

Auteur van *Elke dag een druppel gif*

WILMA GELDOLF

HET *meisje*  
MET DE  
VLECHTJES

Gebaseerd op het waargebeurde verhaal  
van Nederlands jongste verzetsmeisje

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A young girl with two braids and red bows, seen from behind, against a cloudy sky. She is wearing a light-colored top and a jacket draped over her shoulder.

# The Girl with the Braids

Wilma Geldof

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Freddie is only fourteen when World War II breaks out. For some years already, her mother has been taking in Jews who have fled Hitler's Germany. In 1941, Freddie and her older sister are asked to participate in the armed resistance. The girls lure high ranking Nazis into the forest, where they are killed by fellow resistance fighters. The sisters are then given their own pistols, and Freddie finds herself oscillating between fear and courage, doubt and pride. In between all of this, Freddie finds herself dealing with the frustrations of being a teenager in love. She adores her boyfriend Peter but he struggles with her role as a resistance fighter, even though he has no idea what the nature of her resistance work is. But Freddie refuses to stand by helplessly and takes greater and greater risks. The danger of betrayal mounts. Who can she still trust? Then she makes a shocking discovery...

This poignant story about betrayal and trust, loyalty and love is based on the life of the Netherlands' youngest female resistance fighter, Freddie Oversteegen from Haarlem, who, together with her sister Truus, worked for the resistance group whose later members included Hannie Schaft. Freddie passed away on 5 September 2018, a day before her 93rd birthday.

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# The Girl with the Braids by Wilma Geldof

Translation by Laura Watkinson

## Prologue

October 1933

Mum had lifted me onto the table and was braiding my hair. ‘So you’ve got it?’ she asked.

I nodded so automatically that she let go of my braids and grabbed my head between her hands. She forced me to look at her.

‘Ye-es,’ I said.

I wiggled my toes. No, I didn’t wiggle them – there was no room for that in my sister’s old shoes. They had holes in the soles and the heel was coming loose. My feet would only fit into them if I curled up my toes.

‘Well, how are you going to do it then?’ asked Mum.

‘You know, I’ll just sit there until I get it.’

‘Because? Why?’

‘Because I have a right to it,’ I said.

Mum laughed, planted a kiss on my forehead and said: ‘That’s the way, sweetheart.’

At lunchtime, I knocked on the headmaster’s door. There was no answer. He’s not there, I thought with relief. So now I’ll just go home. *It’s not my fault, Mum, he wasn’t there.* Mum would look at me with disappointment in her eyes. Then I’ll have to go myself, she would say.

My stomach lurched as I knocked on the door again, louder this time. Again there was no reaction. Maybe he really wasn’t there. I looked up at the portrait of Queen Wilhelmina above

the door, but she didn't know either. I waited for my breath to calm. Then I took hold of the door handle, silently pushed it down and opened the door.

There he was, sitting at his big desk. Without moving his head, he raised his eyes, saw me, looked down again and went on writing. He was wearing a long black jacket over a white shirt with a black tie. He was short and fat – his neck was short and fat, his hands were short and fat. In the glass ashtray on his desk, a fat cigar was smouldering away.

'My mother would like a coupon for new clothes,' I said, my voice trembling.

He sucked on his cigar, put it back in the ashtray and blew the smoke in my direction – without responding to my words.

'My mother would like a coupon for new clothes,' I repeated, coughing. 'A coupon from school welfare.'

The headmaster shook his head slowly and wearily, as he went on writing.

I took a deep breath, stepped into the room and, my heart pounding, sat down on the chair opposite him.

Now he looked up.

I crossed my arms and hooked my feet around the chair legs. 'My mother says I have to sit here until I have that coupon.'

'Then you can just stay sitting there, can't you?' he said casually, dipping his pen into the inkwell. The corners of his mouth crept upwards as he continued writing.

