

Translation of the story

# MORFAR'S STORY

Grandfather's story for Juli,  
his granddaughter, on her fifth birthday.



By moonlight Morfar often lay thinking, what can I do for my treasure, what can I do for my dearest? Morfar often thought at night it was at night Morfar thought clearest. Morfar is old and far away. But in a flash, he realised what he should do. Got it at last! Stroke of genius! I shall write about Morfar, Morfar rabbit himself, that's me! Morfar hopped out of bed with his skut, lit a light, paper and pen and thought. Where shall I begin?

I shall begin by telling of my Morfar as, since I know so little about him, I can just keep it short. The most important thing he did was to baptise me in water from a spring known as the spring of youth, which is found in a wood between Djursdala and Södra Vi in Småland. Soon after this event he died.

Morfar was a farmer's son from Småland called Svensson, they were red-haired and lived near Sävsjö. Once when I was young, I drove through a farmyard in that area when many irate red-haired Svenssons ran out but thanks to my family it all ended up amicably. I vaguely remember that they ran into difficulties there. My Morfar became ordained and adopted the name Svenoni. He was vicar of Södra Vi and Djursdala (well worth a visit). His first wife was a Wetterhall and when she died it became Step Mormor Hilda, a splendid Sabelström woman, who later as a widow lived in a small cottage in Kalmar. There she had delicious cherry trees, I remember. Morfar lies buried in Södra Vi churchyard. Five children survived him. Aunt Anna, Aunt Mottan (I'll return to her later), Aunt Salome, Uncle Erik and my mother, Martha

Eva Dagmar. Aunt Anna married Uncle Carl Siden, a man of great integrity, who struggled with bad luck. In our eyes they seemed badly off, and they had seven children.

Uncle Erik married Aunt Ingrid and became a stupid captain in the infantry.

Aunt Salome married a Dutch timber merchant called Frans Hendrik, who was a brother of my father. When my father came to that wedding, he at once fell in love with little Martha and not long after there was a wedding for them as well, thus two brothers married two sisters. My father was a banker called Marius Johannes. Born in Amsterdam, he was of the sugar Heybroeks to be distinctly separated from the coffee Heybroeks.

Here is my mother, Martha, and father, Marius, painted by Aunt Mottan, Hilversum 1906





“My first memory is of a lampshade ...”

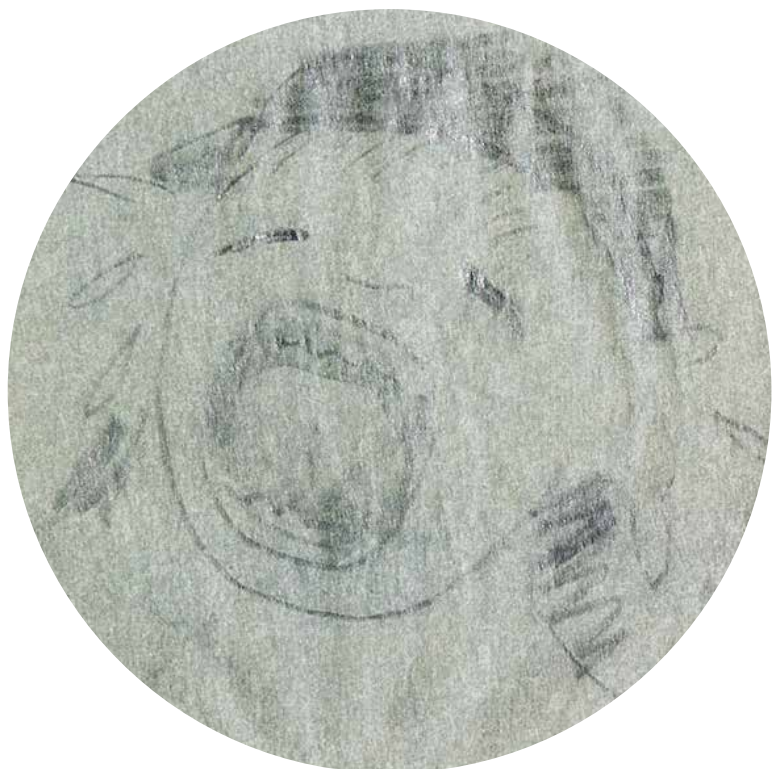
Their wedding was in 1907.

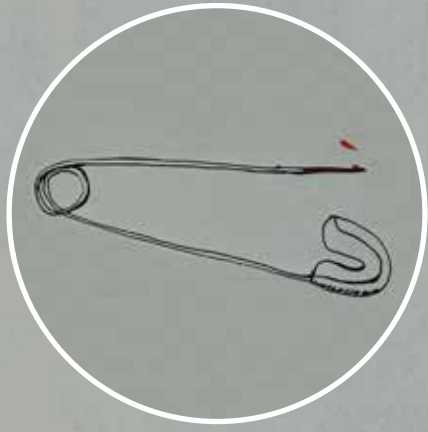


You can understand their joy when they received on 2nd September, 1913 a sturdy, lively son, baptised Folke Marius who with time became Juli's Morfar. While I was still in my mother's tummy, she went every day to the great galleries and delighted in those old master painters and from this I received a gift for painting. Though meanwhile it took many years before I became a painter by profession. The main thing is that at last I have reached that point when my story can begin.

Darling Juli sometimes my spelling is rather odd but I have a Dutch father tongue and a Swedish mother tongue which creates confusion in the grammar of my mind but there are surely nice people near you who can explain. Perhaps you imagine I was born in my parents' house in Hilversum, but then you would be wrong. As occasionally, particularly in the winter season, my parents would rent a house in Amsterdam. In that way they had greater opportunities to attend concerts and exhibitions. For that reason, I was born in Amsterdam, in Johannes Verhulststraat 172. Naturally Doctor Petter attended and so that I too would not be equally lifeless, Doctor Petter called out "Goddamn!" and lifted me by the feet and gave me a smack on my bottom. Then I screamed and all were happy. "A boy" called Doctor Petter.

Your Morfar was like a small, very fat rabbit baby and fed on strained purée of brown beans. But then one day I screamed without cease as loud as possible.

