

Sample translation from

*De Mannen van Maria* by Anneloes Timmerije

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Translation and notes by Antoinette Fawcett

Suggested title in English:

*A Self-made Woman: the story of Maria van Aelst and how she made her fortune*

*De mannen van Maria*, Anneloes Timmerije's fifth novel, largely takes place in what was then the Dutch East Indies, a part of the world where she herself has family roots. It is a stirring story set in a 17th-century world of slavery and pirates, and portrays the life of a self-made woman whose drive to action succeeds in spite of the colonial and patriarchal systems of the time.

Maria van Aelst, the main character, really did exist. Not much more is known about her than that she was the wife of Antonio van Diemen, who between 1637-1645 was Governor-General of the former Dutch East Indies. It is also known that their marriage was childless and that she was immensely wealthy when she died. Timmerije has filled in the details of Maria van Aelst's life, portraying her as an intelligent, self-willed woman.

The following extract explores the reasons why Maria was sent to the Dutch East Indies, her experiences on board ship, her initial impressions of Batavia, and her marriage to her first husband, the merchant Johan Libener. We first meet Maria on board the *Mauritius*, a Dutch East Indiaman.

## DEPARTURE

4 January 1625

### Father

We went to bear children, sent by ship on the orders of the gentlemen over there, seven young women, few of whom had ever been kissed. Even I, far too wise for my eighteen years, according to Mother, had never known the taste of other lips. That is why on that very first night I began to practise at once, on my right hand, with thumb and forefinger shaped into a stiff mouth, a cold mouth. But this preparation for my new life couldn't last long, for I then had to thaw the hand between my thighs. I wriggled down below the blanket till only the tip of my cap peeped out, so I could shut out that biting cold. There I had some peace, for I did not think it likely that men would wish to kiss beneath the blankets, if blankets even existed where I was going. In my warming-up time I could snooze a little. Not one of us truly slept, thanks to the crashing, and rolling, and creaking, and howling, and grinding, and lurching of the good ship *Mauritius*. Only old sea-hands are immune to this, men to whom all land is foreign and who can only flourish on the waves. Men who do not lie awake when the ship heels so far over it seems to be capsizing, while we were convinced that our time had come. All seven of us were yelling for our mothers, even the girls who had never known what mothers were. And we were scarcely underway.

The ship had sailed out of the Wielingen roads and joined the Texel fleet a little after Flushing. The open sea immediately turned wild and capricious. I never thought to experience anything so terrible again. Even now, fifty years later, I am still sometimes haunted by that voyage – especially when dreaming that my life is not yet over – and yet I have slowly come to realize that things can be far worse. In fact, on that first night, I felt happy with my place in the corner of the girls' cubbyhole, built especially

for the outbound voyage. It was eight foot square and had a sailcloth across its doorway to shield us from the other passengers. Yes, quite a privilege, but we had special status on board: a Dutch East Indiaman did not usually sail with women, let alone young, unmarried ones. I had chosen that spot instinctively and not because I was cock of the midden, as the young woman from Middelburg flung at me. It turned out to be a good choice, because at every heavy swell I shoved the top half of my body into the corner and braced my hands against the cold, rough planks. That gave me some grip. Sometimes my feet slid from the thin mattress and I accidentally kicked the girl opposite, who like me was trying to survive the night half sitting. Another ray of sunshine was that I seemed immune to the seasickness that struck as soon as we were offshore, a sickness that for ten to fourteen days reduced most of the passengers to yellowish-green, squirming creatures. I decided that my Indies adventure could have had a far worse start, and then, like a reward for seeing the good side, an unexpected calm descended on us. The ship had reached still waters and I could hear the bell in the helmsman's cabin: the sound of everything normal, nothing amiss. I shut my eyes and imagined how above me the first mate was holding the *Mauritius* on course. Beside him the boatswain kept an eye on the sandglass, turning it when the glass was empty and striking the bell to indicate the passing of another half hour – turning and striking, till after eight glasses his watch would finish. I really should have liked to have been rocked to sleep, bobbing on that serene sea, and that would have happened too if the ship had not suddenly started rolling and bucking again. At that very moment I felt an urgent need to pass water. Searching for the chamber-pot, I crept with lifted skirts past six pairs of legs. When by the faint, flickering light of a solitary oil lamp I spied a river of spew and piss splashing round the pot, I was already standing in it.