Through the big, high window behind him I could see two boys running across the playground – my next-door neighbour, Peter, and a boy I didn't know. My sister was hopping in circles around the old oak with its bare autumn branches. Then she picked up her skipping rope and ran to the headmaster's window. With every skip, her worried face appeared at the window. I shook my head. *It's not working, Truus. Don't go away! If you leave, I'll leave too.* Truus ran back to the tree and leant against its trunk. I knew she would wait for me. But I could hardly see her now. In

her brown dress she was almost invisible against that tree, and the playground was deserted. The view through the window seemed to have transformed into a dead painting.

Inside, the only sound was the quiet scratching of the pen on the paper. The cigar smoke spiralled straight up out of the ashtray. I looked at the walls of the room. They were bare, not even a clock. It was like being trapped inside a bubble with the headmaster. I hardly dared to breathe. I counted to one hundred. Then I burst the bubble.

‘May I have a sandwich, sir?’ I heard myself asking. ‘It’s lunchtime and I can’t go home now.’

The headmaster audibly sighed, bent down and picked up a brown paper bag. Without saying a word, he handed me a slice of rye bread. Without saying a word, I ate it. And waited. And the headmaster dipped his pen into the inkwell and wrote. And wrote.

Nothing else happened. Except, now and then, when he sucked on it, the tip of his cigar glowed orange.

I counted backwards from one hundred to zero. Then I stood up. ‘My mother says I need to have a coupon for new clothes,’ I said loudly. My voice sounded strangely high-pitched. Any minute now I was about to start screaming. I squeezed my lips together.

‘Your mother?’ he said. He stubbed out the cigar in the ashtray and laughed a short, sneering laugh. He knew my mother. Everyone knew Mum. Last week I had been given a letter to take home for her: FOR MISS VAN DER MOLEN, it said on the envelope.

‘That’s not my name,’ Mum had said without reading the contents. ‘Just give it back to them.’

‘So what is her name?’ the headmaster had asked.

‘*Mevrouw* Van der Molen,’ I said. And his eyes went big and then he roared with laughter, as a working-class woman does not deserve the title of ‘Mrs’ – and certainly not a *divorced* working-class woman.

‘Your mother?’ he repeated now, carefully dipping his pen into the pot of ink. ‘Last week the coupon from school welfare was not to her liking. And now she wants me to write out another one?’

I stared in bewilderment at the small mouth that those words came rolling out of, and then at the short fat fingers that so very delicately, almost tenderly, picked up a piece of blotting paper to prevent any smudging or smearing. And then – there was the inkwell.

I jumped forward and, in one movement, I swept that inkwell from the desk. It crashed into the metal cabinet and the wall, and the black liquid trickled down onto the floor like thin streams of dark blood. For one moment, the headmaster and I looked together at the evidence of my offence. Then he shot to his feet and raised his hand.

Before he could hit me, I flew to the door.

‘Out!’ he screamed. ‘Out! You’re just like your mother!’

‘That’s not true!’ I screamed back. ‘Mum always behaves herself!’

‘... suspended! Three mon...’ I heard him shouting, but I was already gone. I stormed along the street, blazing with fury.

# 1

This is the beginning – August 1941.

We don't know any men with hats. Leaning over Mum's bed, I peer out in surprise through a crack in the blackout paper at the visitor who's standing at the door. I shout upstairs to Mum.

'A hat?' repeats my sister from the living room.

'He's tall and slim...' I say mysteriously. I whistle through my teeth. 'A face like a prince's. A movie star, Truus! He must have come to ask for your hand in marriage.'

I hear Mum open the front door.

'Grow up.' Truus gently slips the last peeled potato into the pan, as if it might break, and wipes her dirty hands on her dark-blue dress. 'You act more like you're ten than sixteen,' she says, but she's laughing.

'Hey, almost seventeen,' I reply with a grin. 'And you act more like you're ninety than nineteen.' Oh well, he's obviously not here to see her anyway. She's not pretty enough. But I'd never say so out loud.

Mum opens the living-room door a crack. 'He wants to talk,' she says quietly, 'to the two of you.'

'To us? Really?' We only know men with caps!