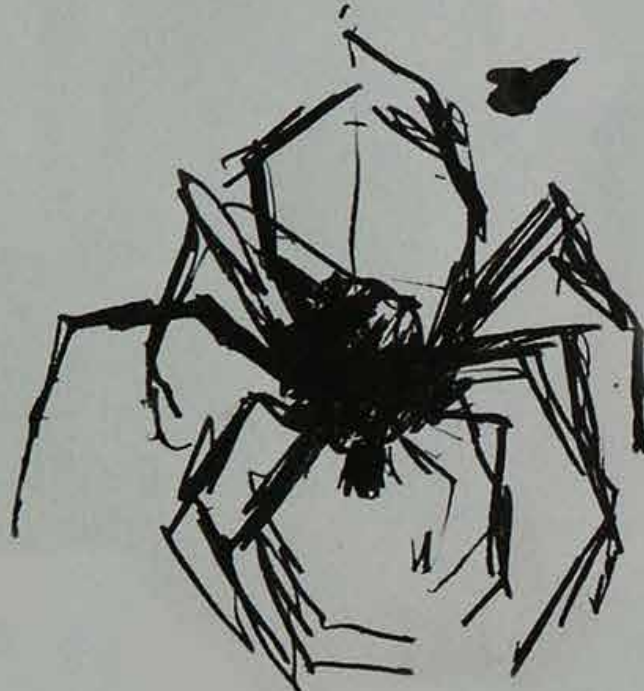




At first Morfar's mother thought perhaps he is hungry and made still more bean purée, but I just kept screaming. She became very anxious and found a little later that it wasn't a safety pin sticking in my bottom.

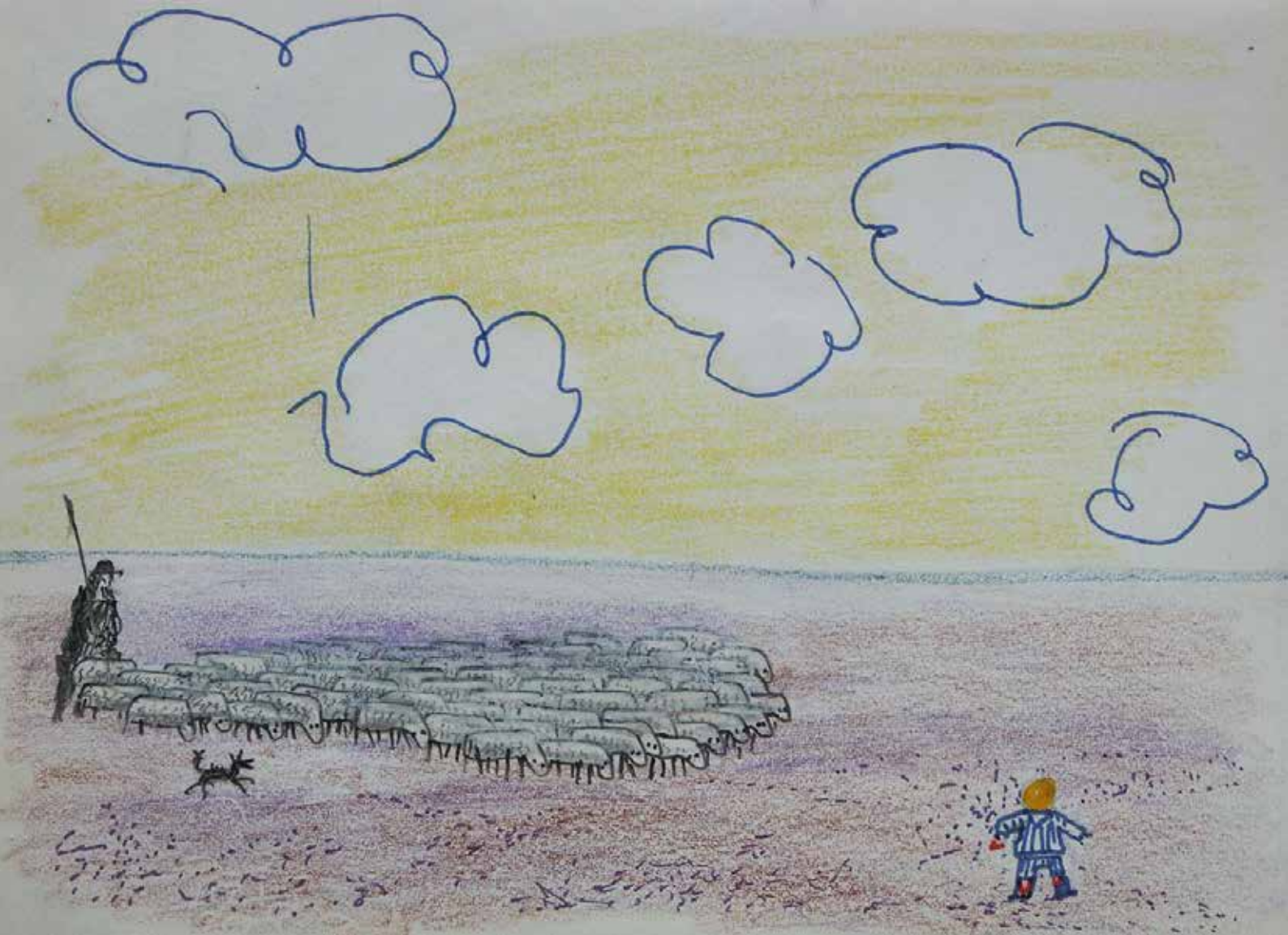
Perhaps it was a spider on the wall, but he wasn't there anymore. So, she lit the lantern and put it out, still I kept crying. Morfar's mother rattled my pretty silver rattle, nothing helped. So, Doctor Petter arrived with his bag.

He said 'What a fat, podgy baby, he has tummy ache. Make a salad of green purée to settle his tummy.' At last, I stopped crying, and everyone was happy.





Behind the house was a wide empty heath with only heather. There I could meet a shepherd with his many, many sheep and his small, snappy dog. The shepherd spent all his time knitting black stockings while watching his flock. There were also many warm fleecy lambs which were nice to hug.



