterous to compare our children to the young boys shot to pieces on the battlefields of Schleswich or Crimea in the nineteenth century. But after all those years that Jan and I devoted ourselves to keeping our child in school, to meeting the demands of the government, of society, all those years of having to cope with criticism of Peter's behaviour, his performance, his development, all wrong according to the specialists, without anyone ever offering a single solution that would have made the boy happy, would have helped him on his way, I have gone totally to pieces. My child has gone to pieces. We can't go on anymore(?).

What did we, ordinary citizens, expect from life? The same as people in the nineteenth century. We do exactly the same things and dream exactly the same dreams. You are young and you meet someone. You get married, or maybe not, but you start a family, work to earn a living, have a roof over your head. And apart from that, you have one more modest wish; to be a little bit happy and to stay healthy. And you imagine that if you just do your duty as a mother, as a father, as a worker, as a citizen, that your wish will be granted.

But not for us. Not for Peter. He became a toy for people with a mission. We, Jan and I became subject to the system. We had to go all the way until they were done with us. The victim, our beautiful Peter, will be left behind as a small germ in society. Just as cholera decimated cities in the nineteenth century after bloody wars, so Peter and his fellow victims will slowly but surely make society incurably sick. How will administrators respond to that? With reform schools? Prisons?

I have decided to delve into the history of our current system of care and education. Why did it become what it is? I'm going to look for an explanation. I want to show that for the sake of the system we mistreat and destroy our children. And this has to stop.

* A BPO person is an Appropriate Education Supervisor. An invention of the Appropriate Education Act, to replace the ambulant counselor who had approximately the same tasks but was a product of the Act on Expertise Centers, also known as the Backpacks Act.

3. About my parents and the war

I was born in 1965 in a place X somewhere in the Netherlands, as the youngest of three daughters of Gerrit and Anna van den Burght. My father Gerrit was born in the Dutch East Indies, in Medan. My grandfather was a general practitioner there. When the war against Japan broke out, my father was just nine years old. Grandpa was taken away as a prisoner of war to, as my grandma and dad found out much later, Singapore, destined for the dark wilderness of what was then Burma. My grandfather survived the horrific time in the camp because he was put to work as a camp doctor. Thus he was spared having to work in the bush to clear the way for a railway line in the most appalling conditions. But many died in his care. The Red Cross parcels were stolen by the Japanese guards. The drinking water was filthy and contaminated with all kinds of diseases that mainly cause diarrhea. There was never enough food.

My grandmother was locked up in a camp on Sumatra with her two children, my father and his sister, and many other Dutch women and their children. My father's sister died there of diarrhea. She was only four years old.

I never understood how these people found the strength to pick up their lives again after the liberation. Why on earth would you still want to go on when you have been treated so brutally? How do you come to terms with such injustice? To lose your child and still keep going. Not to give up, to keep going. That damned indestructible? (??) human resilience, the amazingly strong will to live.

After the war, back in the Netherlands, no one asked them what they had been through. No one took care of them or comforted them. Everyone had suffered. The Netherlands had been through the occupation, the famine. The people here had to cope with their own suffering. Let's go! Keep going. Contribute. We have to rebuild. And so my grandparents went to work. Just like everyone else. Grandpa started to work for an old GP in place X and after a while took over the practice. My grandmother did the paperwork, just as she had done before the war in Medan. I only ever knew my grandparents to be quite tubby , but in those days they were both skinny as a rake. In the attic of their old house there was

a cardboard box with worn black-and-white photos in all sizes. From large portraits in soft focus of demure girls, modestly looking down on their hands, to robust grave-looking boys, standing next to some column with a plant on top, to minuscule prints of groups of people in unfamiliar places. As a ten-year-old girl, there was nothing I liked better than rummaging through that box and asking my grandmother about the people in those pictures. Usually she would say, 'I don't remember, dear', with a sigh and a sad look on her face that I, the happy teenager, didn't understand. But there were some photos she did want to tell me about. Like the photo of Grandma in her wedding dress, surrounded by lots of people but without Grandpa.

'I married by proxy', she said. 'You have to understand that grandpa was already in Medan. He went to work in the hospital there. During our engagement I was in Holland and we could only write to each other. A letter like that could take up to a month.'

I found that wildly romantic.

'How old were you then, grandma?'

'I was just 19 when I got married. It wasn't very nice, really. My uncle Cees played grandpa, but of course I didn't marry him so he held a glove. The glove was actually grandpa. Do you see?'

When I heard that, I laughed out loud and my grandma laughed too. We sat there sobbing with laughter. So funny, getting married to a glove.

'Why didn't Grandpa come home to marry you Grandma?'

'Oh dear, that was much too far away. You had to take a boat, the journey would take weeks. We couldn't afford that either, such a long journey.'

'But couldn't you go to grandpa's and get married there?'

'Heavens no. You couldn't just leave your home to be with your boyfriend. It wasn't considered proper. You had to get married first. That was the only way for my parents to be sure that I would be looked after.'

I looked at my grandmother in admiration. What an enormous adventure. Marrying someone you could only write to and then that enormous journey by boat for weeks on end to a country on the other side of the world. Away from your mother, away from your friends.

There were a lot of photos of my father as a baby, a toddler and a pre-schooler. Being held by the hand by the 'babu' (nanny), on grandpa's lap, between grandma and grandpa on the rattan sofa on the veranda. A veranda. They were black-and-white photos, but that veranda gave color to my imagination. When I grew up, I wanted a veranda too.

'Then you have to go and live in a warm country', my grandma said. 'The Netherlands are too gloomy for such a long roof. The rooms would be darkened all day.'

Grandma had too much common sense to my mind. I would find a solution somehow, but there would be a veranda.

Dad with his little sister on his lap. Poor little Pingie. She would only live to be four years old. I could stare for hours at that little portrait of my aunt who would never grow up. Such a thing is incomprehensible to a ten year old. Grandma would put her hands in her lap and stay silent. Later, I dared to ask about Pingie once, when I was about sixteen: 'How do you get over it, Grandma? To lose a child?'

And grandma said: 'The camp was so awful. I was actually glad that she was freed from the horrors. I didn't have to worry about her anymore. Fear for your children,' and she was silent for a moment, 'fear for your children is the worst thing.'

She stared in front of her and at that moment she no longer seemed to be talking to me. 'It was ... a relief when it was finally over,' she said softly to herself. I never dared to ask again. It wasn't until much later, when I was a mother, that I sometimes felt so much anxiety that I thought I would collapse. Only then did I understand that if it would get any worse, if the despair would get to be so great that you no longer believe in a solution, as it must have been for my grandmother in that horrible camp, death can actually be a salvation. Even if it is your child.

In the last year of the war, my grandfather worked in the sickbay of a camp in Fukuoka, only a hundred miles from Nagasaki. There, the prisoners of war slaved away in mines. After Japan's capitulation, grandpa was taken to Java by an American navy ship, along with thousands of other prisoners of war. My grandfather never talked about what he must have seen, when he was brought from the camp to the ship through the ruins of Nagasaki.

On board the naval vessel, they were issued with uniforms that hung loosely around their fleshless bones. Grandpa's belt from those days was also kept in the attic and as children we couldn't believe that it could ever have fitted around his waist.

On Java, these soldiers, who had just been liberated from hell, were told that they were still serving in the Royal Dutch East Indies Army (KNIL) and that they weren't free to go and do as they pleased. My grandfather almost immediately was put to work in the hospital in Balik Papan. 'That was really his salvation,' said grandma, 'that he could go back to work right away.'

Nowadays, I rack my brain over this. Over that casual remark by my grandma: 'Luckily, grandpa could go back to work right away.' She had seen other young boys who didn't have a clue what to do with themselves. Aimlessly hanging round in their uniforms until the Dutch government finally decided to let them go. And then what? Many of them had yet to start their education. The government gave them a highschool diploma, the only band-aid they got for over three years of cruel abuse, and then it was up to the young man what he did with it. I have often wondered at what point things become too much for a

person. Why did those people have such resilience after that inhumane treatment, whereas these days you get mental help if someone has tried to break into your house? Where is that human endurance stored?

Through the Red Cross, my grandmother and grandfather found each other again. My father was almost 13 at the time. Pingie had been dead for almost three years. Grandpa knew nothing until he saw his family again. No message from the Red Cross ever got past the Japanese guards.

I never knew the exact reason for them to decide to return to the Netherlands. Papa said: 'I think they realised even then that things would never be the same again.'

Now, being old and mentally exhausted, I think he meant that the country no longer represented happiness, but reminded them of hell. And who wouldn't want to leave hell?

In Holland, in the town of X, my father went to school. Grandpa simply brought him to the HBS, which had just opened its doors again. He had to work out for himself how he would manage that, after having been deprived of education for more than four years.

How that turned out, I do not know. We as children were always told how very clever daddy was to have passed the HBS, followed by: 'So you see. You can achieve anything if only you want to'. And that last statement was the law set in stone in our family. There was no other truth. When I had to repeat a year at secondary school and did just as badly the second time in the same class, my father told me that he would allow me until the age of twenty-one to get a diploma. If I failed, I could look for work as a cashier employee at the Hema, for all he cared. For him, that was the most terrifying prospect he could put to his children. In those days, the minimum wage was less than 300 guilders a month, so my father had every reason to worry. I did not even know what the words 'minimum wage' meant.

My mother grew up in the Netherlands, in a strict Catholic family. I don't really know anything about her family. I never knew my mother's father and mother. Her parents were strongly opposed to her marrying my father, because his relatives in the Netherlands had joined the NSB during the war. They will have thought that could only mean there must be something wrong with the whole family. In 1956, the war wounds were still too fresh, or simply too deep to heal for my father's new parents-in-law. My mother was told never to come home again. I hardly knew my uncles and aunts on my mother's side. Actually, most of them emigrated after the war. They went to Canada, South Africa and the United States. For them, the same probably applied as for my grandparents. They were determined to start again somewhere else and once again try to be happy, despite all the hardships they had had to endure in their young lives.

A few things I do know, for example that my mother's mother was sent to work in an office at fourteen and had to hand in her meagre earnings to her parents. Apart from the

menacing prospect of a life as a cashier employee, these were the small educational facts that were passed on to us children, when we didn't feel like doing our homework.

My mother's mother also married young, like my other grandmother, and had eight children, one of whom did not survive the war.

My mother was the youngest of the family. As a little girl, she had watched things from a distance and she suffered the least from the war.

After the war she went to the all-girls secondary school, the MMS. Before they left to other continents, her brothers and sisters had instilled in her the conviction that as a woman you had to be able to earn your own living. Times had changed. It was no longer taken for granted that if a woman got married, her husband was going to provide for her.

But despite of the fact that the war had seemed to overturn all relations for a while, some things stayed the same. Women were still subordinate to men. Women were still legally incompetent, like children, and that law wasn't changed until 1957. When a woman got married, she was fired. A married woman was supposed to take care of her family. She wasn't even allowed to start a business or set up a foundation without her husband's consent. In 1950, only 2% of married women were working in paid employment. My mother, too, disappeared from working life when she married my father, despite all the invocations of her brothers and sisters. She looked after her husband and children. She was also a member of the Catholic Women's Guild (KVG), did all kinds of volunteer work and poured coffee in the church on Sundays after mass.

4. In the old days, things were much better

My mother always told me that things were much better in the past. She said, for example: 'In the old days, children got a decent upbringing.' I have always found it strange that my parents used to tell me this in a somewhat reproachful way. I was not well brought up and that was apparently my fault. I have always felt guilty about it. My father often called me a spoiled brat. He had a twinkle in his eyes when he said that, but somehow it was clear to me that I did not deserve all that pampering. Apparently there was another kind of life that I had no part in that would have been better, but well, we had to make do with this life.

By the same token, I've been afraid of old people for most of my life, except of course for my own dear old granny. But besides her, all old people seemed determined to point out my shortcomings at every opportunity.

‘Well now girl, are you quite comfortable? That was not for us, when we were young. We were never allowed to laze. We had to work for a living.’

‘Did you get that? Well well, such a treat! In my days we had to be content with a bit of needlework, so we’d make ourselves useful.’

I remember when I first lived on my own, I didn’t dare to buy anything other than groceries, worrying that the lady behind the counter would ask me if what I intended to buy was really necessary.

My parents met each other during college. My mother was studying to be a pharmacy assistant, earning 12 guilders a month in the early days. That was before the introduction of minimum wage in 1969. Another noteworthy piece of history that had a big place in how my parents educated us: be grateful for the many opportunities you get nowadays!

My father studied history and pedagogy. Much later I figured that he chose history to understand the war. I never thought to ask him. He was a teacher in heart and soul, both at school and at home. My father was strict but fair, though the latter was mainly his opinion. We used to be punished with house arrest, and our bicycles put under lock and key for a week.

We lived in a medium-sized town called X. I remember nothing of my first years, of course. My first memory is of kindergarten. It was run by nuns and it was awful. About forty children on long benches in perfectly straight rows, presided over by a few of those blackrobed women enthroned behind a lectern. I can still recall the image, so frightening for me as a five-year-old toddler, of those three stern faces cloaked in black. You were supposed to be quiet and very well behaved. Every time I had to go there, I would scream my head off until they’d let me stay at home. Fortunately, around that time a neighbour told my mother about a small kindergarten that had recently started in an annex to a primary school nearby. I think that this place was quite a novelty in those days. There were small tables and chairs, spread around the room. There was a doll’s corner and a sandbox and you could play with blocks. I probably liked it there, though I don’t remember much about it.