Truus puts down the pan of potatoes on the kitchen counter and snorts. And I start giggling like an idiot. Quickly I try to shut the sliding doors in the front room so that he can't see Mum's bed, but it doesn't work because of my stupid fit of the giggles. The crooked doors keep sticking.

'Yes, really. I know him vaguely from the Party,' says Mum, who's a member of the Communist Party. Well, she *was* a member, I should say: the Party's banned now, because the Communists are the enemies of the Nazis. 'It's about the resistance.'

Truus's eyes nearly pop out of her head. We don't do much more than take newssheets around. I can't help giggling again at Truus's stunned expression.

'Stop it, Fred!' whispers Truus. She puts her hand over her mouth to hold in her laughter. I'm still chuckling when Mum swings open the door and shows in the gentleman with the hat, and even when I give him a weak handshake too, with a tickle still in my throat. He introduces himself, but I don't catch his name.

Truus gives me a pleading look from behind his back. I bite my lips. I really do want to stop laughing.

'Do you need me here?' asks Mum.

'No, thanks, there's no need,' says the man. His voice is calm and warm.

'Then I'll go upstairs,' says Mum. 'You're better off not knowing everything nowadays.'

Other mothers would insist on staying. Other mothers like to be in charge, but Mum's not like that. She's more like a big sister.

The door shuts and the sound of Mum's footsteps disappears up the stairs. Truus and I stay behind with our visitor in the small living room. Now I'm silent. A bee circles between us, flies away and into the sliding doors, bumping against the glass. In the sudden silence, where only the tapping of the bee can be heard, I can see that Truus thinks the man is at least as handsome as I do. Her ears are sticking out of her sandy hair, bright red, her cheeks are flushing and she is sitting up straight without touching the back of the chair – as if she actually is in the presence of a movie star. She's usually the sensible one, the one who knows how to behave, but I don't think a normal word is going to come out of her now.

'Please, sit down,' I say quickly. I point at the nice armchair, which is covered with a deep-red fabric, but he takes the other one. The sagging one, with the spring sticking out. 'No, this one,' I want to say, but he's already sitting. I search curiously for any signs of shock or pain on his face. No, nothing. Hmm, very brave. I grin at Truus and flop down on the sofa beside her so hard that she bounces up a little.

The man takes off his hat. He doesn't actually look all that remarkable, but there is something elegant about him. He is wearing a tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows. Very different from the local lads. And he has fine features and an intelligent and gentle look – even with a spring poking into his backside.

'You're already quite active in the resistance, aren't you, eh?' says the man.

Excuse me? What a stupid question! We have no idea which side he's really on. Truus and I both shrug our shoulders at the same time. We keep quiet about that sort of thing.

The man smiles. 'I've heard lots about you.'

I notice Truus stiffen beside me. 'What do you mean?' she asks reluctantly. There is no flush on her cheeks now.

'From the Party!' says the man quickly. 'From the CPN.'

Oh yes, he's a red too. Another Communist.

'I've heard that Red Rita's daughters are no cowards.'

I look at Truus. I don't know what to say. *You need to speak for us both*, I say with my eyes, *you're the oldest and you're the sensible one – that's what you always say, isn't it?*

'What do you want from us?' asks Truus. She sounds serious and grown-up.

The man puts his hands together. 'I am planning,' he says in a grave voice, 'to organise a group to fight fascism. To tackle the Krauts more firmly. And to do that I need people who are brave, people who don't scare easily.' He stops and looks at each of us in turn. 'This is more than courier work, putting up posters and taking around strike leaflets...' He lets a silence fall again. And in that silence I realise that he already knows exactly what we've done up until now: courier work, putting up posters and taking around strike leaflets.

We started a year ago. Mum was having trouble with her knee. 'Will you two do it?' she asked. We did a good job. And after that, on an almost daily basis, it was: 'Go on, get to it.'

So the man thinks we're the kind of people he's looking for: people who are brave. I don't say anything, and neither does Truus.

‘Are you still in school?’