Over the wide empty heath, little blue butterflies fluttered and here and there you happened on little hollows of pale-yellow sand.



On the heath was also a spring with clear water the sheep drank out of.



There one also found a rarity amongst all the country's birds. The cock has decorated eye markings, large double crest and a great ruff of endlessly varied colours.

Courting in the spring they were far less shy, and they seemed to fight fearsome battles with beating wings, boxing, kicking, pecking and pushing and it looked as if it was a fight to the finish until one noticed no injuries and not a feather out of place, I forgot to tell you these birds are called ruffs.

In the middle of August as the heather came into flower, the bee man came on his waggon, moving his waggon load of hives from the buckwheat fields to a warm sheltered spot on the heath where the air was soon filled with the drone of the workers, who gathered great quantities of honey from the tiny, tiny, exquisite flowers.



We had an enormous dog called Mirambo who later became a mat under my father's writing table. And we had a little dog called Tosse Maffe who was allowed to ride in the car, while Mirambo ran along behind.



In 1915 there was a major strike and the 'Reds' wanted to sabotage the railways. My father and our gardener went out to keep watch on the line.

Every day my mother took me by the hand for a long walk over the wide, empty heath to go and see them, where they were walking up and down by the track. We had a basket with a lunch bag in it they were glad of. My father came back in the evening, and then first removed his long puttees.

There was rationing due to the fact that the whole world was fighting and killing each other than, for I know not what reason, in millions. Many fine lives were wasted, and many were saddened for the rest of their lives. My father knew a farmer who would happily provide a pig for a hefty payment. They carried it via isolated footpaths through the woods and over the heath to our house in the pitch black.

First of my early memories. Two wet men smelling of autumn rain in the warmth of our hall below; one had a bloody nose from walking into a tree in the dark. Loud voices.

Second memory. Fine autumn morning, my father cycled to his office. A pleasant little trip unless you are moustachioed in a dark suit. A fire is lit in a large drum at the back of the house. The pig is hanging in it for smoking. All of a sudden, the drum collapsed, and the pig lay in the ashes, now what? Little Märta started to get worried and missed her husband. But those friendly, burly fellows weren't lost for an answer, being well-rewarded Dutchmen, they soon found a green cart and finished smoking it there. I asked myself why that image was so powerfully Imprinted.



Apart from my parents there were three more people in the house. A cook called "Thousand Feet" by my Mummy, as she was so quick. Later she married a policeman in the village, then her sister came to replace her and she too married a policeman, after which her sister replaced her, only for her also again to marry a policeman!

And then there was sister Helga who was with us for six years after which she emigrated to Canada.





And then there was the gardener, van de Meulen.

He wore grey brown corduroy trousers and when he walked the parallel lines scuffed between his knees. I couldn't keep up with his big strides. My mother was from Småland, and there they had rocks, huge rocks. So now chance had it that the extensive sandy heath behind our house had been formed in the Ice Age, where the ice had also carried with it amongst the sand many stones from Småland. If you dug down sometimes you would find a fair-sized stone and in this way, she tried to replicate her childhood terrain in our garden.

All our neighbours knew she liked these stones, and she even had a fixed reward for anyone who found some. (You must excuse my descriptions in anticipation, but I shall not be making any further mention of our gardener even if he served us for many years) – that as a parenthesis. But then one fine day when he was off to fetch gravel for our paths, he happened on a massive boulder it was one metre high and 1.2 metres across. No one had ever found such a huge rock, so it was quite an event. Such a boulder could only be destined for placing in the middle of the central square of the town. At first, they brought the heaviest waggon of the town with six horses, but that broke down. So, they built a special waggon with 12 horses, and then they succeeded. Take note, our gardener was suddenly famous, and he was photographed next to his stone. But then he wanted the Mayor to have his name engraved on it, for posterity to note, but the mayor didn't want to, so it became an issue. After that he was never any good as a gardener again, he spent all his time dreaming and even sleeping in the loft of the tool shed.

It wasn't only stones we had from Småland, we even had junipers, bilberries, whortleberries, linnaeus flowers, blue anemones, aconites and violets.

But the stone still lives on the central square of Hilversum and it's called "de Hilversum Kei", (kei – boulder).

We also had many birches, but a birch in Småland is silvery or virginally white, whereas Dutch ones are green and mossy. To try and make our birches like the ones in Småland, van de Meulan had to scrub the trunks every winter with scrubbing brushes.