Then came primary school. My father would later say that there too, modernism had gradually set in. In first grade, we still sat in rows and the girl behind you could spit in your neck or pull your hair. It was easy to cheat, if your neighbour allowed it and didn’t bend forward with her arm around her notebook, shielding her work from your eyes. But in the higher grades, we were grouped together with four tables. There was no more cheating or secretly pulling someone’s hair and claiming that you hadn’t done anything. You had to look your classmates in the face and that was quite a change. For that reason we usually sat on our chairs back to front. I don’t remember much more about primary school.

The class of my eldest sister was the first under the new education law, the so called 'Mammoth Act' in 1969. This law was so named because it was so wide-ranging that its introduction was an enormous operation.

Being a teacher, my father suffered with all this change. The last graduates of the former school type, the HBS (Higher Civic School), couldn't be held back to repeat a year, because after them the educational system changed too much. That was a thorn in his side.

Apart from that I didn't understand any of the discussions between my parents about the educational system. Life was the way it was, and as far as I knew, things had always been like that.

I now know that we are just beginning to enjoy the debatable pleasure that every child *has* to go to school. The educational system as it is today is not that old at all. At the beginning of the last century, most children went to school until they were twelve. In 1900, only eight per cent of all children attended secondary school. And they were all boys. Children got a basic education and then they were put to work. Like my grandmother. She did a course in shorthand and typing, and then she was sent to work in an office at an age when, sixty years later, I was still slouching over my school desk and cheating at tests.

In 1950, 45 per cent of children went to secondary school or some form of continuation of primary education, and fifteen years later that number had risen to 84 per cent. So, my grandmother's generation worked from the age of 12, half of my mother's generation received at least some form of secondary education; starting with my generation everyone had to go to school until the age of 16 and my children are in school until their 18th birthday. Anyone who does not want to do so will be taken to court.

After your eighteenth birthday, everything is different. If by then you have not managed to fit the requirements of the successful people, you get cast away, as Peter and I have experienced.

Since 1901, all children had to go to school. That is to say, to primary school. Home tuition was also allowed in those days, because owing to the Constitution of 1848 everyone was allowed to teach, as long as the children learned what the law prescribed. Since the 1857 Act on Primary Education, for example, it was compulsory to teach the subjects of geography, history and natural science. Of course, home education was exclusively for those who could afford it. Ordinary children had to sit still in school desks, forty, fifty, sometimes a hundred pupils to a class with one teacher in front.

In those days children who could not keep up were labelled retarded, morons, imbeciles, or 'nervous'. From the point at which all children had to go to school, the number of children who could not keep up proved to be surprisingly large. And, of course, people wondered why that was so. The variety of diagnoses we have today did not exist in 1901. Psychiatry as a science in its own right was less than a hundred years old. In 1795, as I read on the internet, the asylum doctor Philippe Pinel (1745-1826) released the chains of

hysterical women in the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris. This momentous act is considered the beginning of psychiatry as a medical science, that aims to help and cure rather than lock up and feed.

In 1901, when it was discovered that not all children were able to attend classes or sit obediently in school desks, there were also the problems posed by of a modernising society. Industrialisation had rapidly changed daily life. Technical progress demanded educated people. At the same time, the population's mental state of mind deteriorated considerably. A worrying number of people could not cope with modern life. Alcoholism, for example, increased, as did all kinds of stressrelated problems, then called neurasthenia or nervositas or hysteria. Without the social, caring safety net that we have today, these were conditions that drove people to destitution or to crime.

I wonder what Peter would have been called in those days. He didn't get his work done at school, or didn't want to do it. Retarded perhaps? He also sometimes ran away and at one time he threw the furniture about. Nervous then? Or were we perhaps considered high-risk parents? Husband at sea, wife having to cope on her own. They may have wondered if the children got enough encouragement. Just as they are asking themselves now. Today's specialists.

5. A Century of educational innovators

Just over a hundred years ago, our modern twentieth century began. The century in which cars, aeroplanes, films, television and computers were invented.

At the beginning of this century of modernisation, all kinds of pioneers were ready to make history.

Montessori wrote her book on the discovery of the child at the turn of the century. Jan Ligthart, like her, argued for more love in education, more space for the child to discover for itself. The Swedish feminist Ellen Key, who visited Jan Ligthart and his school in The Hague, called the new century 'The Century of the Child.' The century in which new insights would ensure better upbringing and education. Her book with this title appeared in 1906. At the beginning of chapter five she wrote on The Soul Killings in the Schools:

“Any one who would attempt the task of felling a virgin forest with a penknife would probably feel the same paralysis of despair that the reformer feels when confronted with existing school systems. The latter finds an impassable thicket of folly, prejudice, and mistakes, where each point is open to attack, but where each attack fails because of the inadequate means at the reformer's command.

The modern school has succeeded in doing something which, according to the law of physics, is impossible: the annihilation of once existent matter. The desire for knowledge, the capacity for acting by oneself, the gift of observation, all qualities children bring with them to school, have, as a rule, at the close of the school period disappeared. They have not been transformed into actual knowledge or interests.”

In her day, a school was an institution where children's souls were murdered. And something had to be done about it. Now, a hundred years later in 2015, my son Peter, a boy of normal to high intelligence, is sitting at home because the school no longer wants him. There are thousands of children sitting at home. For the same reason as a hundred years ago. Because they can't sit still, because they can't cope with constant demands, because their curiosity is not stimulated, because in the schools their souls are murdered.

Yes, admittedly many children, most children, survive school. I don't think the soul of Sam, Peter's brother, was murdered there. He was overjoyed to be out of school, yes, because he didn't like it there, but I think that's all. He was relieved because he could start his training of choice. And he puts his heart and soul into it. And that is definitely the merit of current times. If you meet the conditions, you can start your education of choice, regardless of whether your father is unemployed, doctor or politician.

I read the books of Montessori, Ligthart and Key and I am gripped by their enthusiasm. They write with love about young children, about the wonderful way they grow and explore if they are given the chance. These innovators had the advantage of the times in which they lived. At the turn of the century, many people in authority were worried about the increasing problems in society. I read in the history books how schools were hopeless institutions. There was fertile ground for new ideas. The educational landscape was a wasteland. Jan Ligthart's school in The Hague was visited by educationalists and other curious people from all over the world. Ellen Key is said to have exclaimed when she was there: 'Here my dream comes true!' To which Ligthart replied: 'Mine not yet'. This I read in the introduction to 'In Zweden', a delightful book by a positive person with a great sense of humour and a good dose of cynicism. Ligthart was invited to Sweden to talk about his school and his ideas to change the *visual education* into his *learning by experiencing*. In a series of lectures, he explained how education was built up from the first class onwards. In

those days, children learnt mainly by reciting what the teacher in front of the class pointed out on posters. Ligthart made education come alive.

“The carpenter's folding rule brought us to a four centimetre scale, which the children could make for themselves and which, in applying it to handicraft, introduced them to the metric system. (...) From the wood on the floor, it went on to the trees on the playground, which provides the wood, and so we were in the middle of botany. We learned to study these trees, not by pointing at the parts to the tune of dictate-and-repeat : "This-is-the-trunk-of-the-tree", but by letting a boy climb it, or the teacher!”

In 1918, the Netherlands got its first minister of education and in 1969 comprehensive legislation. Since then, the current system exists, consisting of primary education, which is subject to the Primary Education Act, and three levels of general education (Mavo, Havo and VWO), which are subject to the Secondary Education Act. And then there are laws for secondary vocational education and for higher education.

The other day, I asked my dad how he felt about the abolition of the HBS. ‘A hundred years,’ he said, ‘the HBS has existed, the Higher Civil School, founded in 1863. Actually a wonderful school. A beautiful, broad education. You learned everything there. Specifically for those who love to study. At the end of the nineteenth century, the HBS ensured that you could go to university without Latin and Greek. The HBS became much more important than the posh little club in classics. Much more businesslike. And it was necessary. Developments were moving forward so rapidly. University faculties were multiplying.’

‘In the beginning only a handful of children went there, wasn't it?’ I wanted to let dad know that I had been reading up about it. ‘And only boys.’

‘Yes, only boys. That's right, but that changed quickly. Already in the twenties, girls were going to HBS. And for girls there was also the MMS (secondary school for girls), of course.’

‘But how did you feel back then, dad, about the HBS being abolished?’

‘Oh darling, every change is difficult. And the reason was good. Children had to make their choice for a specific type of school when they were twelve, and then there was no way back. You could not move up from MULO to HBS. If you weren't good enough at twelve, it pretty much stopped. That's the great thing about the Mammoth Act. It ensured that children could continue to grow.’

For a century now there has been debate about twelve year old children and the moment they should make a choice for the rest of their lives. This discussion continues to this day.

The MULO used to be the solution for these kids. Although MULO was not linked to higher education, it had the great advantage, as I see it now, of being subject to primary school law. It was More Comprehensive *Primary* Education. This was fitting for those pupils who suited this level, because some elements that make children drop out nowadays, were not applied at MULO. For example, in MULO, as in primary school, there used to be just one teacher to a class, taking care of all lessons, while every class had their own classroom. It prepared for vocational training such as that of teacher, midwife and mate. Nowadays it is changed into Mavo and is part of *secondary* education. Now, every child of twelve, even in special education, has the distinguished but dubious pleasure of being startled by an idiotic bell every forty five minutes, giving the signal to change classes and find a different teacher in front of them. This is real hell for many children

Back when dad went to HBS there were maybe ten children to a class. In those days a teacher still had time to stand by his pupils through thick and thin. And that was necessary too, because at HBS there were no such things as selective combinations of subjects, as we have now. There were a linguistic and an exact science curriculum, and apart from that the children had to learn everything. But even among the bright children of well-to-do families, there were many who couldn't handle this educational system. Already at the beginning of the 20th century, there was concern about the mental well-being of children, who were overburdened at school with too many subjects and too much homework.

Much has changed in education in the Netherlands since the beginning of the twentieth century. Children are no longer a hundred to a class, with a piece of chalk and a slate, and one teacher in front of them. And yet, when for example I read Ellen Key's book, I think: much has remained the same.

Schools are rich in the Netherlands, they overflow with beautiful teaching/learning aids, but the basic structure is still the same. Pupils are supposed to sit still, listen, learn and finish in time. Peter's right to education turned out to be one in name only. It didn't yield him a diploma, only a deep trauma.

We have lived through a century full of hopeful educational innovators but, I think, none of them lived long enough to clarify exactly what they meant.

What is different now? What have all these people been looking for over the past hundred years?

Half a century after the first appointment of a minister of education and almost thirty cabinets later, the Mammoth Act was introduced. This new Act is supposed to ensure that the entire population is brought to a higher level, both mentally and economically. All in the same way, not taking into account the differences between people. The century of the

child has in fact given us nothing. Only more mental poverty, if on a materially comfortable level.

A human being learns through curiosity. This wisdom of pedagogues has existed for centuries. The wisdom of a cabinet is the politics of the day, the interests of the establishment.

As a result healthcare has developed parallel to education into a multi-million dollar business with the associated wealthy elite. But in the meantime, society and this industry are increasingly weighed down by the growing army of derailed young people, robbed of *the desire for knowledge, the capacity for acting by oneself*, ignorant of who they are and what they would like to become.

6. A carefree time

My sisters obediently went to high school, but I was too dumb for that. My father's motto still being: 'You can achieve anything if you set your mind to it', he put it down to laziness. It took me half a lifetime to be able to say out loud that I am not a studious person. That I'd rather be doing things than be poring over books. That that's really all right. From the moment I was allowed to work, I knew how to be diligent.

So I went to the Havo (higher secondary school). I failed the second year. And when I failed the same year for the second time, my father threw in the towel. It was apparently my choice not to do better, so I was sent to the Mavo. 'I'll allow you until the age of twenty-one...' and so on. One of the reasons for the Mammoth Act was to facilitate progression to a higher level of education, and I made grateful use of this, albeit in the wrong direction. Our legislator wanted the pupils to grow and rise above their hopeless existence, but I preferred to descend. At least, that was my father's opinion.

I wasn't diligent at the Mavo either, but I got through damage-free and afterwards with three friends I attended a course for elderly care.

From the moment I was allowed to work in an old people's home, while still in training, I blossomed. Finally, I was allowed to roll up my sleeves and get to work.

I was the odd person out there. In those days, this work was mainly done by girls from the lower classes. They were good, hard-working girls, but their use of language and politeness towards the old people left much to be desired. I once saw a colleague snarl at a lady of 85 years old, telling her to finish her dinner, 'otherwise there will be no telly tonight'. One day, a nice lady came to work with us to polish the girls' manners. It turned out that that was not the only thing that needed teaching. Many girls were used to a diet of potatoes, beans and bacon. Fresh vegetables were a rarity and mostly considered inedible.

I could also write a book about my working life, but this story serves a different purpose.

I had a friend from secondary school who went to nursing school in Vlissingen. Her name is Maria and I still see her regularly, because after our training and our various wanderings we came to live near each other again.

The nautical college was also in Vlissingen. There were only boys at the nautical college and only girls at the nursing school. Thus, Vlissingen was a kind of marriage agency. In the week before Christmas, the nautical college used to have a Christmas ball and it was the practical custom to invite the whole nursing school. Once, Maria took me there and that's where I met Jan.