‘No,’ I say abruptly. I’d like to go to school, and my teacher told Mum it would be a cinch for me, but we don’t have the money. It’s that simple. For eleven years now, ever since my father left, we’ve been living on charity. Or on the pittance that Mum makes when she has work. At the laundry she used to get... What was it again? At any rate, it was two thirds of what the men were making.

‘You’re complaining?’ her boss said when she went to talk to him about it. ‘Women like you are stealing the men’s jobs!’

‘Of course we’re not,’ said Mum, ‘no man would work for that money.’ And then she was out on her ear.

‘So you’re not at school. Got a job, then?’ asks the man.

‘No,’ says Truus, just as abruptly as me. She’s a housemaid, but she’s no good at it. Just been chucked out of another job. Now we help at home. And our underground work keeps us both pretty busy too.

‘What do you expect us to do?’ Truus asks him coldly. ‘Do you have work for us?’

The man flashes us a quick grin. ‘Yes,’ he says, serious again. ‘I want a group to carry out active resistance. To derail ammunition trains. To blow up railway lines. To steal weapons from the Krauts and the police. To deal with traitors.’ He waits a moment to gauge the effect of his words. Then he says, ‘I’m talking about violent resistance.’

And he’s asking us to join the group?

‘I need the two of you,’ the man says.

Us? Two *girls*?!

I take a deep breath. ‘No!’ I think. Of course we’re not going to join a group like that. Never. Even though it does sound quite different from what the government in London is saying. They say we have to ‘adapt’ and to ‘go on with our lives’. And it also sounds quite different from the people who are insisting that ‘everything will turn out fine’ because the

Germans and the Dutch are not so different in terms of race and language. And it's not even necessarily NSB members who are saying that. I'd rather hear what this man is saying. Powerful stuff. Even though I obviously won't join that kind of group! That's impossible. And neither will Truus. My body slumps until my back is touching the sofa.

'I've not just come here by chance,' says the man. 'I selected the two of you for this job.'

I slap my hand over my mouth. Later, when he's gone, I'm going to laugh myself silly about this with Truus.

Truus sits beside me, saying nothing. She is peering at the man through narrowed eyes, examining him, almost tasting him. 'Why us?' she asks.

'Because I've heard from the Party that you're brave *and...*' – the man laughs – '...because I want some women in my group.'

*Women*, I repeat in silence. *Women...* Truus is more like a boy. Not a wild kind of boy, not like that, but the sort that sits like a man, with her legs apart. She would fit right in at the harbour, or no, behind a rag-and-bone cart, with her constantly crumpled clothes. But I'm not like that. Absolutely not. I cross my legs and sit up a little straighter.

The man gives us a big grin. 'You're still *girls!* No Kraut is going to suspect you of anything!'

'So,' begins Truus, 'it's because they won't take us seriously?'

'Exactly,' says the man.

'Well, that's nice,' says Truus.

Suddenly I see us through his eyes. Both of us. Two girls in dark-blue sailor dresses, and white socks in our flat shoes. At one metre sixty and with my skinny body, it's easy to take me for a twelve-year-old. My face is soft and round like a child's. Not a blemish on my skin. Two peas on a plank instead of breasts.

The man looks at me and smiles again. 'You definitely need to keep those braids.'

I often wear my hair like that out of laziness. I tug at my braids and sort of smile back at him as I feel my face turning red.

‘Put ribbons in it!’ says the man.

I pull the hem of my dress up over my bony knees and pick at the edge of a scab.

‘And also,’ he says, serious again now, ‘I’ll teach you how to use pistols, hand grenades and explosives.’

I stare at him.

‘Will we have to shoot people?’ Truus asks with a neutral expression, as if she’s enquiring if it’s going to rain tomorrow.

‘Not people,’ the man says emphatically.

‘Oh,’ I say, feeling relieved.

‘Gestapo men. Or traitors.’

‘We’ll never shoot anyone dead,’ says Truus firmly. ‘Not all German soldiers are Nazis!’