The first death came in the third week. We had sailed through the Channel and were about the latitude of Cap de la Hague. I did not know this at the time – we in our cubbyhole knew nothing at all. We only thought about looking and staying respectable, and in those first weeks we didn't even have time for that, because every minute of the day and night we were busy surviving and longing for home. It was Antonio who traced the course of the voyage for me, six years later, when we were sailing home. Because of him I also know that a ship usually sails far more slowly than you think. 'A

trotting horse is swifter,' he said. Toni knew a great deal and he liked to display that knowledge.

All those on board, the two hundred and forty-five of us still surviving, gathered together at sunset for a solemn farewell. We, the young women, the Colony Girls, were placed to the left of the officers. I saw that most had their eyes shut or were looking down piously at the newly-scrubbed deck, as may be expected of devout, respectable young ladies.

'Maria's standing at the front, of course,' someone said.

Yes, I was standing at the front, because from that vantage point you can see everything. But that wasn't the only reason. It was as if I already knew I would have to get accustomed to that position. In front is the place where you can best arm yourself, for precisely the reason that hiding is not possible. My gaze was on the captain of the ship, Reinier Pels, dressed in full regalia for the occasion. The tails of his long seaman's coat flapped in the wind. The ship hurtled through the sea like a horse at full gallop, or so it seemed at least to a young woman with nothing to grasp hold of. There was the corpse, lying on a plank, with three sailors standing on either side. It was not the first dead body I had ever seen – there were sometimes great piles of soldier's corpses where I lived with my family in Steenberg – but he was certainly the fattest: a merchant, was the whisper, who could barely be lifted, even after two weeks of the bloody flux. I had never seen him before, probably because he had fallen ill shortly after our departure. Now no one could see him anymore, because belowdecks they'd sewn his body into a sailcloth. The last stitch isn't put through the canvas but through the nose. That day we found out that this is what you do at sea, to make sure the dead are truly dead.

From p. 41 to p. 51

After the long and difficult voyage to Batavia, on the Mauritius, Maria once more sets foot on land. The reason she had been sent there becomes absolutely clear.

## Arrival: 3rd October, 1625

If my father had known what Batavia was like, he would never have sent me there. The former swampland of Jayakarta, captured in 1619 from the Sultanate of Bantam, the western province of Java, was a hot, chaotic shambles, rife with mosquitoes and violence. The central square and the Pangeran's palace had been razed to the ground and a new city built in their place, a Western city in an Asian setting. At least, that was the intention. Two years before our arrival the Governor-General of Batavia, Jan Pieterszoon Coen, had written to the Heeren XVII (the seventeen gentlemen who governed the Company), to say that he needed people to increase the city's growth – plenty of people, women especially, because there was a dire shortage of these. Without women, as the Gentlemen naturally knew just as well as he did, Batavia could never flourish. He wrote clearly and directly – he was good at that, and he had a trump card to strengthen his request to advance the seeding of the colony: money. If the founding of Batavia did not blossom, the East India Company would not have the slightest chance of success in Asia, and the whole of the East Indies trade would evaporate.

It was not so strange that my father hardly knew what the real situation was there. Coen, a man of many talents as I later knew, wrote stirring accounts of the place in his letters to the Amsterdam Chamber. His representation of Batavia and its fertile hinterland, pure drinking water, and wonderful opportunities was apparently so convincing that he was able to outsmart his own superiors. At best, he presented things as being much better than they really were. No wonder then that the Heeren XVII and many others concerned with trade and the strengthening of the situation in the East had a distorted image of the reality there, a reality that we entered when we stepped ashore, on that morning of October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1625.

Coen saw something different. Not only did he wish to populate Batavia with people from the Dutch Republic – which in his opinion was overfull anyway and well able to lose a hundred thousand subjects – both Ambon and the Banda Islands, which had also been conquered, formed part of his

plan. He wanted to have many ships off the coast, and busy cities filled with European men and their wives and children – all free citizens, honest people well able to earn their own living by means of the merchandise that lay there almost for the taking. That is what he saw.

It didn't happen, at least not as he had imagined it.