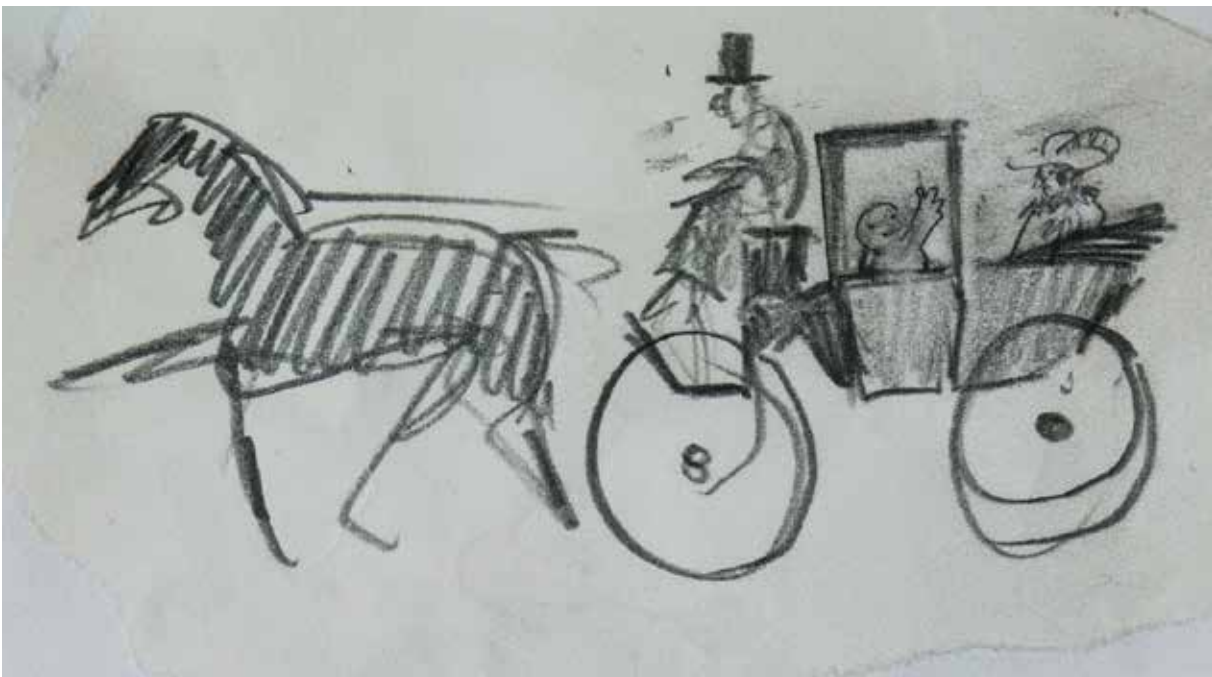


One fine autumn night, twins arrived from my mother's tummy, a girl and a boy, called Karin Rigmor Maria and Carl Erik.

That made a huge change, as you can imagine. Neither Mammie nor sister Helga had time for me anymore. They were continuously occupied feeding Karin and Erik. To draw attention to myself I began to poo in my pants and wet my bed again, and to babble like a baby.

For that reason, it took me far longer to grow up than normal children. It became a concern whether I would ever grow up. My parents even worried a bit about this.

Ett kålhuvud tänker, men inte på kålsoppa – A cabbage-head thinks, but not about cabbage soup.



Occasionally we journeyed into Amsterdam, firstly in a horse drawn carriage.

Then we took the train. We sat in a cosy compartment with red plush. While the train powered ahead with its long plume of smoke, which hid the peacefully grazing cows in the meadows, our outer door suddenly swung open allowing our compartment to fill with smoke and racket as the conductor stepped in, like a supernatural apparition. After clipping our tickets, he disappeared by the same route into empty space.



The door was slammed shut and one only heard the usual

do-do-da-dak

over the points once again.

Outside the window, the telegraph wires rose and fell.

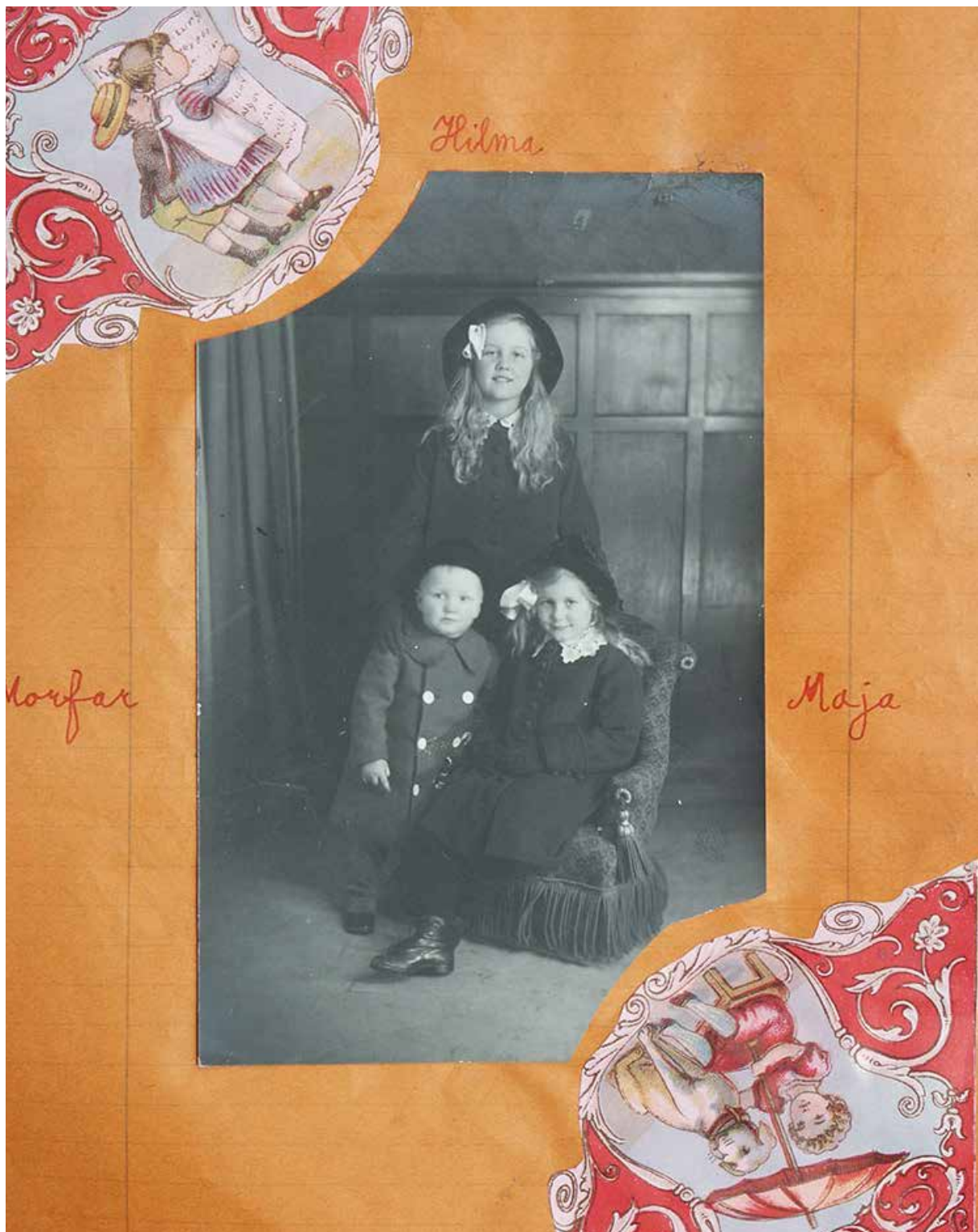


And so, we arrived at the great station of Amsterdam. I just walked amidst an endless flow of long legs to the outside where an electric taxi was waiting for us (why should they leave).