‘We don’t shoot just any old German soldiers,’ says the man. A tone of impatience has crept into his voice, but it quickly disappears. ‘You’ve heard of De Geuzen, haven’t you? The resistance group?’

‘Yes,’ Truus and I reply. It was so terrible what happened to them.

‘That whole group was arrested and executed,’ the man continues. ‘Eighteen men. And one was tortured to death.’ He lets a meaningful silence fall.

I realise that I’m tensing up, clenching my fists.

‘The bastard who betrayed that group clearly needs to be caught, eh?’

We nod obediently. Yes, of course!

‘But why?’ the man asks me. ‘Why does he need to be caught?’

‘Why?’ I repeat. ‘Well, he’s a bastard! You said so yourself!’

‘No! Not out of revenge, but because that swine will just keep on doing the same thing otherwise.’

Oh, yes.

‘In the Soviet Union, women and girls fight in the army,’ he says.

I nod slowly, but my breath catches in my throat.

‘Do we have to –’ begins Truus.

‘I’m not saying that you’ll have to eliminate traitors yourselves, but you do have to agree with it,’ he says, calmly interrupting her. Then he smiles and continues in a friendlier voice: ‘You two really are perfectly cut out for this work. I can’t imagine any better girls for my group. Seriously. Will you think about it? Please?’

The man stands and picks up his hat, and then stops and gives us a penetrating look. ‘In three days’ time, on Thursday afternoon, I’ll come back to hear if you’re going to join us. If you don’t say yes, then you’ve never seen me and you’ve never spoken to me. Is that clear?’

We nod.

‘But if you do join,’ – he pauses for a long time – ‘then you can’t talk about it, not to anyone. I consider talking to be betrayal. And then...’ His hand flashes across his throat. He gives each of us another long, hard stare. ‘So not a word about it. Not even to your mother. Is that –’

‘But,’ I say, cutting straight across his words, ‘Mum’s allowed to know, isn’t she?’

‘You can tell her that I’ve asked you to join a resistance group. But not what exactly our group does. Is that clear?’

A little bewildered, we nod again.

When the front door closes, we both sit there in silence, just staring.

‘This is really risky, Fred. It’s scary,’ whispers Truus after a while. ‘Well, we’re obviously not going to do it, are we?’

‘No, of course not,’ I say. ‘Why would we?’

We fall silent. We look at the wall. At the place where Mrs Kaufmann stood...

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Mrs Kaufmann...

It had been a month ago. July. A vehicle stopped in front of our house. An engine growling. Doors slamming. Then banging on our front door. Not with fists, much louder. With the butts of their rifles. The Jewish people who were in hiding with us would always be able to run to their secret place in time, we thought. But Mrs Kaufmann and little Abel just so happened to be downstairs right then. With us. In the living room.

‘Krauts, Mum! Krauts!’ I called in a hushed voice. I quickly stuck the loose blackout paper back up and looked at Mum and then at Mrs Kaufmann.

Mrs Kaufmann grabbed her son by the wrist and looked at my mother in panic. She was a young woman with wavy brown hair and soft brown eyes. I thought she was really pretty. Her son, a chunky five-year-old with blond hair, had the same eyes.

‘Quickly! Upstairs!’ I said. But that meant they’d have to go past the front door. The banging on the door went on and on. ‘No! Into the garden!’ I said.

Mum shook her head. That would also involve going through the hallway and past the front door. She hurried to the door. If we didn’t open up soon, they would break it down with the butts of their rifles. ‘*Kommen Sie herein, meine Herrschaften,*’ she said warmly, as if welcoming old friends.

Two military monsters stomped out of the dusk and into our cramped living room. I knew them. I had seen them before, they were all the same. Grey uniforms, gleaming black leather gloves and boots, insignia on their collars, sleeves and shoulders. *Sicherheitsdienst*. Their eyes were little bullets, which they fired straight at Mrs Kaufmann. She backed away with Abel until they were standing right up against the wall.

From the stairs came the din of soldiers' footsteps, and then thudding above our heads. They soon came back downstairs. Along with Truus, who ran into the living room. She came and stood close to me, shoulder to shoulder, against the sliding doors of the front room.