I started my first job before Jan. Eventually, my darling father was so proud of me when I passed the course, that he gave me a little car.

So, being mobile, I raced to Vlissingen at every opportunity in my bright red deux chevaux, for as far as racing was possible with this car. I slept at Maria's and I went out with Jan, at times accompanied by most of his roommates and their girlfriends. And by Maria, of course. With a bit of good will, we could cram nine people into my little car. Once we went to a concert by the Dubliners. They performed in the vegetable auctionhall out in the fields. Ten people and a bottle of gin in a deux chevaux, driving the unlit countryroads of Walcheren. It makes sense that we do not trust our children when they go out.

Jan was a hardworking student. He passed his final examinations of the 'HTS-structured' course for chief mate in one go.

Until Jan started his education, the nautical college was a trainingschool. You first went to school for a year, then out to sea for a couple of years and then back to school again. After every two years of this type of training, you would rise to a higher rank. From student/deckhand, to fourth, third, second to first mate. As first mate, you could become captain. At the end of the 1970s, the shipping companies joined the race to innovate education, and this professional trainingcourse was artificially raised to the level of higher professional education. They called it an 'HTS-structured' education. This meant: it is a technical education but it is not a real HTS. As a result, new students needed at least a Havo diploma, including mathematics and physics, to be admitted. Chemistry was an extra advantage. Thus, many of them were good students and chose not to go to sea after finishing nautical college but, honouring the idea of the Mammoth Act, continued their studies at university. Others chose a career as manager in a company, because there was more money to be made there than on the high seas.

When Jan was at nautical college, the shipping companies appeared before the classes, literally begging, for God's sake, to come and work on their ships, so serious was the shortage of personnel in the fleet. Therefore, after graduation Jan got a job pretty quickly, and went to sea for four months.

I was busy with my work and further training.

After two years we got married. Jan had become second mate very quickly, and when we were married I was allowed to join him on board. I did that a few times. Although I was bored to death, the sea was fantastic and I visited many lovely ports. I could write a book about this episode too, but that also must wait for another time.

And then the children arrived.

In 1993 our son Sam was born. Jan was home on leave. Sam was born without any noteworthy complications. The maternity nurse was a nice rotund experienced lady, bursting with stories about how it used to be. Too bad I didn't write them down then. We were given a 'growth book' in which all the facts about little Sam were noted. After a few days, we were called by the 'infant consultation centre' (Consultatie Bureau CB). Someone would come by for the heelprick. After a month, we reported to the clinic for the first check-up as we were supposed to. Sam was weighed and measured for a growth curve to be drawn. After two months, we had to report back for the first vaccination. He was very sick for one night. The growth chart instructed us on what was expected of us as parents and when we had to report back to the clinic (CB). We all loved it, this good care. Sam developed very well, neatly keeping to the CB's growth instructions. We were proud parents with an approved baby. What more could we ask for?

The first 'infant consultation centre' (Consultatie Bureau CB) in the Netherlands was established in The Hague in 1901, by initiative of the general practitioner B.P.B. Plantenga. In the beginning, the CB was only intended for the poor and disadvantaged. Nowadays, every mother is expected to have her baby or toddler checked regularly at the CB.

What Dr. Plantenga did was extremely necessary. In Plantenga's time, many babies - twenty percent - died because mothers did not know how to prevent it. For the most part, they actually weren't able to prevent it. In those days, poor people were often malnourished. Some mothers simply did not have enough milk, and artificial nutrition did not yet exist. Doctor Plantenga devised a way to make babymilk from cow's milk. This was an enormous success and Plantenga's initiative was copied throughout the Netherlands. Mothers could collect the milk free of charge, exactly enough for so many bottlefeedings a day. They had to hand in the dirty nappies to prove that their babies actually got the milk, presumably to prevent the other children in the family from drinking it. Hence the regularity: so many bottlefeedings a day, to be given at fixed times. Along with the free milk, the mothers were instructed how to take proper care of their babies.

Many people were uneducated and poor. There were no social services, only charity. Slums really were slums. Unheated houses, polluted streets, coalstoves. Children had to

work from an early age. But the 20th century was the century of progress, of modernisation, demanding more and more educated people as workforce. It was no longer acceptable that people lived in slums and died of hunger or infectious diseases. I imagine that the upper class at that time was aware of its responsibilities. It was probably also in their own interest, but without the will and the efforts of that elite, the underprivileged of 1900 could never have been lifted up out of their misery.

After a while, Consultation bureaus for infants also took on the care for toddlers. And when most of the more scary diseases had been banished, the offices would not be abolished. All sorts of things were wrong with the upbringing of Dutch children. In 1938, at the third Congress for Preschool Care, it was argued that preschoolers were better off at a school in professional hands, than at home with their mothers, so I read in 'Kwetsbare kinderen. De groei van professionele zorg voor de jeugd.' [Vulnerable children: The growth of professional care for youth (PCM Bakker)].

In my opinion, the consultation bureau in The Hague marks the beginning of the caring society. It was the kick-off of Ellen Key's century of the child, in which every effort was made to protect the growing child from poor health, poor education and poor upbringing.

It also marks the beginning of the search for reasons why some children are different. From day one, parents were the main suspects.

I was not aware of this when our Sam was born. I felt a free mother, Jan felt a free father. We just had children, like so many other parents. We thought it was the most normal thing in the world to have children and start a family. How wonderful it that sounds: to start a family. Jan had a good job. I had a job. We lived in a nice flat and dreamed of a house with a garden one day. What was wrong with that?

Jan and I enjoyed the maternity period. It has its advantages, being a sailor. When Jan was off work, he was really free. We were able to enjoy Sam together for two months. Then the brand new dad went back to sea. Saying goodbye was suddenly a lot harder!

I had a very sympathetic boss at the time, and I got some extra leave because my husband was a sailor.

After six months, including some unpaid leave, though I don't remember how much exactly, I went back to work. For Sam, I had found a nice, older lady who looked after him on Mondays and Thursdays at our home. On Tuesday and Wednesday, my parents came. On Fridays, I was free.

It was a wonderful, carefree time. I even spend a few weeks with Sam on board with Jan for during the summer, when he was on a line in European waters.

7. School

After three years Sam's little brother Peter was born and Sam went to a nursery school a few times a week, only in the mornings. Peter's birth and Sam's school did not really have anything to do with each other, but Maria's children had been born a little earlier than mine and she used to give me useful tips, and also passed on clothes. 'Soon, Sam will have to go to primary school. That will be too much of an upset for him if you don't let him go to a nursery school first,' she said. I startled me. I hadn't thought about that at all. Although I was very much looking forward to the years to come. I saw them in my mind's eye. Sam in the classroom listening to the teacher, playing in the schoolyard. What would he want to be? What will he look like when he is six? Or twelve? Or grown up? It was wonderful to dream about Sam's future while he played with the duplo and I was feeding Peter on the couch. But I had not envisioned the transition from the safety of home to a busy classroom where one has to sit quietly on a chair.

Maria's daughter had gone to a small private nursery school run by a retired teacher. She was called Juf Marretje. I told Jan about it when he phoned me from Hamburg. I remember how sorry he was that he would not be there when Sam went to a school for the first time. I promised to take many pictures.

Marretje and her pleasant little class were in a classroom in a big old building, next to a visual artist who made very colourful paintings. The whole building was full of small businesses. I remember the artist because Sam always wanted to go in there. Sam liked the artist's paintings almost as much as his own, which adorned our refrigerator. He was a nice man and Sam was always welcome, except when he was working with smelly solvents. 'That's not good for your little lungs,' he used to say through a small crack in the door with a mask on his face.

Sam made two friends in Miss Marretje's class. That made the choice for the next school easy. The two friends had experienced parents and their choice of primary school was already made. During Jan's leave we went to have a look. It seemed like a nice school. They taught Montessori education and that was very trendy at the time. It teaches your child to work independently and that is a good thing if he wants to go to university later, they explained. The school was in demand. We lived in a medium-sized town and we thought it was important to choose a school that was a bit special, where other parents also made a conscious choice. We wanted the best for our child, our beautiful Sam. We had to enlist timely. We were actually about a year late, so we hadn't done that very well, but children from Miss Marretje's school enjoyed preference, the director explained. Thank goodness!

Now I read about Maria Montessori in a beautiful biography by an Italian journalist. And I read her own book, that she wrote at the end of the nineteenth century. She lived from

1870 to 1952. In her book *The Method* she relates how she came into contact with education. She was a strong enterprising lady, who never gave up. She studied medicine, which was quite exceptional for a woman in 1890. Moreover, she wrote her graduation thesis in a psychiatric clinic, in those days certainly no place for a lady from the well-to-do classes. As a medical assistant, coming into contact with the children who were admitted there, and especially the miserable conditions these children lived in, she got involved in their education. She immersed herself in the science of pedagogy, the psychology of the child and philosophy. This was new in her time. Idiot children were not educated, but locked up in institutions or left to their own devices to roam the streets. Montessori sought to educate the soul. She was ordered by the minister to start a school for the 'idiot children'. In preparation Montessori studied intensively the methods of Eduard Séguin, who a few decades earlier had developed a method for 'retarded children'. She even copied his book in its entirety, letter for letter, the better to drink in everything the scientist had to say. In the end, the 'idiotic' and 'retarded' children whom Montessori had taken under her wing made so much progress in just two years, that they could compete with the healthy and privileged children in the schools.

“Since I had devoted myself to the education of retarded children (1898-1900), I felt more and more that Séguin's methods contained nothing which made them especially suitable for the education of retarded children, - but that they were based on more rational principles than had been applied up to that time, so that even inferior faculties could be strengthened and developed by them. Here the children not only learnt, but their personalities were awakened.”

As I write this, I am reminded of the first time Sam's teacher called me into the school for a chat. She was worried, she said, because Sam did not yet know the colour yellow. She also thought his vocabulary was very small and wondered if we talked enough with Sam at home. Sam was also not good at sitting still. He was already five years old and would have to be able to do so in third grade, when he was going to learn to read and write. 'By the way,' she added, 'I am a bit worried about that too. Most children are already busy with letters and Sam has not caught on at all. A very sweet boy though, our Sam.' Mother should not worry too much.

Montessori, I know now, thought that the school desk was a bad invention. In her time a special school desk had been invented. It was thought that children got scoliosis from sitting still for so long in the classroom. So they invented a bench in which the child had to sit upright, to prevent their vertebrae from growing in a curve. Maria Montessori did not mince words and strongly criticised this policy:

“And when, in this same period of social progress, we find that children at school are labourers, working under conditions so contrary to the normal development of life that skeletal deformity may result - then our only answer to such a terrifying revelation is an orthopaedic bench. It would be like fobbing off a coal miner with a truss and a malnourished labourer with an arsenic preparation.”

Over a hundred years later, in the year 2015, as I am writing this, it is true that children no longer sit at the kind of school desks Montessori wrote about. But children do have to sit still in their seats. If children can't do that, the teacher gets worried. Some children are even given a pill so that the teacher is less bothered by them, and a personal budget ('backpack' with money) for the child to buy one hour a week of personal attention, to learn about his problem.

Montessori wrote a hundred and twenty years ago:

“One cannot say that an individual is disciplined merely because he has been artificially brought to the taciturnity of a mute and the immobility of a lame. That is not a disciplined individual, but one from whom all personal qualities have been suppressed. We call someone disciplined when he is master of himself, that is, when he can deploy his personality, following a rule of life wherever necessary.”

After the project I described, Montessori taught the teachers in her first school, Casa dei Bambini, to give children the freedom to explore for themselves. She prohibited the teachers from helping with every task, and taught them not to forbid and punish so much. Don't be angry if a child knocks over a chair, she explained. Because the child will put the chair upright by itself and find out for itself how to prevent it from happening again. She considered this a valuable process. And that was an entirely new insight. Montessori had furniture made to the size of the children. She gave the children their own tailor-made household tools. And she had teaching materials made after Séguin's example.

Montessori's famous teaching materials can still be found in the classrooms of Montessori schools. But the individual freedom for the child has long since disappeared.

I was not concerned with all this when I brought my little Sam to school. I had no idea. I was just a young inexperienced mother. I was not only a young mother, I belonged to the herd, wanted to belong to the herd, doing what everyone else does. All mothers of my

generation had only one thing in mind. To give their children everything they needed to be happy. We did not observe like Montessori and let the child discover. We did not teach ourselves, at home, as Key would have liked, teaching our children to take up their own responsibility; no, we kept on marching in step. Children should be able to measure up to their peers. Be equal, be better, get good grades and succeed. What is succeeding? A mother of a severely autistic girl once said to me: 'When my daughter learned to swim, that was the best moment of my life. I find it almost pathetic that parents of healthy children don't experience such highlights at all.' Once things are no longer taken for granted, a swimming diploma can be a highlight, incomparable to anything else. How is this perceived? In a condescending way, or very seriously, as it should be? Do we appreciate the achievements of every human being? No, I do not think so. Not any more. I think we have come to know only the one value. The value of high education and big salaries. The rest of humanity may suffer the goodwill of those who have succeeded and therefore dictate the rules. The same goodwill that the poor received in 1900. I don't think conditions have changed that much.

We let Sam start in group 1 at the beginning of the new school year. He was almost four and a half then. Jan was at home.