By this means we at last reached Aunt Salome and Uncle Frans' house.



At first you had to climb an endless staircase which climbed steeply straight to the 4th floor.



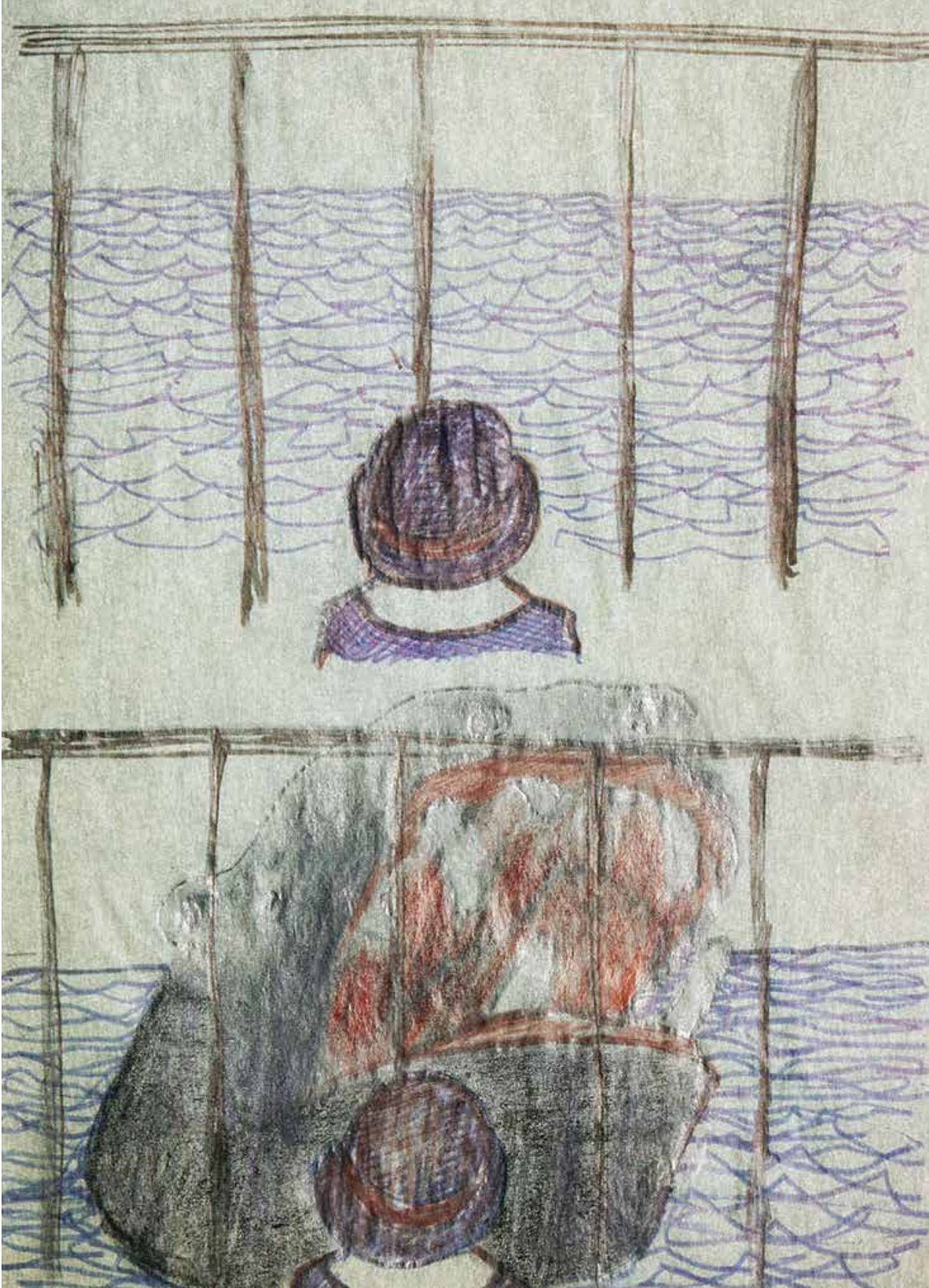
On arriving at the top, there stood their kindly cook, who was called Christina Appleeyes. And could she make pancakes? And then Aunt Salome appeared with my two double cousins Hilma and Maja.

Whilst my mummy chatted with her sister Salome, Maja and I played mummies and daddies and babies under the dining room table. It was funny play and Maja had lots of dolls.



Then we all went to Artis zoo where there were plenty of animals. The first we came to were the llamas, uncle Frans gave one a biscuit, so as a thank you the llama spewed a great stream over his dark suit.

Then we came to the hippos. It seemed to be nothing but water but suddenly the hippo emerged with a wide-open mouth as if to eat me.



I cried so much we had to go home.



Morfar's old granny also lived in Amsterdam in a large house on the Herengracht which had dark panes which reflected in the canal or rather the opposite, the canal was mirrored in them, so that this way the canal looked even wider than it was. This granny was really Danish, with maiden name Bjorn. Her father lived in a castle in South Jutland as a young man. One night he was tipping and playing cards with his friends. The stakes kept mounting, and before he could call a halt, he had gambled away all his money, his property, almost his shirt. That was 1828. The same night he saddled his trusty horse and rode off to Holland. Then he enlisted in the army where, due to his daring and charm, he rapidly became a general and chief of the Breda Staff College.

After pressing the gleaming brass bell beside the heavy black-green front door of granny's house, (it was a door it to another world) one heard the bell echoing round the deserted marble hall behind. After a while the door was opened by her aimable servant, William. Granny lived in a high-ceilinged room with red velvet armchairs with fringes, dark red velvet curtains with fringes, and on the black table a dark red velvet cloth with fringes.

My granny was a dignified, solid lady with beautiful silver white hair always very neatly arranged without a hair out of place. She wore a black or violet dress with lace, somewhere a tortoiseshell comb and a brooch of diamonds in a half-moon to gather her collar.