The Kraut dropped down into the armchair. 'You have been hiding Jews!' he yelled at Mum. The corners of his mouth were turned down in anger. He stood up, took a step towards Mrs Kaufmann and said in German: 'You have five minutes to pack your belongings.'

'Excuse me?' said Mum.

'New orders,' he said. 'All Jews have to go to Germany, to a work camp.'

Behind Mum, Mrs Kaufmann hugged Abel tightly. All around us, the house held its breath.

When the Kraut grabbed Mrs Kaufmann by the arm, Mum jumped in front of him. 'You!' she said in German, now raising her voice. She pointed at the man. 'You're an educated man! And yet you allow yourself to be used to hunt human beings?' The way she was raging, it seemed as if she might even be able to take on their Führer.

'Shut your mouth, woman!' he yelled in Mum's face. 'Or would you and your daughters like to come along too?'

He gave Mum a hard shove and she fell against the table. Truus and I leaped in between Mum and the Kraut. Not a word passed our lips, but our tense bodies were saying the same thing. *Just you try that again!*

Abel was still stuck to the wall, his face as pale as the wallpaper. Truus went over to him and took his hand.

'Nothing we can do about it,' the other Kraut growled at us as the first one turned back to Mrs Kaufmann and pushed her out of the room. '*Befehl ist Befehl.*' Orders are orders.

On the stairs and then above us we heard Mrs Kaufmann screaming. Abel pulled his hand away. Mum stormed into the hallway and up the stairs, followed by Abel. Truus and I wanted to go after them, but Mum shouted at us to stay in the room. We flew to her bed in the

front room downstairs and peeked out through the gap in the blackout paper. Soldiers with guns at the ready. A truck. People inside the truck, staring down as if they were ashamed. Then we saw Mrs Kaufmann. Two soldiers dragged her out of the house, pushed her into the street, knocked her into the back of the truck. Her suitcase slipped out of her hands, fell onto the street, burst open.

*'Mutti! Mutti!'* wailed the little boy. He clambered up into the truck, missing a step and receiving a hard shove from one of the soldiers.

Meanwhile Mum was quickly stuffing a pale-pink blouse back into the suitcase. She still had not fastened the two metal catches when the soldier tore the case from her hands, tossed it into the truck and jumped up after it.

We never saw the Kaufmanns again.

## 2

We are still sitting on the sofa when we hear Mum's footsteps on the stairs.

'So what does that Frans van der Wiel want?' she asks, dropping a pile of laundry onto the table.

So he's Frans van der Wiel.

'Oh,' I say after a quick glance at Truus. 'Frans wants to know if we'll join his resistance group.' I say it casually, as if it's something we're asked every day. 'Do you know him, Mum?'

'And what would you have to do? Bad things?'

'I thought you didn't want to know,' says Truus.

'No details! But I would like to know what he wants. Nothing bad, then?'

Truus doesn't say anything.

'Well? What, then?' asks Mum. 'Helping people who have gone into hiding? Making fake ration cards?'

Truus nods.

'Or carrying out sabotage too?' She puts up the ironing board.

'What?' I say.

'Cutting telephone lines, blocking railway tracks, that kind of work?'

'Yes, that too. But what do you think, Mum?' asks Truus quickly. 'Can we trust him?'

'I barely know the man.' Mum looks thoughtful for a moment. 'I'll make some enquiries about him,' she says, 'with my comrades in the Party.'

Just like every night, Truus is lying across from me on the shabby sofa in the living room. I am on the two armchairs, which we have pushed together. And Mum is in the bed in the front room. She has said that we can sleep upstairs again now, in our own beds, but then it would be as if we approved of what had happened to the Kaufmanns.

I turn my head on the pillow. The seat of the armchair is under the pillow. A month ago, that Kraut sat in this armchair with his Kraut backside, followed, just a couple of hours ago, by a gentleman. A real gentleman in a hat. Frans van der Wiel. Who selected *us* to work in his resistance group. Truus and me!