During my first years in the East I learned that Coen sailed back to the fatherland at precisely the same time we were on our way East. While we were drawing closer to land in a shaky sloop, he was in the East India House in Amsterdam, pleading his case with the Heeren XVII. His term as Governor-General had just finished, but he was burning with the ambition to push his successor, Pieter de Carpentier, off the throne and to start a new term of office, and so he built an image of his dream city with the words he spoke to his superiors.

When we set foot on land we saw the stories told by the uncouth crew of the *Mauritius* become reality. All the cheerful Company servants we'd imagined standing on the quayside, the whole dreamed-up idyll, gave way to the reality of men carrying guns and swarming, toiling masses. It was so busy and turbulent on our way to our temporary lodgings that the ox-cart conveying us constantly had to stop and wait. Hundreds of men and women, even children, trudged along with boxes and sacks on their backs. Some carried stones on their shoulders, or rooftiles. They were all on their way to the wall being built to protect the city against attacks from hostile bands of warriors. Soldiers armed with rifles would shoot into the green curtain of jungle at every suspicious movement, hoping to keep the warriors at bay. There was a war going on here, just as at home.

For nine months I had been sailing towards a better future, only to discover that in Batavia the future was also just a day long at most, if you weren't deprived of that prospect by the clouds of midges that they call mosquitoes there. And this city was also a heap of rubble. The only difference to Steenberg was that in Batavia they were building things up rather than blowing them to pieces, but that didn't make much difference to the way it looked: broken roads with potholes full of water, miserable little houses without doors or windows, and often without roofs. No smiling faces anywhere.

What I had never seen before were brown faces, some very dark, with blue-black hair. Their bodies were also dark, as we could see because they

were scarcely clad. These were Indians, we discovered. The officer who walked beside the ox-cart told us that most of the men, women and children we could see had been bought by the Company at the slave market of Coromandel a few years earlier. Pieter de Carpentier, the Governor-General of Batavia at the time, had sent for them so that the fortress could be built. A good thousand of them were shipped all together in the hold of the *Nieuw Seelant*, an East Indiaman of the same dimensions as the *Mauritius*. We heard such things during the tumultuous, stiflingly hot journey from the quayside to our lodgings. Not one of us spoke, because we were afraid of this new land, afraid of falling from the cart and vanishing into the swarming masses. Afraid also that we might be touched by an Indian. Or by the Chinamen with their long pigtailed down their backs who, the officer told us, worked very hard for almost nothing. Only later, in the course of my Batavian life, did I learn how to distinguish between Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, Javanese, Balinese, Malays, Makassarese, *Mardijkers*, Siamese and Cambodians.

On the day we arrived I had no idea. I wanted only one thing: to go back home.

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‘Stewing pears! The new load of tasty pears has landed!’

It took some time for the glad tidings to trickle through the school gateway. Because our access to the city remained hermetically sealed for the first weeks after our arrival, we had no idea how much upheaval we were causing, let alone become familiar with the Batavian lingo – that wasn’t exactly what we were taught in the lessons about the customs and traditions of the East Indies, which my sisters and I were served daily. We had, in fact, been transferred from one closed world to another. It is true that our new residence did not float on water and was strictly forbidden to men, but we were still girls in a coop. We slept on thin mattresses on the ground, under a single length of cotton cloth.

Of all the ten thousand things that were new, I couldn’t take my eyes off the tree in the inner courtyard of the wooden school. It was a *waringin*, a weeping fig, the biggest and greenest tree I’d ever seen. In the years that followed I saw many of its kind, some even bigger and more majestic, but it

was the tree at the school I would always remember. And those legs of mine.

‘Sea legs,’ the kindly officer who supported me said, because I suddenly had difficulty walking. I hadn’t had a single day of seasickness, but I became land-sick as soon as I was ashore. After the journey through the pandemonium, the school courtyard was an oasis of coolness and quiet. I regained my footing on firm ground beneath that tree and revived a little.

‘I am Mistress Qual,’ said the head of the school.

The five of us stood facing her in a strictly ordered line: side by side, starting with the tallest, myself, and going down to little Hendrikje from Bergen op Zoom. That was how we were meant to arrange ourselves whenever Mistress Qual addressed us. That was Lesson One.

Governess Catharina Qual was a round lady, of about forty years of age, with what my mother would call a mighty bosom. She moved with surprising agility, as corpulent types often do, and her face was open and friendly.