She played patience or made puzzles (a memory of thousands of pieces on the red velvet tablecloth, the subject a half-finished picture of a battlefield, a wounded soldier raising his standard over a pile of fallen soldiers). Then she would wash up those fine Indonesian teacups, as she trusted no one with them. (If you imagine that she then went to the kitchen you would be wrong. William came in with a Chinese lacquered wooden basin, decorated with birds, a kettle with hot water, a plate with soap, a soft brush and a chequered tea towel and granny did the washing up whilst seated chatting to the guests).

Actually, I know nothing about her, which I think comes from the fact that my mother and father had little contact with her. They had such different taste and different character. In the long run the differences were too great, if you understand. They weren't at odds, or I would have noticed. My granny's house breathed high bourgeois materialism, something we, in our own family, had no taste for like taking tea and cakes off a flat lacquered plate or crystallised fruit out of the crystal jar. On the next floor was a large drawing room with gilded chairs and a ceiling painting of clouds, horses and soaring nudes in drapes. One only saw the thin, gilt legs of the chairs as everything was under dust covers.



These were only removed on New Year's Eve and then the chandeliers were also lit, though I never witnessed that.

The dining room was dark and large, heavy dark oak, plenty of wide lion's feet, swirling patterned carpets and black velvet curtains with frills. On one wall a cupboard door behind which a WC.

I never dared visit it as I knew that Grandfather, after a good dinner had taken a seat there for the rest of his life. And he was only 54 in fact when it happened. That one needed a WC in the vicinity in those times comes from the fact that, as my father told me, at those dinners it wasn't only the plates that were changed, but one also occasionally had to change to cold chairs. (Another memory: a lunch with golden scrambled eggs on Delft blue plates which my sister Karin now has – due to my double cousin Maja being so fond of it and my granny preferred Aunt Salome and her children, they had more in common.)

It was a huge house with several floors. The top two floors functioned as warehouses once. Ships came in from the East Indies and moored outside the house and all the cane sugar was refined there, which is why we are counted as sugar Heybroeks. The others are coffee Heybroeks and completely different, even if I am extremely fond of coffee. Sugar suffered its first set back when some Frenchman under Napoleon hit on sugar from beet. The country was at war then and sugar was very short. And that sugar was just as good, so no one craved cane sugar any longer, even though Napoleon I is forgotten for many years.

But try cane sugar and then you will taste the difference. Try it especially when you make jam. Whatever your verdict now, it was the end of the Heybroek sugar business, but not in Granny's time, as it was her eldest son John who had to pull the chestnuts out of the fire, and in the end, he shot himself.

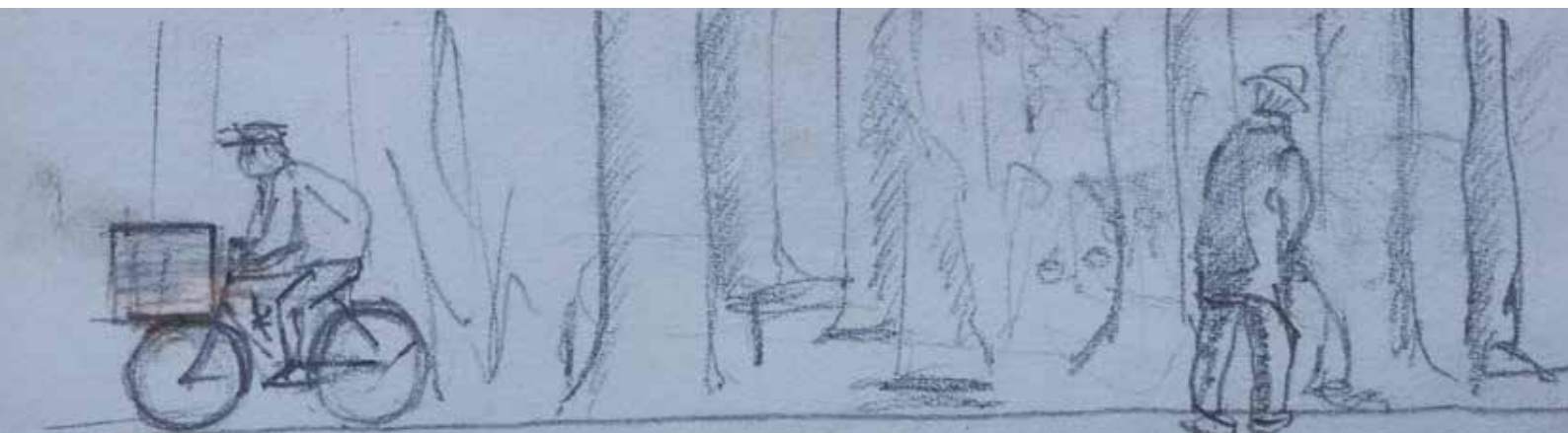
For company granny had her daughter Greta. She looked very handsome, roughly like a Greek marble statue and many young men cast a roving eye over her, it's held. She also had lessons in painting and there she met the young painter Piet Mondriaan, and who fell madly in love with her, partly due to her classical posture, but especially, say the wags, because of her square breasts.

He painted a picture of her called 'Passion Flower', of which you can find an excellent reproduction in Seuphor's book on Piet Mondrian (Michel Seuphor: *Piet Mondriaan: Life and Works*, Thames & Hudson 1956). Piet was as in love with her as a tomcat and constantly wanted to kiss her. But Greta didn't like being kissed, she thought artists should talk of art and