It was a beautiful day, Sam's first day at school. Peter was a bit weepy, as I remember. He didn't want to sit in his pram, but he did not want to walk either. Jan put him on his shoulders. I still have a photo of this, Jan among all those parents in the schoolyard with Peter towering over them all, his little hands on Jan's forehead. What were we thinking then? How did we feel? I remember looking at all those parents with older children in admiration, because they were so much more advanced than I was. There were groups of parents talking animatedly. We stood around a bit and I realised that I would be gaining a new circle of acquaintances. Soon I would also know parents. The parents of Sam's class.

I remember not knowing what to do with Peter's pram and I left it in the schoolyard as we pushed our way in. On the first day, all parents were allowed in, but as Jan put Peter on the floor in Sam's classroom, Peter started screaming so terribly that I picked him up and hurriedly went back outside again. Parents nodded understandingly at me while I worked my way back out against the flow of incoming people, with red-faced Peter in my arms. 'Ah yes, those little ones. It's too crowded for them, isn't it?'

For a while I sat all alone with Peter in the shadow of the beautiful chestnut tree in the schoolyard, as the first parents started to come out again. The parents of Sam's friends from the playgroup came up to me. 'Don't you want to look inside?' they asked. I explained that Peter was not feeling well. 'Shall we babysit for a while?' suggested Marijke, one of the mothers. I appreciated this so much that I didn't dare refuse, but somehow I knew that it wouldn't go well. Not knowing how to explain this to her, I said, 'Oh, thank you, how sweet. I'd love to.'

I handed Peter's hand over to Marijke and walked to the door. As I went in, I could just hear Peter starting to roar. I walked on, I remember this because the other mother came to get me as I was kneeling next to Sam, who was proudly showing me the space under the table where he would put his exercise books, as soon as he had them. Peter had become so terribly upset that they had started to worry. They asked me to come out. In the square, little Peter stood screaming at the fence while Marijke, stooping, was talking to the back of his head, her hand stretched out to him. I can still see the picture clearly before me. I couldn't calm Peter down either, I remember that too. And I see those two mothers walking away, talking to each other. I felt very insecure. My child was doing something I wasn't sure about, if it would be considered normal by the mothers I wanted to belong to.

8. The educationnalist

'We have moved!' That's what it says in my old diary. On the previous day it says: 'moving'. I was probably so anxious about the move that, to encourage myself, I also put in the diary when it would be over.

We were very happy with the new house. We had a garden with a shed, four bedrooms upstairs and an attic. Truly a house for a family with children.

I have no trouble recalling why I was so terribly anxious about the move.

Sam was almost five and Peter was almost two at the time. I was at the end of my third pregnancy, and Peter had decided some time before that he would no longer sleep during the day, and not at night either. Every night at two o'clock he would wake up, wanting to play. Until about five o'clock either Jan or I would sit up with him on the sofa. Usually I would put on a Disney video for him, hoping that I could doze off a bit. But I wouldn't be able to sleep because he would be playing with his farm and the farm animals he had very interesting conversations with them.

Good advice is difficult to get. I thought about having to feed the new baby at night, and how Peter's sleeping rhythm would then be the death of me, without a doubt. I asked my mother. She said: 'Just let him scream. He will go to sleep.'

'But Mum, he works his way out of the cot. He lets himself fall over the side onto the floor.'

'Good heavens, isn't that dangerous? Dad? What do you think?' she asked my father.

My father also thought it dangerous and promised to raise the sides of the cot.

Since then, Peter used to scream every night until I would take him out. I let him scream on once. I regret that to this day. He hollered for three hours. Sam came to me and we

were listening to it together in my bed. 'Why doesn't he go to sleep Mum,' Sam asked and I didn't know. Finally I still had to get Peter out of bed, scarlet and sweaty. The next day, and that was only a few hours later, I called in sick at work and let Sam stay home for the day.

I remember how, in my desperation, I called the parenting helpline. 'Ask the people at the ('infant consultation centre' (Consultatie Bureau) CB,' said the kind pedagogue on the other end, after a half-hour conversation. He didn't know either.

The people at the clinic said that it was not healthy for a child to scream for more than half an hour. And they asked if I wanted help with parenting. I discussed it with Jan when he called from a port and he said, 'Try it. Maybe they have useful tips. You mustn't tire yourself out too much. Think about the baby.'

We moved during Jan's leave, four weeks before the birth. My maternity leave had also started.

While Jan and I were hanging an enormous map of the world in Sam's room, the telephone rang. I remember the moment precisely because with my big belly I was standing on a chair, holding up the map, while Jan pricked the drawing pins. Sam handed me the phone and I stood on the chair, holding the map with my other hand, to speak to the social worker. We were up for family counselling or whatever it was called. She wanted to make an appointment.

About a week later, while we were still surrounded by boxes filled with incomprehensible stuff, the social worker visited us for the intake. She introduced herself as the contact person. If other help was needed, we could ask her to organise it. Then she asked us a gazillion of questions. How Peter's pregnancy had gone. How the maternity period had been. If we'd noticed anything special or unusual. Whether help had been requested before. 'Yes,' I said, 'at the parenting helpline.' She nodded politely, she had read that in my application. How was Sam? Everything all right at school? No worries there?

In a way, I was happy with the interview. I was so worried about Peter's sleeping problem, often wondering if there was anything else I could do. Whether there were things I didn't know. If I was failing somehow. The social worker seemed very interested. She promised me that the educationalist was specialised in precisely such questions and would certainly be able to help us.

So we had an educationalist come to visit us. The first time, she came for an introductory meeting. She had a pile of papers on her lap and said apologetically that first we had to fill in the questionnaires together. 'But I've already done that with Mrs X from social work,' I objected. 'I'm very sorry,' she said, 'but yes, it has to be done.'

I cannot remember the questions verbatim, but I do remember we worked on it for a good hour. It was about all sorts of things. About how Peter was as a baby, how he had

developed. How Jan and I did this and that, and whether we ever quarrelled. Well, of course Jan and I had fights. 'Oh, yes? And are the children present with that?'

Jan later said: 'Why did that woman have to know all these things?'

My father was visiting to help Jan put together the new cupboards, and he thought it all very plausible. It was a good thing that people were getting help in bringing up their children. 'It contributes to a healthy society', he said. 'This definitely is an improvement compared to the old days. My parents had to figure it all out for themselves.'

Reading this back, I think that in the old days things didn't go so badly at all. Despite the war and all that my father had to go through as a little boy, he has become a very sweet, hard-working man, who always considered his duties and responsibilities the most important guidelines in his life.

The second time the educator came was during dinner. She wanted to observe the family, she had explained. Sam was a good eater, in fact he liked everything, but as if by devil's work, when the educator joined us he refused to take a bite. It was a predictable situation but at the time I couldn't deal with it at all. I wanted to show that I had a nice family, that my children are wonderful and that I am a very sensible mother. But Sam was not going to cooperate. There was a stranger at the table and he sensed very well that she wasn't there to have a good time. He wriggled on his chair, tried to push his head under the table, went shooting peas at Peter, who roared with joy. And I kept spouting pedagogic, seemingly appropriate reprimands. 'Sit up, don't do that, eat your food, if you go on like this I'll send you to your room.' And that person kept uttering understanding remarks: 'Oh yes, I understand, there's a stranger at the table'. And to me: 'It doesn't matter. I can see through this.'

My scalp contracts again when I think about it.

Let me be clear, I have never found it a problem if my children didn't empty their plates. As a kid, when I used to whine over my food at home, I was sent up to my room. I was not allowed to leave it until I had finished my plate. So up in my bedroom, I would throw the food out of the window. Until the neighbours across the street called my parents and told on me. Then I was not allowed to play outside for a week. My parents had been through the war and knew about hunger. I was supposed to be more grateful and had to eat up what was on my plate, even when I'd had enough. Of course, later I understood why my parents were nagging me about food, but I would never do that to my children. Why would I? I am not a war child. It's not at all healthy to eat on after you have had enough. My children are not bins. The bin is under the kitchen sink. I have never lost this rebelliousness about food and eating.

After observing our family for a few weeks, the educationalist declared she wanted to discuss The Plan with me.

It turned out that there was a great deal wrong with the way we did things. We would have to be much more consistent with the children. Fixed mealtimes were very important, according to the educationalist. She gave us a day schedule to follow. I asked her what I could do to get Peter to sleep through the night, uncertain what all this had to do with Peter's sleeping. After all, that was the reason why I asked for her help. She said: 'Let's get this sorted out first. Maybe then Peter will sleep better too.'

Ingeborg was born on a beautiful sunny day in March.

The contractions started in the middle of the night, of course, but she did not see the light of day until one o'clock in the afternoon. A beautiful pink baby with round cheeks and black hair. She was born as sister to two busy brothers who loved frolicking and pillow fights, chasing each other around the house, screaming at the top of their voices. From the very beginning, Ingeborg slept through everything. I remember my mother's surprise. 'We used to observe rest and regularity,' she would say.

I fed when the baby asked. I had done the same with the boys, and fortunately this was allowed in those days. But my mother thought that strange too. 'Dear, dear, how you spoil your baby', she often said. I asked Maria about it. She said, 'Oh, your mother is old school. Rest, cleanliness and regularity. Very old-fashioned. Just do as you see fit. You can only be a mother from your heart, isn't it.'

You can only be a mother from your heart. I will carry this statement with me all my life, hold on to it, comfort myself with it. All those years that were still to come, filled with anxiety and uncertainty, they have left their mark, as I know now. But still, 'you can only be a mother from your heart'. If I have done it all wrong, sue me. I only ever had nothing but my heart. Those people who interfered with everything, they felt nothing, they saw a file, a case. And a stupid mother who wouldn't listen. If only I had been more independent. If only I had said: 'Enough! Get lost everyone. We are going away. We'll go somewhere where we won't be bothered. Where we may enjoy life, and each other. Where we are allowed to be... just to be...

9. The report

My sisters were on maternity visit. My eldest sister is called Lucia and my second sister Johanna. Lucia is an accountant, our math wizard. She has two children, a boy and a girl. Lucia works mainly from home. She does the accounting of all kinds of small businesses. Her husband is a tax consultant. She met her stick-in-the-mud while she was studying 'calculating', as Johanna and I always teasingly call it. But Bert is okay. Just a bit precise. And not very flexible.

Johanna is a bit of a wild one. After her final exams at highschool level, she obediently went to university. But she only really wanted to be a visual artist, so she gave up her studies and enrolled in an art academy. Dad was very disappointed, but he kept his cool. When I asked mum about it, she sighed. 'Oh well,' she said. 'It'll pass.' Without explaining what it was exactly that would pass. I suspect that dad complained to her a lot: 'These children have so many opportunities . And what do they do? They throw it away! Is that what we struggled for?' Or something similar.

After all the cries of adoration, while Jan was handing round tea and traditional biscuits, Johanna asked: 'Marta, how is Peter sleeping now? Do you simply sit up *all* night now? Haha. Feeding the baby, watching tv with Peter, feeding the baby. Or do you now watch TV with Peter Jan?' Jan chuckled dutifully. 'We do our watches,' the sailor replied vaguely.

'Oh. But is that woman helpful at all? What's her name again?'

'Her name is Mariëlle and she thinks we should be stricter with the boys, then Peter will sleep better,' I said this as if I was reading out a manual.

'Oh, well. As they used to say, rest and regularity, didn't they?' Johanna looked at me mockingly.

Lucia, our well-organised sister, missed the pun. 'Yes, well, certainly, very important,' she said. And Johanna laughed in her face.

As Lucia embarked on a story about her children, how well they were doing at school and that they were both in the first hockey team, 'the little ones-team, of course?', I felt an overwhelming sense of resentment rising against that educationalist-woman. There was an appointment scheduled for the upcoming week, the first one after our maternity leave. I didn't feel like keeping it. That person in my home, telling me what to do with my own children, while the actual problem I had called her in for, already seemed to be solving itself.

In the last week before Ingeborg's birth, Peter didn't want to go to bed at all. We let that slide a bit because we didn't feel like fussing. The baby was due any day. In the evenings, Jan and I let Peter wander around the living room, until he fell a sleep on the sofa. Simply for the sake of peace and quiet. Eventually Peter made the couch his bed. He had found a blanket somewhere and by eleven o'clock he laid down on the couch and went to sleep. We thought we were being clever, Jan carrying Peter upstairs to his bed later that night, but that turned out to be not a good idea. Half an hour later Peter would be screaming in his cot, his little hands clasped furiously around the bars. So now we just let him lie on the couch downstairs. And he slept! It was a blessing.

Why did this happen in this way? I don't know. We could not see inside Peter's head. He could not explain to us what happened in his bed at night. He wanted to sleep on the sofa

and that was the end of it. I saw no reason not to allow it. He slept. The whole night. Exactly at the time when Ingeborg was born, we no longer had to worry about Peter's sleep for a while. I considered it great timing.

The educationalist had a different opinion. Children should sleep in a bed. Moreover, children had to learn to obey. 'What if he decides he wants to sleep in your bed! Are you two going to sleep in his cot then?'

I felt the blood rise in my neck, calmly explaining to her that I actually wanted to stop the coaching. Mariëlle looked at me with raised eyebrows. That decision was mine to make, of course', she said, but she was worried and she would put that in her report. Suddenly I felt threatened by this woman. Suddenly I realised what I had done. I had opened my home to a complete stranger, and as a result we were at the mercy of someone's convictions who doesn't necessarily understand my life or care about us. Maybe she comes from a very strict Christian family and considers us wicked and frivolous. Why is what she says the truth? Jan probably saw that I had reached the end of my tether because he quickly said: 'Fine, do we get to read the report too?'