‘If we say yes to that Frans, everything is going to change,’ I say quietly to Truus. Mum went to bed half an hour ago. I can hear her regular breathing – she is asleep.

Truus’s laugh sounds fake. ‘Everything already changed a long time ago,’ she says.

I nod, even though she can’t see me.

‘Back when Germany bombed Rotterdam,’ says Truus.

‘Oh yes,’ I say. That was when we knew what kind of bastards we were dealing with. Even though the newspapers later wrote that the German soldiers had behaved ‘so decently and politely.’ So had they dropped their bombs very neatly and carefully? Had they said ‘Excuse me’ first?

‘No,’ I say. ‘It was before that. When the Germans started persecuting their Jews.’ Because that was when the first refugees came to us, after Kristallnacht. Four years ago now.

‘No, no, even before that,’ says Truus. ‘In 1933, when Hitler came to power.’

I give a big sigh. ‘No. Even earlier,’ I say. ‘After the World War, because, um...’ I stop, I can’t remember what exactly went wrong back then, and all this history is making my head spin. It’s like when I used to write down my name and address:

Freddie Oversteegen

Brouwersstraat

Leidschevaartbuurt

Haarlem

The Netherlands

Europe

The World

## The Universe

... and I got dizzy because I could feel myself disappearing into an infinity that was beyond my imagining.

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It is a few days before Mum gets an answer to her questions about Frans van der Wiel, but I am sure she won't hear anything bad about him. He is a gentleman!

If only my father were the same. My father likes to be as free as a bird, spreading his wings in the open air, instead of being with us. We were his cage. Mum says he worked whenever he felt like it (not often), and he drank whenever he felt like it (very often). And I also know that he couldn't keep his hands off other women. I heard Mum and Aunt Lena talking about it one day. Because he even tried it on with Aunt Lena. Mum's own sister! Here in the kitchen. Mum was in bed with me, I'd just been born, but my father was looking at Aunt Lena. Well, it was more than looking. He tried 'it' on. It. And that says it all.

But it's good that it didn't work – Aunt Lena just gave him a whack.

'That kind of man,' says Mum with moist eyes as soon as the subject of our father comes up, 'is someone we don't need anymore, eh?'

'Nope, never,' Truus and I always reply. And when children ask where my father is, I say: 'He's dead.'

I have Mum and Truus. That's it. The three of us. We don't miss him. The family – that's us. Not him.

'About that Frans,' Mum begins. She's folding the laundry with Truus. She loosely puts the corners of the last sheet together – it doesn't have to be too exact – and she walks towards Truus to join up the ends. Then she passes the sheet to her and sits down on the sofa.

‘Yes, what?’ says Truus, standing there with the half-folded sheet in her hands.

‘He’s okay,’ says Mum simply.

‘What have you heard?’ I ask.

‘That he’s a good person to lead a resistance group. He’s brought together a group of excellent men. And he carried out extensive enquiries into anyone he didn’t know personally.’

‘Really?’ asks Truus.

‘Really,’ says Mum.

I knew it! ‘What do you think, Truus?’ I drop down onto the sofa, next to Mum. On the windowsill behind her my tin tortoise’s head bounces up and down. ‘Do it!’ says the metal toy. ‘Do it!’

‘Don’t go making any hasty decisions,’ says Mum.

‘Hasty? What do you mean?’ I think about Mrs Kaufmann and Abel.

‘It could last another year, the war,’ says Mum.

‘Mr Van Gilst says there’s no point to the resistance,’ says Truus, folding the sheet in half. “‘You’re not going to get rid of the Germans,” he says. It’s always going to be like this. The Netherlands as a new German state.’

‘Ach, that grocer!’ says Mum.

‘Peter’s father!’ I reply.

‘He’s so small-minded,’ says Mum.

‘Lots of people are saying what he’s saying, you know.’ Truus drops the folded sheet onto the table.