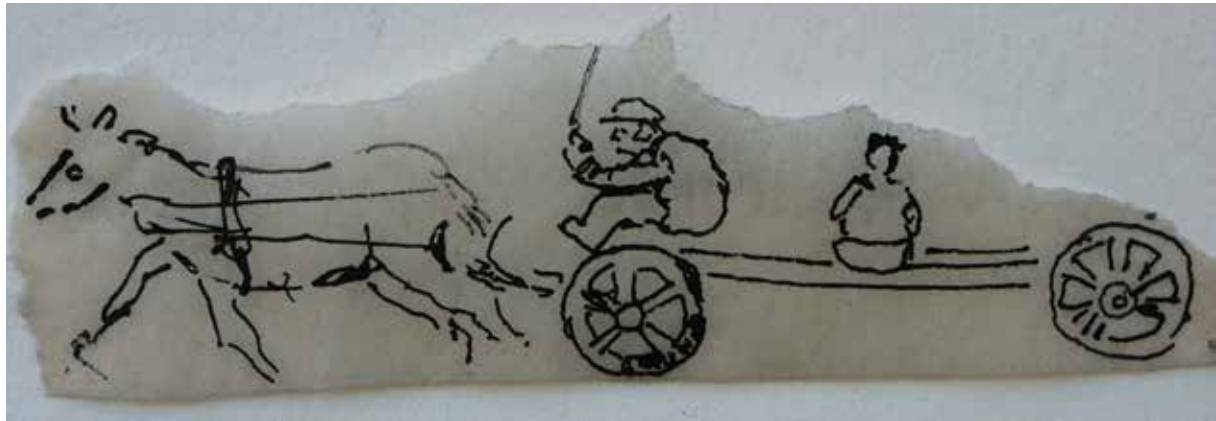
intellectual matters. Piet was very hard up and therefore, like many artists, thought a great deal about food, especially Brussel sprouts. Greta who had never been hungry thought it unfitting for an artist to discuss food, and especially not Brussel sprouts. She craved intellectual food. Thanks to that the engagement ended after eight enjoyable months. Aunt Greta never married and remained Granny's companion until she died. Then she moved to a house outside Arnhem where she lived with a very old spinster and a very irascible dog.

Her life became very narrow, from when her post arrived in the morning until Miss Smith tucked her up at night. But then one day in 1944 her house suddenly became part of the front-line. They hid in the cellars. The Germans installed artillery in her garden amongst the lilacs. Wounded English paratroopers were carried down into the cellars with them. Her lovely house became a pile of rubble, and they sat in the cellar in the dark without food and much water for a whole week. Above a thunderous hell, until suddenly once again quiet, when they could creep out only to find a grim, destroyed world. Greta was in her 60's and Miss Smith in her 70's then. The house was rebuilt, and Aunt Greta was collecting her morning post and being tucked up in the evening by Miss Smith once again just as formerly. Now I shall draw some pictures of all these stories I've told you about and then quickly get back to my own story once again.

I have so far only mentioned that heath and everything else behind our house; but in front of our house lay the main road to Utrecht, and across it were found tall beech woods – with trunks of great girth, the ground covered in coppery leaves, where I used to collect beech mast in the autumn which we fried in butter and then munched.

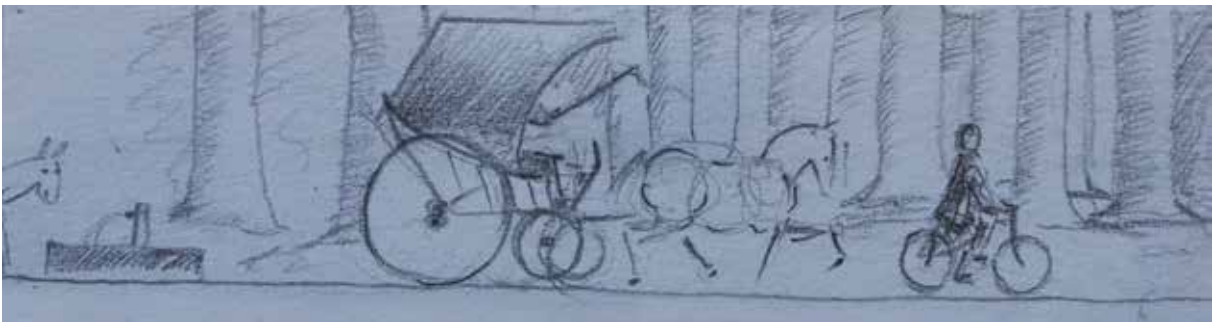


Our house was on a rise, in Holland that's only a few feet, in any case it was enough to develop a tiny stream which filled a watering place directly opposite our gate.

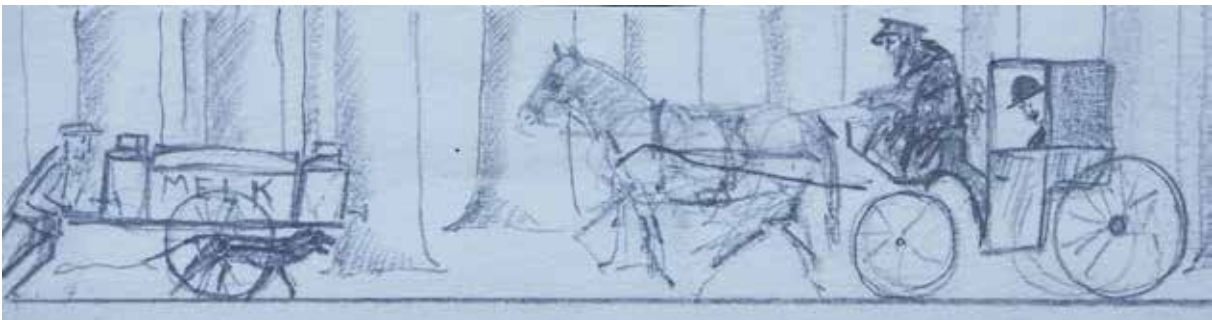




Horses and dogs on the lead availed themselves of it. The heavily laden and clinking milk cart with its pair of black cobs was first to use it in the morning.



Then came Mr. Saltsil in a loden coat, with a red nose and hands on his bicycle; even if it was bitterly cold, blowing icicles, he always said “fine day!” Farmers with business in town on their handsome carts with gleaming tack, all paused by the drinker.



The milkman’s little wagon was drawn by a huge black dog with a red tongue and his farm was a long way off so he must have covered 25 miles a day, and yet he still had the energy to hug the scullery maid behind the door. Now I think all that walking and flirting with the maids gave him the energy to seek out new opportunities in his life. Doctor Petter’s black carriage also often passed by.

If we were ill, he left the carriage outside, and the horse fell asleep. Once while Doctor Petter hurried in with his doctor's bag, and the coachman also fell asleep at once no matter how cold it was. When the horse and the coachman died Doctor Petter bought a Ford and became a fast driver, with lots of accidents, running into horses, trees, steam engines and even a stationary train.