‘And this is Mistress Cornelia,’ she said, her left hand gracefully indicating the lady standing beside her whom I guessed to be in her mid-twenties, Anna’s age. Mistress Cornelia was everything that Mistress Qual was not: slender, stiff and strict.

However much they differed in appearance, Mistress Qual and Mistress Cornelia were mother and daughter, as the girls who had already been living at the school for some time whispered to me the following day.

‘This is not simply a school, this is the Great School,’ Mistress Qual chanted, as if the word ‘great’ contained at least four times its number of vowels.

And that, after the delousing and the washing, was Lesson Two.

That adjective was there not because of the magnitude of deeds accomplished in the school, despite what Mistress Qual may have thought, but because of its two sections. At the back was the Women’s House, and at the front was the school itself. We were housed in a little chamber in the school.

‘For it is certain that you will all soon be gone,’ Mistress Cornelia said.

That was the third lesson on the day of our arrival.

Another lesson, which I came to hear somewhat later, was to keep your distance from the Women’s House. That was where the girls lived that all the men scorned. End up there, and you would never come out.

Our first outing was a stroll to the harbour – Sunda Kelapa was its name, as we learned on the way – where we would welcome the last ship of the fleet. I was proud of the fact that our captain had managed to be the first to weigh anchor; that lent us some lustre too. The *Kameel* had sustained damage during the voyage and was therefore delayed – and so there was every reason to greet the safely arrived passengers with joy. We walked as we'd been instructed: one behind the other, from big to small, with downturned eyes. Mistress Qual and Mistress Cornelia flanked our little file.

It was a great deal calmer than on the day of our arrival. There were indeed men with guns along the way, but the sense of threat I'd felt so strongly in that throng had vanished. Had I imagined it? Perhaps the memory was false. I could no longer tell. Like the others I had suffered from fierce, feverish dreams during that first night at the school, my body not yet able to withstand the intense heat, nor my stomach the unaccustomed fresh food. Because of this, and the din of the night creatures, we barely slept a wink. Perhaps that is why my first steps on Batavian soil were hidden behind a veil of greenish light. I still remember that: discovering how different the light is there.

It became busier as we drew closer to the quayside. There, almost on the water's edge, the Castle was being built, on the right bank of the Tjiliwoeng, the Great River. More men were standing by the roadside here, men without weapons, joyful men. It was that morning that I first heard someone call out 'stewed pears'. This was no pleasant little stroll, it was a parade: the first official viewing of the Colony Girls.

That realization slowly began to sink in. Although Mistress Qual had not exactly made a secret of the day's purpose, she had managed to wrap it up in merry, innocent words, and we had preferred to cling to the idea that we were setting off on a cheerful little excursion.

'Juicy stewing pears!'

There was no more escaping it. For the first time I fully understood why I was there. I continued to lead the prim little file of girls, looked neither left nor right, letting nothing be seen. But in my head something else was happening. In my head I ran off, rose out of myself, looked around a little and left my future behind me. With absolute determination.

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At the quayside we could smell the ship before we saw it lying at anchor, far off in the bay where the Shahbandar, the Lord of the Harbour, was checking the cargo. The wind blew an odour of decay across the water. And with every lighter or sloop that brought passengers, soldiers and cargo ashore, the stench came closer. We had stunk exactly like that, I thought, and I suddenly understood why the crews of the small boats covered their noses and mouths with their neckerchiefs.

While we waved at the passengers of the *Kameel*, Mistress Cornelia turned her back on the stench. She was the one, I now saw, in whom I had briefly recognized my mother's form just before we stepped ashore, before I realized it was an illusion.

My daydreams about fleeing, about home, were abruptly broken off by the squeaking wheels of the ox-cart that would take us back to the school. It was still early in the morning, but already too hot to go on foot. Some distance behind us walked the soldiers brought across on the *Kameel*, bent and crippled after almost three hundred days on the orlop deck. Beside us coolies trudged with roof tiles on their backs. The way back to our lodgings seemed as crowded and ghastly as on the day of our arrival, because this was how it always was when a ship from the fatherland arrived in harbour. Our cart could hardly make its way through the throng and we were therefore far too late back at the school. Night fell well before the school gate came into view and we saw nothing any longer. At that point I still thought I would grow accustomed to that sudden darkness, that I wouldn't miss the summer light of my native land.