Yes, of course we would get it, in fact we would even have to sign it.

The report came two weeks later. The maternity nurse had long since left and Jan and I were engrossed in our new daughter and the boys. I had completely forgotten about Mariëlle. My father was visiting us. My mother was away for the day with friends and dad was having dinner with us. Jan came in with the big envelope with the organisation's logo on it. 'Shall we open it tomorrow?' he asked. But I was too curious and tore it open.

Mariëlle wrote in her report that we were a loving family. The parents clearly show affection for their children. From this we were to understand that there are parents who have no affection for their children. Something I had never thought about. But, wrote the social worker, we also held a rather libertine view of parenting. The second son calls the shots and mother doesn't consider that a problem, she wrote in the report. She also thought our home was often untidy and that we had our meals at irregular hours, which was not beneficial to raising two rowdy boys. At that moment I resolved never again to let anyone into my home, to advise me about my own children.

'This is outrageous!' I exclaimed.

'Why,' said Jan, 'she has to write down something, otherwise she can't justify her hours. She's just throwing her weight about.'

'Yes, but Jan. How old was she? Twenty-six? What can she be thinking, such a young chick like that!'

My father looked thoughtful. 'Well, those girls get a solid education, you know. It may seem a bit over the top. You are responsible parents. But many people really do need a little help in bringing up their children. Children are now very well looked after by

Consultation Bureaus and school doctors. There used to be a boy in my class with a terribly crooked back and X-legs. All right, it was just after the war, but still. If someone had payed attention in time, prescribing vitamins, things might have turned out very differently for that boy. Not all parents are as caring as you... or, or, ... as well educated. That also counts, doesn't it?

I had to think about this for a long time. I felt aggrieved by the educationalist. As if I wasn't doing it right. And I did. I knew that for sure. I didn't like strictly regulated households at all. That's how it used to be at my home, when I was young. The table was set three times a day, every day. Breakfast, lunch and dinner. Only on Sundays we skipped lunch. Then everyone could get something to eat for themselves. Often there would be a pot of soup for lunch. Or dad would make a small Indonesian 'rice table', with sambal that was much too spicy. Then the whole house would be filled with the fumes and we'd all be coughing. Sunday was church in the morning, sherry at noon and the enormous amount of washing up after dad's cooking, late in the afternoon. And then the table was set again at half past six promptly. At a quarter to seven we had dinner, no matter if we were still full from the abundant ricemeal. Then my sisters and I again did the washing up. At eight there was coffee, with the news. Every day. Later my mother discovered decaffeinated coffee; then we had that in the evenings.

Is it so crazy that we do things differently, Jan and I? What is so important about this regularity? Do children need it? I didn't do anything at school despite the strict regularity of my parents. How was that in the past? Weren't teenagers lazy in Dad's time? Will I have irresponsible children if I don't set the table three times a day? I was young, a new mother. The uncertainty that was suddenly forced upon me made me angry. I decided to call Mariëlle.

It didn't go very well, that conversation. I was too offended. I blamed her for betraying my trust by writing about us like that. She defended herself. She didn't mean to make me angry. She was there to help. It sounded a lot like what Jan and dad had said. She was doing her job like she was supposed to. If she saw things that worried her, she had to write it down. Otherwise she could be accused later of having overlooked things. Later? What do you mean, later? I was not yet assertive enough to ask. That would grow over the years. Now I just imagined that I understood her reasoning. I had to understand her situation. I gave in. I asked if I could sign off on it and then add my own report, if they would be archived together. She promised that it would.

The report that I wrote is still neatly stored in the enormous 'Peter' file that I have filled over the years.

“On 2 March this year I called in the help of bureau x because I was looking for educational advice. One of my children sleeps so little and is awake for so long at night that my husband and I were worried. Our second son Peter is a special child. He is only two years

old but he already talks in full sentences. And he has so much to tell us throughout the day! He is very different from Sam, our eldest. Sam is very thoughtful and doesn't talk much. But Peter is very active all day and talks nineteen to the dozen. He is clearly very intelligent, just like his brother. As parents, we are not worried about him.

The reason we asked for help from an educationalist was his sleeping rhythm. About six months ago Peter started waking up at night, wanting to get out of bed. We were up all night with him. He did not sleep during the day either and we were worried about this. I phoned the parenting hotline and was advised to call in an educationalist. Since then, Peter's sleeping is much better and we no longer need any help.”

Now that I read this report again, I again feel the same need I had at the time to defend myself. Peter was special. Jan and I knew that. We didn't mind. A special child will go far! Those were the very words the proud grandparents used. I did not want to defend myself for my child, or for my faith in my children, as I would have said before. Now I say: for my unconditional love for them. And still I did exactly that. I defended myself.

10. The photograph

There's a large photograph above Peter's bed. His room has undergone several metamorphoses over the years, but that photo has always remained. I often look at it. Sometimes, when I was doing the rooms, I would sit down on one of the small chairs and stare at the picture, remembering that wonderful holiday. Nowadays, Peter often sits there himself, gaming behind his desk, his gaze fixed on the screen. I know he doesn't like it much when I'm there. He's afraid I'll nag. That he shouldn't be gaming so often. That it's not healthy. That he could become addicted. But now Sam is abroad and I know he misses him. So I let him.

We went to Denmark. The boys were four and seven and Ingeborg just two. We had rented an old farmhouse with a huge garden surrounding it. The house was not by the road but at the end of a dirt track. We enjoyed a wonderful freedom there. Behind the house, there was a farm track through the cornfields to a typical Danish beach. Danish beaches on the Baltic Sea side of Jutland are generally small, sheltered, always full of stones and dried-up or rotting water plants, and there are plenty of little beetles, shellfish and crabs to be found. It is a paradise for children with buckets, spades and fishing nets. After a few days

in this remote enchanted place, there was little distinction between the beach and the kitchen table. There were snails, ladybirds, and once a large dung beetle with its many protrusions crawling through the kitchen and over the counter.

I took the photo in Peter's bedroom during an outing. We had driven to a harbour because Jan wanted to look at boats. Nyborg. In itself not the most charming of towns, but for a sailor there is plenty to see. Moreover, the bridge across the Great Belt starts at Nyborg and had been completed only a few years earlier. An impressively high structure. We looked it up for the boys in a leaflet that we fished out of a rack at the Danish tourist office. The bridge is 18 kilometres long and the highest clearance is 65 metres. But the poles from which the bridge is suspended are 254 metres high.

For the boys, however, this feat of Danish engineering paled into insignificance when we visited a Dutch sailing ship moored in the harbour. Jan got talking to the skipper, knowing well how to ask a few sensible questions, and before we knew it we were invited on board. Sam and Peter were ecstatic and immediately disappeared through a hole in the deckhouse. Jan started an animated conversation about masts and ropes with the friendly bearded skipper. I felt very displaced, I remember, even though I am not really a nervous mother. 'Where are the boys Jan? Can't they come to any harm?' 'Not at all,' said the skipper, 'as long as they're inside there's nothing to worry about. On deck they have to wear a life jacket.'

A life jacket, ah yes. I stood with Ingeborg on my hip listening to a conversation that might as well have been conducted in Greek, not understanding a word of it. Suddenly a nice young lady who seemed to have risen from the deck said to me: 'What wonderful sons you have. That little one ... that's Peter, isn't it? Such clever questions! They already know how to start the engine, where the bilge pump is and what a life raft is. Soon they'll be able to start working here!'

Jan and the skipper laughed heartily. 'What is a life raft?' I asked. I remember thinking: are those kept inside?

'They are the white round things on the foredeck.'

'On the foredeck? Where are the boys then?'

Oh, they've already seen the whole ship and climbed up the front hatch. There's someone with them though,' she added, seeing my alarmed expression.

The skipper nodded understandingly and took a pair of life jackets from a chest.

I was already on my way in the direction the girl had pointed out to me, with Ingeborg on my hip. The poor child became entangled in all kinds of ropes as I stressfully made my way through the narrow gangway. I found no children on the foredeck. 'Jan!' my heart was in my throat. The kind girl guided my gaze in the right direction. It took my breath away. There the boys were, sitting on a pole sticking a long way out of the bow of the ship. The

bowsprit, they taught me later. Someone was sitting next to them. And although there was a sort of fishing net stretched out under the pole, I think Peter would have fitted through the meshes.

Jan told me to stay calm and simply stepped into the net, clambering forward with the life jackets in his hand. Together with the crew member he put the life jackets on the boys. And then he sat there too, on the pole, next to the sails with the water beneath them. Peter sat between his legs and Sam hung against his back with his arms around his neck. The crew member modestly withdrew and climbed on deck. 'Cool guys', he said to me, grinning broadly.

And I looked at them. My men, sitting there, backlit by the sun, peering out over the glistening water that gently rippled and reflected the sunlight sparkling on the bow, on the sails, on Peter's trainers. No doubt they dreamt about sailing across oceans. Jan explained something to them. He pointed upwards and the boys looked up at the masthead, and then I took the picture. It became a dream photo. Soft and mysterious, the boys partly in backlight, but their faces just out of the shadows. Everything about the picture is warm and summery and yet veiled. Just as our life was back then. Beautiful, warm and full of expectation. Not a cloud in the sky.

When I look at that photo I smell the fresh summer air, the typical smell of the ship, I feel Ingeborg's little arm around my leg as I take the picture.

Over the years this photo has changed from a beautiful memory into a wistful longing, a reason for crying. Crying for what is gone, for despair, for the elusive nature of the events that relentlessly sent us in a direction no one wanted to go.

11. Primary school

Teacher Debby from Group 3* rested her chin in her hand and looked at me intensely. I caught myself explaining a lot, again. Teacher Debby had just delivered a long diatribe. Peter would not remain seated in his bench. He constantly stood up and bothered other children. He never finished his daily task and when teacher Debby then assigned it as homework, it often didn't get done. I tried to explain that maybe it was a bit too easy for Peter. Perhaps if he was given somewhat more difficult work, Peter would feel more challenged.

Teacher Debby explained that underachievement was indeed a characteristic of giftedness, but that she did not feel that Peter was unusually intelligent. Nor did it explain why Peter kept getting up, walking around and making other children angry.

'Is it alright if I sign Peter up for RT? Later on he may be too far behind to catch up.'

'To far behind? He could already read in group 2!'

'Yes, but at the moment he is only in box 1. Most children are already in box 3. Maybe it is a bit too difficult for him.'

Too difficult? I couldn't imagine that. Later on I would find out that there were more children in box 1, especially boys, and that there were also many children who were still working in box 2. So why the rush?

'Perhaps it would have been better if Peter had had an extra year in kindergarten.'

It had been a subject of discussion. The teacher of the kindergarten found Peter difficult. But Jan and I were concerned that he would only become more difficult if he wasn't allowed to go to the next level.

It was 8 o'clock on Thursday morning and Peter didn't want to go to school. He claimed that he had a stomach ache. But it was the third Thursday in a row that Peter complained of a tummy ache and did not want to go to school. Like most working mothers, I was free on Wednesdays, not Thursdays. I called my mother.

'Does he have a stomachache again?' she exclaimed, 'Well all right, I'll come.'

When I think back of that time, what is still clear in my mind is how we, the parents, took it for granted that our children were being assessed all the time. And I myself judged other people's children just as easily. I remember running into a mother in the street whom I had not seen in the schoolyard for a while. Her son was in a higher grade than Peter, but I hadn't seen him for a while either. I spoke to her. She acted very cheerful and happy at first, but when I asked her about Josh, she started crying. I stood in the street for 15 minutes listening to a story that I couldn't believe at that time. Josh was now at another school. And he was deeply unhappy there. He had had two friends at the Montessori but at the new school he made no friends at all. She told me how she had tried to keep Josh at the Montessori, without success. He was dyslexic and still read at too low a level. Math wasn't going well either, and the fourth grade teacher and Mrs. Rascals from RT had explained to her that school X was much quieter and that it would suit Josh better. They would really pay attention to his problems. But that was not true at all, the mother said. It was awful. Josh's reading was getting worse and now he was wetting the bed again.

I was shocked, but I am ashamed to admit that I also thought: There must be more to it than that. It must be you, I thought, or there is something wrong with Josh that is more serious than you want to admit. And there are special schools for that. That was a good thing.

And now here I was, sitting across from Mrs Rascals from RT. And the first thing I thought: you are not going to send my child away. Immediately, I had the ominous feeling that I could end up in the same boat as Josh's mother. But that was not going to happen. Not to my Peter, who could name all the different beetles in the garden, who at four years old knew the difference between mammals and fish, whales and sharks, spiders and beetles, who could recognise trees by their leaves. No, this child would never be like Josh.

'In the last test Peter scored remarkably low, far below average.' Rascals announced, after her polite welcome speech.

'The last test?' I asked. 'But I thought the children don't take that test until the eighth grade?'

Mrs Rascals smiled indulgently. 'We test from the third grade onwards. But the children don't notice it, don't worry.'

'Oh. Well, neither do I,' I said more sharply than I intended.

'If you would like to take a look,' she slid a diagram across the table towards me, 'you will see that Peter's reading comprehension is, well ... a good deal below average.'