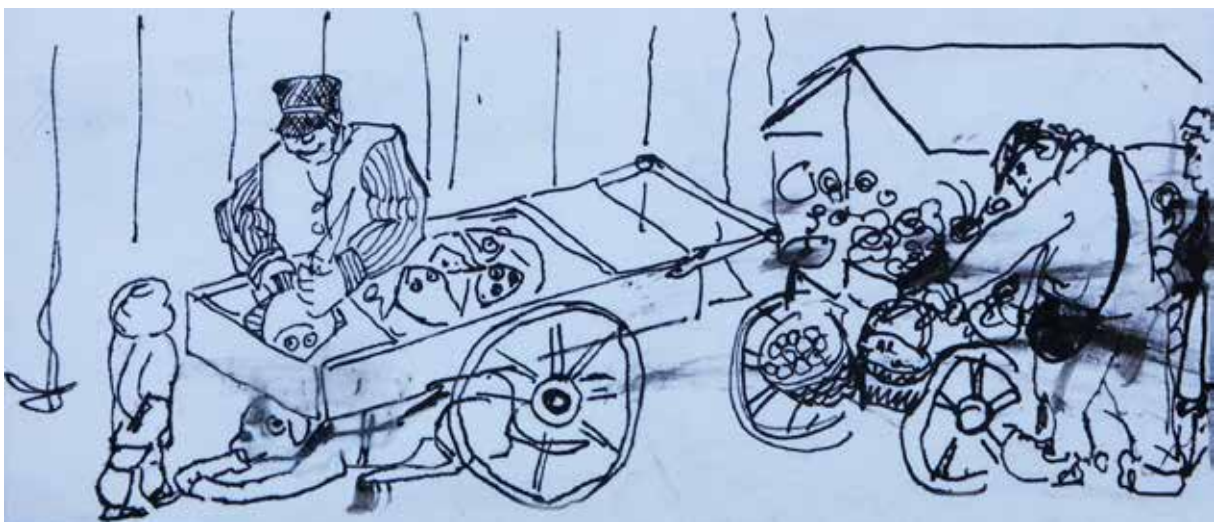
Once a week the rag and bone man came by, heavily laden with stinking bones and his horse always especially drank its fill, and sometimes he looked up anxiously as the water dribbled out of the corners of his mouth back into the drinker.



And I imagined I could smell rotten bones in that water for a long time afterwards. His driver barely moved, never said hello, was expressionless, glassy eyed and as if intoxicated. For me he represented the only real funeral undertaker, even though very occasionally a proper hearse with black clad men, black horses with many silver buckles came by, seeming actually quite festive by contrast. Their horses were never allowed to stop and drink.

We also had calls from the friendly fishmonger in his blue striped apron. He had a sizeable pale-yellow dog with a moist brown nose and black fisheyes trotting below his cart.

It was interesting to see how he could strip out all the fishbones and guts, and he too covered great distances as he drove all the way from Spakenburg, which then lay next to the sea.



Numerous errand boys also came to us on their delivery bicycles bringing groceries and meat.

For instance, one would bring 100 grammes of thinly sliced smoked meat costing 35 cents from a distance of three kilometres, and then once a month he came just to settle his bill, waiting endlessly as mummy or Aunty Nimblefeet checked and rechecked it. It could even take an hour or two.

On a stone in the garden, I once found a little rhyme.

“If still your patience isn’t learnt.

You’d better wait here till it’s earned.”

‘Wie het wachten nog moet leren,

Moet het hier maar eens proberen.”

Only in Dutch of course!



And then came our own cheerful baker who pushed his handcart along all by himself and without even a dog. He had great bristling eyebrows and a blue grey moustache that shone like bright wires. He was always cheerful and on Saturdays he gave me a delicious currant bun the taste of which I shall never forget. Wednesdays were market days in Hilversum and from the crack of dawn onwards farmers and their heavily laden carts passed by.

Cartloads of hens, ladies with baskets of eggs, trailed by mares with foals, all to be sold. Also loads of pigs and even bunches of cows with their coats on as they mooed past. You can understand how fascinating it all was just for me to stand by our gate and watch.

And now I’m forgetting all those cartloads of vegetables not to mention mountainous loads of hay or wheatsheaves for the baker. They fired their ovens with the straw and as they still do in France made delicious bread believe it or not.



One Wednesday I was watching all the passers-by, when suddenly a cow bolted and raced around the garden.



Van de Meulan flayed his arms at her, but an upset cow is wilder than an upset bull. Anna Nimblefeet rushed out and picked me up from near the gate just before the cow leapt out of the rhododendron bush, across the dreaming penstemons and ran head first into one of our own brick built gateposts, which fell apart, while the poor cow collapsed unconscious.



A few days later a friendly bricklayer came by and rebuilt it.

Now 1973 is coming to an end, I am soon leaving for Sweden to come and say hello. And I think that five years old is a good age to break off this section. Next, I'll tell of my school days, and that's why I want to employ the old cliché of the elephant who huffed the story... OUT.

As PS I want to remember three famous people who came to our home. Firstly, Julius Röntgen who gave my mother piano lessons. Because of the poor connections, he often stopped over for the night, and I only have a single memory of him, how with springy musicians' white hair he danced down the stairs for breakfast, struggling with some composition he carried in his head.

And then I have a thunderously loud memory of Björnstierna, the Norwegian skald. who held forth the whole night long through an old-fashioned viking evening with punch and brandies. While my Father couldn't stop drying his eyes from laughter, Mummy didn't laugh but just sat there with innocent eyes.

One afternoon Piet Mondrian came to visit, newly back from Paris. He gave me a French soldier, a rag doll of a 'poilu' but without any weapons or guns as I remember. Handsome and soft, with long moustaches, red felt breeches and a blue jacket. At the start of the war the Germans said 'the French wear red trousers', but they rapidly all changed to khaki. The evening sun sent shafts of light into the dark room haloing their faces, as Piet and Father chatted, making as if a painting by Rembrandt.

Folke's nickname was Rabbit.



Some sketches from Mondrian's sketchbook of the big tower in Zierikzee in whose shade Morfar is writing just now.