‘Well, they’re wrong. They’re not Communists, eh?’ Mum says, rubbing her knuckles, which are still red from scrubbing on the washboard. ‘It’s easy enough, saying that Germany is stronger – and then you don’t have to do anything about all the injustice. But not choosing – well, that’s a choice too.’ She gazes into the middle distance. ‘We must never submit to German

oppression. To oppression of any kind.’ She suddenly seems a little shaky. What’s she thinking about? About the Krauts? About our father?

I move to put my hand on her arm, but then she goes on talking. ‘The Netherlands will be liberated, Truus.’ Now she sounds as certain as ever. ‘The only question is when.’

‘There is good and there is evil,’ I say. ‘And you have to fight against evil. Isn’t that right, Truus?’

I can see Truus thinking, with her head bowed. Then she slowly looks at me and nods.

‘Do the two of you really want to join Frans’s group?’ asks Mum. For an instant the corners of her mouth shoot upwards and a little glint sparkles in her eyes. The next moment, worried wrinkles appear on her forehead. ‘Don’t feel that you have to though, eh?’ she says. ‘You’re the most important thing I have in the world, and this could be really dangerous. Even without the resistance group you can help with the people in hiding and with the courier work. That’s important work too.’

‘I want to do more than that, Mum,’ I say. ‘And you said it yourself: it’s not forever!’

Mum shrugs. ‘But joining a resistance group right now...’

‘You’re the one who let us talk to that Frans van der Wiell!’ says Truus.

‘Yes, but I didn’t know at the time that –’ Mum doesn’t finish her sentence. She just stares ahead, thinking. ‘And what if...’ she says then, ‘what if it lasts more than a year?’

‘I keep thinking about Mrs Kaufmann and Abel,’ says Truus, ‘and about everything that’s happening to the Jews. That star, and they’re not allowed to do anything, they can’t use the telephone, or visit people – they’re all being taken away, Mum!’ Her voice trembles.

Truus is right. ‘Yes, even if the war goes on for another two years!’ I shout.

A silence falls. High in the sky, I hear aeroplanes. British planes, I hope, off to flatten Germany with their bombs.

Mum gives us a searching look. ‘One thing...’ She reaches out and gently pulls Truus down beside me on the sofa. ‘I don’t know exactly what you’re going to do, and you don’t even

know that yourselves yet either, but...’ – she strokes my cheek with her finger – ‘... always remain human.’ Her eyes are serious, she is speaking with emphasis. ‘*Never* become like the enemy. Don’t get your hands dirty. None of that “orders are orders”. Always keep thinking for yourselves.’

‘Yes, of course,’ I immediately reply.

Truus nods. ‘We’re not daft. We’ll always keep thinking for ourselves. At least I will.’

‘Me too!’

Mum looks at Truus and then at me. ‘Don’t kill anyone,’ she says. ‘No matter how bad they are.’

I can hardly believe she’s serious. She’s never said anything like that before.

Maybe I’m not a thinker like Truus, but I do know what’s right. ‘I listen to myself,’ I say, breaking the silence. ‘To my...’ – I put my hand on my heart, but I don’t necessarily mean my heart – ‘... to my inner self.’ My face turns red – it sounds ridiculously pompous.

But Mum says: ‘You put that nicely, sweetheart.’

I rest my head on her shoulder. She reaches around me to Truus. Her voice floats above my head. ‘The world is more important than we are,’ I hear her say. ‘And you two are always in my thoughts. Never forget that.’

**Wilma Geldof** is a full-time writer and writing instructor. In 2014, she published the YA novel *Elke dag een druppel gif* ('Every Day, A Drop of Poison'), for which she received the Thea Beckman Prize for best historical YA novel. In 2016 her beautiful children's book *Ollie en het kronkeldier* ('Ollie and the Twisty Animal') came out, which was nominated by the Children and Youth Jury of Flanders for best book in children's and YA fiction. For *The Girl With the Braids*, author Wilma Geldof conducted interviews with Freddie Oversteegen.

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Author Wilma Geldof with Freddie Dekker-Oversteegen, © Rob van Weegen, August 2018

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