I looked at a piece of paper which showed a graph with two rising lines. One was Peter's and the other was that of the normal child at that age, Rascals explained. Peter's line was lower than that of the normal child. 'Normal child?' I asked. 'Do you mean Peter is not normal?'

'In terms of his score, no.'

I was not prepared for this confrontation. Mrs Rascals saw my confusion and went on more reassuringly. She would take Peter under her wing for a while. She was very busy but a pupil had just been transferred to another school. (Josh? I thought involuntarily.) So there was an opening.

'Was that Josh?' I asked.

'What do you mean?'

'That pupil who has been transferred?'

'I'm not allowed to talk about other pupils, of course,' said Rascals kindly, 'but no, Josh has been gone for some time.'

The thought that another pupil had just been sent away didn't exactly put me at ease.

I called Maria.

Jan was on the other side of the ocean. In those days there was no possibility to call the ship. Jan would call if he was in port long enough. That is, if the port authority had put a

telephone on board, and Jan happened to be free at a time when it was not the middle of the night for us.

Maria was well informed, as usual. She could tell me all sorts of things about the possibilities parents have nowadays to defend themselves against annoying schools.

'Although your Peter is in a good school.'

'Oh yes?'

'Yes, that school has a really good reputation.'

'Oh.' I felt like mother Josh.

Maria advised me to have my own evaluation done. She knew a mother who had done the same for her daughter. It turned out that the girl's left and right hemispheres were not working well together. 'You see, if there is a report from a specialist, the school has to work with that.'

'How is that girl now?' I asked.

'Oh well, still not good. But some parents always find things to whine about.'

Mother Josh.

'Oh yes?'

'Yes, you know. I think ... maybe those parents want too much. Some parents have too high expectations and then a child falls victim to it.'

'Do you think my expectations are too high? For Peter?'

'Oh no! Sweetheart! That is not what I mean at all! Peter is so very clever! Of course you want the best for him!'

'Actually, I just want him to enjoy going to school. He's home every Thursday with a stomach ache.'

'What's on Thursdays then?'

'Oh that's a good question. I don't know, actually.'

I did know but I didn't want Maria to jump to conclusions. Peter had sports on Thursdays. Wouldn't he like that? I had also noticed that Peter never asked any friends to come home with him. Sam had a whole group of friends around him. Every Wednesday, after school, there was a lot of bargaining going on in the square about who was going home with whom to play. But Peter I always had to fetch from the sandpit. He usually sat there in a corner. He did have children around him. But did he play with them? I decided to watch him more closely.

Jan was home on leave and my parents were visiting.

He had had to stay on board longer than agreed. The shipping company was in trouble. According to Jan, they didn't have enough permanent employees, so they used temporary workers now and then. These were more expensive than permanent staff, so his own time on board was extended. Each time Jan was at sea, they added a few weeks and this time he had been on board almost two months longer than agreed in his contract. Six months in all! Ingeborg's vocabulary had doubled in that time. Jan hardly recognised his own daughter.

It didn't used to bother me that Jan went sailing. I had my own work and activities. But now, with the difficulties at Peter's school and our little girl growing so fast. Sam was getting so robust. When I see how happy they are that daddy is back.

Jan looked tired. He had Ingeborg on his lap who was already dozing off a bit. We had finished our evening meal. The boys had slipped quietly from their chairs and were now hanging in front of the television.

'How is Peter doing at school?' asked Jan, 'he seems very quiet.'

'We must have him examined,' I replied somewhat bluntly. So it was out in the open.

My father raised his eyebrows. My mother said 'Oh dear.' And Jan said, 'What?'

'The RT teacher says he's lagging behind.'

'What's an RT person?'

My father took the floor.

'Marta means the remedial teacher. That's an education specialist. Most good schools nowadays have someone like that on their staff. A very good development, you know. Children who are having problems in the classroom come to light more quickly and something can be done about it sooner. What do you mean by examined, Marta?'

'A boy has been sent away from school. What am I saying? I already know of *two* children who have been sent away. I don't want that to happen to us.'

'Well, I'm sure it won't come to that,' my father said.

'Sent away?' said Jan.

'Yes, I met a mother the other day, Josh's mother. Josh isn't in the Montessori school anymore. According to his mother they misinformed her. It was supposed to be better for him at another school, but that turned out not to be the case at all.'

'Oh well, those stories,' my father said, 'you can never be sure what's really going on with a child like that.'

'But I don't get it.' Jan had looked from one to the other frowning. 'Send him away? Why would they send Peter away?'

'He's below average,' I said.

'That's the situation at this moment,' my father said, 'you shouldn't take it too seriously.'

'Rascals is taking it very seriously.'

'Rascals?'

'The RT-er.'

'Is that woman called Rascals? I'll tell her where she gets off, with a name like that!' We all laughed. 'What can she be thinking?' Jan said softly to Ingeborg's sleeping face.

'Shall I put her to bed?' He got up carefully with our child in his arms. I thanked heaven that he was home.

* In group three children are six, it is the first class of primary school

12. The examination by the orthopedagogue

On my father's advice I asked Mrs Rascals if she knew anyone who could examine Peter. 'If these people know each other, the school will be more inclined to take their advice', my father thought.

Mrs Rascals thought it very wise that we took this step. A good friend of hers was an orthopedagogue. Mrs X had her own practice close to the school. There was a one-month waiting list. 'A waiting list?' exclaimed Jan. 'How many children need to see an orthopedagogue?' That last remark sounded rather contemptuous.

The examination consisted of two visits and cost 350 euros. The euro had only just been introduced, and Jan calculated that it would cost 700 guilders and was flabbergasted.

I asked our insurance company. The consultant explained to me that this was a frequent question, but that such an assessment would be at our own expense. Schools themselves

were capable of examining children, the lady on the phone explained. 'But if we as parents don't agree with their findings? We have a right to a second opinion, don't we?'

The lady on the phone was very sympathetic, but as long as there is no clinical picture, the health insurance doesn't cover it, she explained. The words 'clinical picture' gave me a shock. It felt like a moment of choice. Why were we going to that orthopedagogue? What did we expect to hear from her?

Johanna called because she had just sold a work of art in a small gallery. She was over the moon. After she had explained to me at length which painting had been sold and how much it had fetched, and that now she really hoped for a breakthrough, she asked about Peter. She had spoken to Mum.

'I don't understand why you let yourself get so worked up. That's not like you at all,' she said after listening to my story.

'But what if he doesn't make it? Then it will be my fault. Then he will blame me later for not doing enough for him. He's smart enough, isn't he?'

'Yes of course he is. You sound almost like Daddy, if not exactly. I didn't like school at all, I don't blame Peter.'

'Well this isn't really helping.'

'No, I get that. Everyone has to become a professor. So your child too.'

'Well no, that's not it at all. I think it's great that you have chosen your own path. But you did that when you were grown up. You weren't made to choose when you were six.'

Johanna was silent for a while. I stared out of the window. A rabbit was walking in the garden. That beast of the neighbours had broken loose again.

'What does that Mrs X say?' she finally asked.

'We've only had the introductory talk. Next week Peter has to spend a whole morning with her.'

'Well I'm curious.'

We chatted some more about her painting and the owner of the gallery who seemed to understand her art so well.

Two weeks later Jan, Peter and I were invited by Mrs X to be informed of her findings. She had also written a report for us to read, she explained on the phone.

Mrs X had her practice in a large stately house. It was in a park-like area. We had to take a path along the house to get to the practice, which was in the back garden.

'Nice place,' Jan said, 'I'm going to be an orthopaedagogue too.'

'Orthopaedagogue,' repeated Peter, walking between us.

'Oh boys, let's not start,' I said.

Peter laughed. It was the first laugh of the day. I was relieved and chuckled a bit too. We went in, feeling better.

Mrs X was a rather posh lady, with a thousand euro smell, Jan said later.

'Peter is a normally intelligent boy whose school results don't match,' Mrs X started off, after the 'Good day, glad you're here.'

'Oh good,' I said involuntarily, thinking this was good news.

'Well,' said Mrs X seriously, 'that's obviously something to worry about.'

I heard Jan inhale deeply and in the corner of my eye I saw him growing a few centimetres taller. Mrs X promptly sat up a little too. 'Look,' she said, 'there is no significant difference between the verbal and performal skills.'

'What is performal?' asked Jan. I was glad he asked, I didn't know either. Mrs X laid her arms relaxed on the table with her palms together, visibly content that she could assert her authority, and explained patiently. 'Verbal is about the vocabulary, the sense of language. Performal is how he manages in practice. How he solves problems. It's about spatial insight, for example. So in fact we can say that his intelligence profile is harmonious and that is indeed good news', said Mrs X kindly. 'But!'

We were both silent. I looked at Jan. He had a deep frown on his forehead.

'But his school results don't match up to this, so there's something wrong, of course. A normal boy should perform normally, right?'

At this point Peter got up and walked to the corner of the room. There was a table with toys for the little ones. He sat down and began to examine a wooden truck with interest.

Mrs X went on to say that she felt Peter's hand-eye coordination was not well developed and that perhaps his left and right hemispheres were not working together well enough. She suggested that Peter hadn't played enough in the sandbox, and that this might be because father was a sailor and mother had too little time to concern herself with Peter's playing. 'You work too, don't you?' she asked me unexpectedly. Yes I was still working then.

It was all in the report she had made, we could read all about it at home.

'A lot of structure', she said. And small steps. That is the most sensible thing. If you like, I will send my findings to the school.'

'I'd rather do that myself,' I said a little too quickly. Mrs X gazed at me over her reading glasses.

'We like to read it first,' Jan explained, 'your report.'

'Oh well, as you wish. I have a warm contact with Georgette Rascals. We were college buddies. But you don't have to worry. I won't do anything you don't like.'

In the car Peter said he wanted to go back to Miss Marretje. It distracted Jan and me from our worries for a moment; we laughed about it. 'Did you like the wooden truck so much?' I asked. Peter did not answer and stared out of the window. For the first time I felt an indefinable sadness emerging inside me. I felt powerless. What could I do? How could I make him look less serious, smile again and skip to school without a care in the world? He wasn't happy. He wanted to go back to where he had felt safe. To the little ones, to teacher Marretje.

It kept nagging at me. Sam and I sat on the sofa. He with a Donald Duck comicbook, I with some magazine. Jan had gone to the petting zoo with Peter and Ingeborg. Sam was about to go to a piano lesson.

'Sam, does Peter like it at school?'

'I don't know. Does he have to?'

'Well, you do like school, don't you?'

'Yes, sometimes.' Sam continued to peer in his comicbook.

'Sometimes? Sam? Sometimes?'

'Well, most of the time. Miss Sideburn is stupid.'

'You mean Miss Sports?'

'Yes, she shouts all the time.'

'Well if that's all.'

Sam giggled. 'We hid her trainers and then she got mad.'

'Oh well that's not very nice.'

'They were hanging in the flagpole.' He chuckled. 'And then sports class was cancelled.'

Sam likes it at school, I thought involuntarily. I needn't worry about that. At the most, he might have to stay after school sometimes.

'But Sam ... Peter ... do you ever see him at school? On the school playground or something?'

'We don't have our break at the same time. I'm in the middle years. The little ones go separately. Mark says they're bullying Peter.'

'Who? Who are 'they' Sam?' I snatched away his comicbook.

'How should I know!' Indignation.

Jan and I had barely spoken about the interview. Jan seemed impressed. The report was full of difficult words.

Peter's intelligence was indicated by the TIQ (105), the VIQ(110) and the PIQ(100). The TIQ was his endscore. The other two were verbal and performal respectively, as explained by Mrs X.

The report further stated that Peter 'looks in accordance with his calendar age'. His school results were not in line with this. How bad was that? Mrs X had looked worried when she explained that in 'normal children' cognitive development is age-appropriate. So Peter was not normal?

She had asked further, about Peter's development as a baby and a toddler. Hadn't we already been worried then? Back then, we had already sought help from the child health clinic, hadn't we? 'You told me so yourself.'

Jan had answered. His voice sounded different, uncertain, worried, quiet. 'No, not really', it sounded a bit guilty, 'Peter has always been very interested, in everything really.'

'Except school,' said Mrs X with a somewhat sad smile.

'Except school,' Jan said and looked at me. I couldn't make out his look. I felt just as insecure as he did. Even more so, I think. I spent the most time with the children. Was it my fault?

'Do you think I don't do enough with the boys and that that's why Peter is so behind?' I asked Jan. The children were at school. It was my day off. Our morning together.

'No, of course not.' Jan was whisking milk in a pan for coffee. He would only be home for a few more days, a week at the most. The shipping company had already called a few times. 'I don't like to leave you alone with this situation. I'll try to call more often.'

'Apparently Rascals is going to work with him now, right? She should know what to do by now.'

'You should also tell her what Sam said. Maybe he is being bullied and that's the reason why he doesn't like school.'

'But why would he be bullied? Peter's a nice kid, isn't he? Not at all like the nerd with spiky hair and outdated glasses, I mean?'

'No,' Jan just said. I didn't ask any further. I wanted him to go to sea without worrying. So I started talking about his kit bag. It was already packed with the most important things. Was there anything else I should do? We were not the kind of family where mother was in charge of the laundry. Jan smiled. He was on to me. 'Buy me some *stroofwafels* (syrup waffles) when you go shopping later on.'

'I'll get you a pallet,' I replied, laughing, 'for six months!'

Jan left before the interview with Rascals. As expected, but still rather suddenly, as I recall. He had to fly to Houston. There were four packets of 'stroofwafels' in his duffel bag.

A few days later I went to Mrs Rascals alone to hear her plan. 'Your husband has already gone to sea? What a pity. Are the boys very sad? I'll keep a closer eye on them in the coming period.'

Until the summer holidays she would take Peter out of class a few times a week for exercises to increase his attention span, as she called it. She asked me understandingly if I could possibly help a little with the homework she was going to give him. 'I understand there's double work for you now that your husband has gone to sea, but we don't want Peter to fall even further behind, do we?'

I remember promising zealously that I would make sure of that. I really was a caring mother. I wanted very much to make her see that. Mrs Rascals was a rather stately woman. In a way, I felt safe with her. It all sounded very professional and caring. I had carefully brought up the bullying. She promised me that she would be watchful if there really was any bullying going on. She couldn't really imagine that. They were very strict at the Montessori school about bullying. And it actually didn't fit in with the school system, she explained to me decisively. I wanted to be reassured.

The following months we picked up our daily routine again without daddy. The boys and Ingeborg went to after-school care two days a week, one day my mother came, one day I was home early and on Wednesdays I was free.

13. The criminal record

When did this start? This need to measure people, lay them along the yardstick/ and describe them in reports? The more I read about it, the more the ominous and desperate feeling creeps up on me that it is too late to put a stop to it. About two hundred years ago, a train started moving that is driven by people. And those people are governed by the

illusions of the day, by fashion, culture, the wishes and demands of the government. All of this results from a society that thinks more and more of its own interests, people who believe that everything is malleable. And all of this combined with an insatiable hunger for comfort and making money.

Psychiatry was invented as a science at the beginning of the nineteenth century. At the time, people were racking their brains what to do about lunatics rolling about on the floor screaming, chained to the walls of the asylum. The idea gradually took root that things had to change. It was found that not all lunatics in the institutions were insane, or incurably ill. Some patients actually improved with a different approach. A more humane science was born, as people in general started to care more for each other. In '*A History of Psychiatry*' I read that the nineteenth century was also characterised by the development of a closer family life. Apparently, this had not existed before.

The word 'psychiatry' was coined at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Subsequently, for a century there was continuous discussion about what the science of human behaviour, the psyche and the nerves actually entailed. People searched diligently for biological disorders that could explain crazy behaviour. They were mostly groping in the dark. There were no machines yet that could look into the head without having to lift the skull. It wasn't until after World War II that drugs began to provide relief from all manner of psychotic disorders.

Child and adolescent psychiatry has only existed since 1948, when a number of psychiatrists established a special section for it. But already for forty years there had been concern about children who could not sit still in the classroom. In the introduction to '*Children of their Time*', I read a quotation from a Leiden professor of psychiatry from 1932: 'It is known that children who have an attention defect, due to an increased distractibility and restlessness, also have difficulty following the normal education and show a form of backwardness, (...)'

In the early 1900s, when Montessori, Ellen Key and Jan Ligthart were working to renew education, Dr. Plantenga was trying to reduce infant mortality, all children between the ages of six and twelve were required to attend school, and it was discovered that not all children could handle school life without difficulty, the science of psychiatry and nervous diseases was searching for reasons for deviant behaviour, for going or being crazy.

I read a thick book on '*The Psychohygienists*'. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the idea found its way here from America that many psychiatric problems in adults had their origins in childhood. It was an interesting subject because mentally deranged people often got off the rails and ended up in prison. If we take better care of our children, a lot of misery can be prevented, was the idea. This also strengthened the motivation to send all children to school. Educated people find it easier to get work, don't have to steal for their food and therefore don't end up in prison.

A very young Dutch lawyer, who was actually going to America to do research in women's prisons, by chance came into contact with the American *Child Guidance Clinics*. Her name was Eugenia Lekkerkerker and she almost single-handedly ensured that we were to have such clinics in the Netherlands also. The *Medical Educational Bureau*, or *MOB* for short.

In a brochure from 1911, the year Jan Ligthart wrote about his trip to Sweden, Eugenia Lekkerkerker speaks of these American agencies.

"In the first place, the Child Guidance Clinics do not restrict themselves to children who are already delinquent or in immediate danger of becoming so, but accept all children who show serious character problems: children who are truant or have run away from home; children who lie or vandalise excessively; who are unruly, nervous, fearful, lonely or inarticulate; who have bad habits that they seem unable or unwilling to break; who have difficulties with their schoolwork or get along badly with other children; and so on. For such phenomena are usually symptoms of deeper-seated difficulties, which can easily undermine a harmonious development of the personality and a happy adaptation to social life, and lead, if not to the extremes of criminality and nervous disease, then often to mental inferiority, lack of success in study and work, nervousness, sluggishness, difficulties in adapting to marital and family tasks, in short, to a reduction of happiness and "efficiency" in life, which in turn, directly or indirectly, entails a loss of social values.

And so the purpose of the health centre is above all: mental hygiene, the prevention of everything that can lead to mutilation of the personality and thus to social inferiority."

This was written by one of the pioneers of our healthcare system more than 100 years ago.

We are living in the year 2015. I am writing and Peter is gaming. My beautiful, cheerful Peter. We barely speak to one another. He locks himself up. At night I can hear him walking through the house. I got up once to ask what was wrong but he got so angry that I have left him alone since. Now I lie awake in the dark trying to analyse the sounds. The toilet door opens and closes. The water tap is running. Is he brushing his teeth now? Is he finally going to bed? Under the door I can see the glow of the light in his room. Or has he forgotten to turn off the light in the bathroom again? Should I wait a little longer and then take a careful look? And then it's morning and I've slept after all. Peter's door is closed. He will sleep until two, three o'clock. Then he'll fry some eggs, not clean up, stare out the window in the living room for a while and disappear upstairs again. 'Would you like to help me with the shopping? With the garden?'

'No.'

He stopped taking guitar lessons. He didn't practise. Not any more. He gave up competitive swimming a year ago. Just now when he has the body size to win competitions, he no longer goes to training.

Last week I received a letter from Child protection. Actually, Peter received the letter from CP, because he is now eighteen and is supposed to open his own mail. Mail about his failures and all the wonderful care he has spurned.

'Mutilation of the personality and social inferiority', Eugenia Lekkerkerker wrote.

Where have these people gone? The report of the CP skilfully and professionally summarises what Peter has done wrong in his young life, the offence for which he was convicted. The professional efforts of the CP office are neatly summarised. It is a conclusive document, so no one needs to be afraid of a complaint. The fact that Peter is stuck at home, without a diploma, without any future prospects, that actually he doesn't see any future at all, is nobody's fault. Not a single professional, from the school director to the care institution, is to blame for it. Everyone has done their job, ticked off the right lists.

"Reason for closure: Juvenile probation is closed due to the end of probation.

Actual offence: School absenteeism.

Offence description: Peter stated that he did not go to school because of anxiety and physical complaints.

Conditions: A community service for the duration of 20 hours or 10 days suspended youth detention with a probation period of one year."

Then follows a list of all the care institutions that have interfered with my Peter, earning a fee for ministering to my child. And all the while there never was a moment where we thought: Oh this is it. These people are really helping, or here he can learn in the way that suits him. Here he feels safe, and nobody reproaches him for having his own personality.

At the end of the letter, there is a detailed explanation of the concept of 'criminal record':

"The term 'criminal record' is still widely used, but actually no longer exists. All criminal acts (offences) that you have committed from the age of 12 onwards are recorded in the Judicial Documentation System (JDS) and are mentioned on the excerpt

judicial documentation. The JDS also states whether you have received a fine, community service or prison sentence, for example. You can therefore get a criminal record from the age of 12.”

A criminal record no longer exists but still you can get one from the age of 12. I have nothing but contempt for these people. Of course, they are good citizens. They are educated and they do their jobs as they are expected to. But I only want to hit them. I want to beat up the world. To punch until I can't anymore and then get off. I read. I try to make sense of it all.

When Eugenia Lekkerkerker started her pioneering work in 1911 to help young children grow up in such a way that they would have a future and stay out of prison, she could never have imagined that a hundred years later, in the year 2015, children would get a criminal record, simply because from pure misery they couldn't go to school. Because in those hundred years, school has remained an institution that makes many children sick. Perhaps Eugenia mainly had children in mind from disadvantaged backgrounds, from parents who could not read or write themselves. Whereas my Peter and his fellow delinquents are children of parents who've all been to school.

14. The school for learning and educational difficulties (LOM)

After the Second World War, our present-day school system was set up with great energy. The school for children with learning and educational difficulties (LOM-school) soon became the fastest growing type of school in special education.

The LOM-school. I was talking to Lucia about it the other day. She was in town and came to lunch with me.

The LOM-school still existed when we were young. She laughed when I mentioned it. 'The school for geeks. Do you remember?' she said. 'Anja went there, didn't she? The daughter of that friend of mum's, they made us play with her. Stupid child. She put my Barbie doll in her trousers!'

'Oh yes', I laughed too. We were not always nice to Anja. 'She has become a hairdresser. She has her own business. Mum told me so the other day.'

'You don't say.' Lucia looked surprised. 'She wouldn't be able to do that now,' she added decidedly. It stung me. 'What do you mean?'

'Well come on, you're experiencing it yourself, aren't you? School is serious business. Even your Peter can't make it. Ha! There hasn't been a school for Anja's for a long time.'

'But is that all right with you?'

'No of course not! But what are we to do about it? Society is becoming more and more business-like. Even in special education children are expected to earn a diploma now. Let me tell you! That daughter of Marjan, friend of mine ... super smart girl. Draws beautifully. She is stuck at home. The school thought 'treatment was prioritized'. That's how they put it nowadays. Treatment is prioritized.' Lucia pulled a face.

Treatment is prioritized. It's how schools rid themselves of the problem. A child in treatment doesn't have to go to school. Both the school and the parents are left alone by the inspection and the school attendance officer. And then what? After having been on a waiting list somewhere followed by an intake, the child goes to a treatment centre, where he has to learn what's wrong with him and how he has to control his defects so that no one is bothered by it. I've been there. Peter has been there. A child is expected to fix it so he can go back to the place where he was unhappy. So he fits in among the other children. To be like the rest. Who wouldn't want that? Loads of people don't want that. Can't do it. But that is forbidden nowadays. Not fitting in is forbidden. That's the benefit gained from so-called progress.

What Lucia said about the LOM-school wasn't right. The LOM-school was not for geeks. It was a school for children of normal intelligence who couldn't keep up at school, for unknown reasons. Like my Peter. Nobody really understood why, but these children couldn't manage school like other children do.

As a young mother, I didn't understand why Peter didn't fit in. And I followed advice, because those people know more than I do. They are specialists who are going to help me and Peter, I thought. We must be doing something wrong and if I just listen carefully it will be all right. Now I've found out that still nobody understands why some children do not fit in. That we have a glorified school system and that all these specialists are still looking for the egg of Columbus that will ensure that all children will march along.

Nelleke Bakker's thick book directs me to a report of a study conducted in 1963. There weren't any diagnoses yet in those days. Uninformed people now say: 'Didn't all children just go to school in those days? There were no so-called disorders back then, were there?' And these uninformed people usually conclude that today's parents are just full of complaints. Everyone wants their child to be a professor and blames school if it doesn't work out that way.

But it's wrong what these people say; those children with schoolproblems *were* there in those days also. They just weren't divided into sections yet.

In 1963, the Municipal Pedotherapeutic Institute conducted a study on the pupils of two LOM-schools in Amsterdam. When the LOM-school was founded in 1949, no fewer than fourteen different types of school for special (primary) education were listed in the law. For deaf, for dumb, for blind and visually impaired children, physically deficient children, children 'suffering from tuberculosis', sick children, children 'suffering from seizures', schools for retarded children, schools for children in institutions, children who are very difficult to educate, wards of the government or under guardianship, schools attached to 'paedological institutions' and children with learning and educational difficulties. And finally, schools for children of inland shipping skippers.

In 1954, five years after the establishment of the LOM school, there were 866 children in a LOM school. In 1978 there were 28,000. Thirty percent of all children in special education were in a LOM-school. Thirty percent of all children who dropped out of a normal school therefore had a normal average intelligence. In 1986 it was almost forty percent.

According to Nelleke Bakker, in those days parents had no problem with choosing for the LOM-school, precisely because it was a school for children with a normal intelligence. At a LOM-school the classes were smaller and the children received a lot of attention. Attention from people who were still curious about children and how they grow. In the research report, it strikes me how much love and respect the researchers show for the children and the weight of misery they brought with them from the regular school. In the Lomschools, the aim was to bring back some light into those young lives. There, the orthopedagogical profession grew into what is now an indispensable specialism in education. Nowadays, they've turned into ladies with heavy shoulder bags who run from school to school and no longer have time to observe a child, let alone give him or her some extra attention. They are mainly occupied with filling out lists and writing reports. And advising parents to have their child treated or sent to special education.

After a search through second-hand book shops, I find a copy of the 1963 study. A book, neatly sewn into a light grey soft cover. There are a few spots on the pale cover but the pages seem untouched. Yet here and there in the text I do find a few pencil lines. Someone has read it. All the children in the study have IQs between 90 and 110 (with one or two exceptions) and all did equally badly at the regular school for 'preparatory education'. The researchers look for a cause but do not find one. The children are described and examined in many different ways. Height, weight, health, background. Broken family, or not? Are there siblings and is the LOM child the middle child or the oldest or the youngest or half of a twin? All children have had the necessary 'dispiriting experiences' of failure and several times grade retention. Parents are described in the report, the mother's opinion of her own child is weighed in the balance. I read in this document, written two years before I was born: 'The birthprocess showed peculiarities in eight cases' and realise that very little has changed in 48 years. In my life as a mother, I have been questioned on this topic

countless times by every psychologist, remedial educationalist and ladies behind desks for access to some form of aid facility. How was the pregnancy? How were the first weeks? Do you and your husband ever argue? Is your husband away a lot? Yes, he sails. Oh, well then that must be the cause.

Multitudes of successful students come from broken homes or from families where mum or dad works night and day and is away a lot. If you look for the reason for children's failure in such factors, I wonder if there has also been research into how many similar factors are present in children who do succeed in getting a diploma.

The researchers and writers of the report have a warm heart for the nervous, quiet, anxious, neurotic, inhibited, depressed-looking, shy, childish, weak, and so on children. There are no diagnoses, only descriptions of character traits, behaviour, appearance, cared for or not cared for, cold-hearted mother, moronic mother, father is an alcoholic and beats his wife, sweet caring mother, committed father. The researchers can only guess at the causes of the failure. And they have to conclude that, strictly educationally speaking, hardly any progress was made at the LOM school. By 'strictly educationally' I mean: according to the requirements of the government. The LOM-school did not succeed in eliminating the educational arrears and sending the children back to the regular school. And that was their assignment. Just as it still is the task of Special Education 50 years later.

But one thing is clear to the researchers: the children have all recovered enormously since they attended the LOM-school. And they consider this a more important outcome of the study than the finding that the pupils are beyond repair.

"It will come as no surprise that I experienced some hesitation in publishing these data. After all, with the above in mind, one could quickly reach the conclusion that liquidation is the obvious course of action, as the appealing set-up appears to have little rational justification. (...)

When at the end of the stay at the L.O.M. school it can be observed that the personality as a whole has gained significantly and for example the despondency, the fear of failure, the desperate defence have weakened, even disappeared in some cases, then once again this cannot be documented in a system. Hence the very relative value of the elements we have highlighted."

What strikes me most about this old report is the solicitude with which the research was done. The researchers care about the children. It is more important to them that the

children do well than that some government objective is achieved. I do not believe that in the 21st century such empathy will be found in the institutions that advise the government. I'd be surprised if they have ever seen a child up close.

The Lom-school had a stigma. And I can confirm that. The school for geeks. But they weren't, and a survey in 1986 showed that many former LOM-school pupils ended up doing well. I found an article about this survey in the professional journal of orthopedagogy of 1986. The surveyed 'former Lommers' had liked the Lom-school, especially because the teachers had had time for them, time for personal attention, but also more time in class. These pupils had subsequently completed an education and some were still engaged in advanced education to better themselves still further. 85 % Of those questioned had a job. The Lom-school was not a school for geeks, but for children who needed more time. According to the 1963 study and the 1986 survey, the Lom-school had a very important function for quite a large group of children. Children who eventually became part of society. They started out in life with confidence in themselves. Like Anja, the daughter of that friend of my mother's who started her own hairdressing salon. Unfortunately, neither the well-being of these children nor the delayed yet successful development of many former Lommers were taken into account in the decisionmaking of our government. The sole benchmark appeared to be whether or not they were repairable. In the nineties, when I had my children, the Lom-school was abolished and merged with the MLK (Children with learning disabilities). The difference between the two types of school was the IQ, but since the Lom children proved impossible to push back into regular education, they were scaled onto the same level as the MLK children.

The MLK used to be called the 'morons school' and was intended for children with an IQ lower than 80. The new school type that came into being with this merger between LOM and MLK got the confusing name 'special primary education'. However, it was not special education. Primary schools for special education, for children with diagnosed learning disabilities, were called special schools. At the time when my Peter was miserable at primary school, there were special schools for which you needed a special referral and primary schools' to which all children were sent who did not have a special referral but whom the regular primary school did not know what to do with. The assignment of this school? To fix children and to make sure that they move on to regular secondary education.

At this moment, in the spring of 2015, 15,000 children are registered as home-stayers. The programme Zembla had a programme on this subject on April 22th. The law on 'Appropriate education' was introduced last year. All the new laws have passed by for Peter en me. The Law on Appropriate Education came too late for him, but this law offers

no solution for vulnerable children either. This law too was designed in favour of the system. Another law to make children fit in.

340,000 Children appeal to youth care every year. 10% Of the total number of 0 to 18-year-olds. Almost 40,000 of them are in an institution. Is that the benefit of modern times? A father in the Zembra-programme despairingly says about his son: 'He should go to school! All children should go to school!'

But actually this has been the case only for a relatively short time. For only half a century, we have had a law that says all children must attend secondary school. My parents' generation went to work at fourteen, my generation takes it for granted that everyone goes to school until eighteen and continues learning after that. Why don't I feel any gratitude? Surely it is an enrichment for society that all children have the opportunities to learn the profession of their choice?

For many children it is a yoke. They are forced to fail. There is no choice. No freedom. You have to.

'You can achieve anything if you want to,' my father said. Now he struggles with his feelings, his love for his grandson and his worries about his future.

Peter sits in his room and plays games. He is not one of the 15,000, because he is no longer in compulsory education. He is not a home-stayer. He is not on welfare. He is not unemployed. He doesn't count, he is not on any list. 'I'm just in the way', he said recently. Another version of: 'I'm just wasting oxygen.'

I've got used to my feelings. In the past, I would have panicked at such a downhearted comment from my son, but the years of struggle have also made me more stoic.

Vaguely, constantly there is this dull feeling of sadness in my soul and I carry it with me. That is all. There are worse things. My father spent the most defining years of his own young life in a horrible camp. He was humiliated and starved. He watched his little sister die of hardship. He had to bear his mother's grief and his own grief, while fighting to stay alive. A person thrives the better in the face of oppression, someone said to me recently. For my father, this statement seems to be true. And I comfort myself with the thought that one day Peter will stand up and say, 'I know what I'm going to do!' Then he will go for it. I know he will. Against all odds. And then he will come out victorious!

15. Grandpa tells a story

Our beautiful Denmark was a bit wetter than usual that summer. Granddad and grandma came along instead of dad. The cottage had been booked a long time before because we thought we knew when Jan's leave would be. But the extra weeks on board had pushed back his summer leave and he wouldn't come home until after the boys' and Ingeborg's holidays. I thought the rain was fitting. The kids weren't bothered by it anyway. We had brought raingear, for Denmark is as unpredictable as the Netherlands as far as the weather is concerned, but whether it was sunny or wet, Sam, Peter and Ingeborg just stomped outside on their bare feet, treasure hunting in the cornfields and on the little stony beach. Grandpa took great pains examining the little beetles and crabs with them under a magnifying glass. They made beautiful drawings which Grandpa put in a scrapbook for Dad. There were also new interests. Amber had to be found, because the boys had seen Jurassic Park. The long searches on the beaches in the area yielded only a few shiny brown amber stones, but many beautiful round boulders and stones carved by erosion. Our old Volvo would have to carry a heavy load home.

Once we drove all the way to Legoland in Billund, where Ingeborg had the time of her life in the life-size Duplo attractions.

On a beautiful dry evening we lit a fire in the large garden and baked bread on a stick above the fire. 'Cremated on the outside and raw on the inside,' said Grandpa. 'You shouldn't hold your stick *in* the fire, grandpa,' said Sam. He and Peter held their dough neatly above the glowing logs, patiently turning and baking a delicious bread roll that they shared with Grandpa. 'How delicious,' he said gratefully. 'You two would survive in the camp.'

My father never talked about the Japanese war camp and for a moment I wondered if he was just talking about any holiday camp. 'Besides, we didn't have any dough, you know. There was none of that.' My mother took a deep breath and looked at her hands. I had learned at a young age not to ask any further, but Sam was only nine. His curiosity was not yet curbed by experience.

'What camp, Grandpa?'

And Grandpa suddenly started telling. I remember how surprised I was. In that garden in Denmark, on that summer evening, under a clear starry sky, by the magical light of our oil lamps and the crackling fire, my father suddenly started talking about his time in the Japanese camp.

'When I was Sam's age, Grandpa was locked up in a camp. It was war. You did learn about that, didn't you? The second world war. I lived with my parents in the Dutch East Indies. Now they call it Indonesia, but in the old days we just said Indies. My father was a doctor there. When the war with Japan broke out, we had no defence at all. The Japanese were much stronger than our little army. In a few months it was all over. The Japanese just took

over the Indies. And that was horrendous. You will never be able to imagine how bad that was. My father was taken away from us. I remember that very well. How scared my mother was. Suddenly all those cars and trucks appeared on the dirt road in front of the house. We could see them coming from miles away because of the dust they blew up. Some families had already left, of course, afraid of what was coming, but my father was a doctor and he thought he should stay at his post.'

'Then your father was really a hero, wasn't he grandpa?' Sam had sat down on the floor next to Grandpa's chair and, with uplifted face, his cheeks glowing from baking bread, he listened attentively to Grandpa's story. The glow of the fire made his eyes sparkle.

'Yes, I suppose you could call my father a hero,' Grandpa said, stroking Sam's blond curls. Then he was silent, as if processing Sam's conclusion. Did he see his father as a hero? The following years he had to take care of his mother, in captivity. His dad was gone. How he must have missed him. Will he have blamed him that they hadn't fled when they still could?

'What about that camp?' Peter said suddenly, somewhat grouchy. It had seemed he wasn't paying attention at all. He sat there somewhat in the dark next to grandma's chair, curled up on the floor, his cheeks on his knees, seemingly bored, playing with a stick. But he had heard every word. Now I know he shuts himself off so as not to feel too much. That otherwise the entire world just enters him unchecked, that Grandpa's story had indeed touched his soul. But back then we thought he was just a bit bored. And then suddenly this question: 'What about the camp?'

'Yes that camp,' Grandpa stretched out his hand to Peter and pulled him onto his lap. Peter put his head against Grandpa's shoulder and stuck his thumb in his mouth. I didn't say anything. To this day the thumb is still a great comfort to him.

'After my father was taken away, we stayed in our house for a while longer. But then they came for us too. For mum, Pingie and me.'

'Who is Pingie again?' asked Peter.

'My sister Ingeborg.'

'My sister's name is Ingeborg also.'

Yes, your sister's name is Ingeborg also. I think your mummy named your sister after my sister.' There was silence for a moment.

'Camp,' Peter said commandingly, as far as possible with his thumb still in his mouth.

'Yes,' Grandpa chuckled, giving Peter a kiss on the head, 'that camp. All of us, all children with their mothers, were put into camps.

First we drove for a long time in jam-packed trucks, imagine that in that heat, through woods and along fields, it took forever as I remember, we were completely parched, and

then we were locked up. In a camp, behind high fences. We slept in wooden barracks. The roof leaked ... and that was awful in the rainy season because it would rain very heavily. And we had to sleep on bare wooden planks.'

Peter sat up indignantly and looked at Grandpa, his hands resting on Grandpa's chest. 'But that isn't right!'

Grandpa's face suddenly became very stern. 'You don't tell a Jap what is right or not right. You'd be beaten up!'

'Ger,' said my mother warningly. Peter put his head back on Grandpa's shoulder and stuck his thumb back in his mouth. There was a deep frown on his forehead.

'Ah yes boys,' Grandpa said, suddenly lightly, 'it wasn't a happy time.'

'Did you go to school grandpa?' asked Sam.

'No, there was no school. I practised sums with my mother in the sand.'

'But then how could you have become a teacher?' asked Peter without taking his thumb out of his mouth.

'Yes my boy, through hard work. You can achieve anything if you want to.'

At that moment I only thought: here we go again. But thinking back now, I realise why Dad never talked about the camp. Now I finally have an understanding of my father's suffering. We, my sisters and I, always thought that he didn't want to talk about it because we, as children of a peaceful society, wouldn't be able to understand what it had been like. Our lives are so happy and prosperous. He even said that sometimes, when I was young and asked about it naively. 'Oh darling child, you won't be able to understand.'

Now, when I myself want to scream at the drop of a hat, I realise he just couldn't bring himself to talk about it. I think the memories were in his head his whole life. If he would have spoken, would have told us in such a way that would really have made us understand, then he would have screamed out loud. Then he would not have been able to bear the pain any longer. Silence was the only way for him to keep his self-respect. To do his duty with a straight back and take responsibility for his own life and that of his wife and children. I wish I had that strength. I have so often lost my patience towards idiotic headmasters and stupid, pedantic caregivers. But I am a product of a pampered society. I have always had too high expectations. My father, I think, had no expectations at all, only the gift of each new day he is alive.

Seventy years later, people still need therapy to deal with the traumas of the Second World War. Even people of the second and third generation still seek help at the Centrum'45 in Oegstgeest (Netherlands). To my knowledge, my father never considered therapy. The reality of today is no setting for the horrors of yesterday. My own reality cannot even find any base. No one understands what we are going through.

‘Do you ask for help?’

‘It seems hard to me, with a child like that.’

‘Yes, yes, fortunately the Netherlands have the best care there is.’

The lie of the consumer society. Everything is makeable, everything can be bought. What are you whining about?

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