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The next day, in the early morning coolness, the men reported at the gate of the school. Mistress Cornelia counted forty-three of them. I, who was better at counting, made it forty-eight. Mistress Qual explained how the presentations, commonly called the Marriage Mart, would proceed. Not that she and her daughter called it that, not aloud at least, for they were far too polite to do so.

At the stroke of eight the gate opened and the first man entered the courtyard, hat in hand. I recognized his face. The bravado he had displayed the day before, in the midst of his friends, had changed into shyness. He looked down at the ground and spoke his name so softly that no one could understand what he said.

I was the second in a row of twelve girls. The ‘Mauritius Five’, as we were now called at the school, stood among young ladies who had come on an earlier ship but who for various reasons had not yet found a man. Three of them had suffered a while from the swamp fever. Three of them, aged fourteen, were deemed too young by Mistress Qual and had to ripen another year under the guidance of a governess from the Women’s House. The seventh, whose name was Willigje, was rather unsightly. She had flame-red hair and was so sweet and cheerful that after only a few days you considered her ugly face to be captivating.

It was good not to be standing at the front for once, to feel a neighbour on either side, and not feel alone. I could make good use of a little support, now that I was at the point of being traded. I had been to the Steenberg horse market often enough to know that the eye played a part, but that ultimately it all came down to the price.

‘Girls!’ Mistress Qual clapped her hands twice. That was the sign for us to display our rears.

The next time she clapped we stood a little apart from each other and, exactly as Mistress Qual had shown us, we first put our hands on our sides to show off our waists and then smoothed our skirts to accentuate the hips. After all, the broader the hips, the less chance a woman would die in childbed. That was the folk wisdom, and also Mistress Qual’s.

Men want me, I knew that already, which is why, immediately before the market opened, I’d worked out what to do if a man wanted me and I didn’t want him: I’d shriek and scratch and bite. I’d act as if a devil had got into me. Then the man would choose someone else of his own accord, or immediately take to his heels. That morning I learned that there was another, more subtle method to keep a man I didn’t fancy at bay. By the fifth man I’d mastered it. While he – thin and with gingery hair – announced who he was, what he did, and how much he earned, I formed my lips into a pretty little smile, exactly as Mistress Qual had demonstrated. And then I forced myself to think of my silent father and the moment I discovered that I’d be sent away. It cost me absolutely no effort to let the fury and hatred

echo through my body again. And the fury and hatred were real. With that look in my eyes I gazed straight at the merchant who stood before me and saw the smile flee from his face.

Perhaps this man was very pleasant and I had unjustly – and more or less invisibly – banished him from me. His problem was his size: he was too small for my taste, as was the carpenter with the friendly face who was the second to present himself in the courtyard. Besides, I didn't wish to take a Company man, because you could never know where he'd be sent and if he'd ever return.

It's true that for their part the visitors to the Marriage Mart could express their preferences, but they could not immediately get down to business. That happened at a later date, during a conversation with Mistress Qual in which all the particulars were exchanged. The men wished to know where they stood, because the size of the dowry could vary with each young lady, depending on age and status. According to the rules of the Company, and therefore of the Great School, the man in question should somehow be able to demonstrate that he could maintain his future wife. After that he was officially obliged to ask the girl of his choice to marry him. In the short time between the betrothal and the actual marriage came a period of courtship. The rules also stated that a young woman must not be forced into marriage and that there should preferably be evidence of a clear or budding affection between the future spouses. I now know that this requirement was not very strictly supervised, because the sooner a girl married, the cheaper it was for the Company.

Around ten or so men later, by which time my legs were swelling, someone came into the courtyard who was at least twenty years older than me. He took his stance, bowed to the Quals, mother and daughter, and then to us and said, 'My name is Johan Libener. I've come to ask for the hand of Maria van Aelst.'

Just five months afterwards, in the month of March of the year 1626, when the monsoon rains turned the city under construction into a quagmire, I married him.

After Maria is betrothed to Johan Libener, the novel explores her marriage, her husband's work as a merchant, and the loneliness and strangeness of her daily life in the new city of Batavia. She hopes for a child, but no child is forthcoming. She meets her husband's friend, Antonio van Diemen. But within eighteen months of marriage her husband dies. The following extract is taken from the section of the novel called 'Willem', after the man who is Libener's agent. Willem continues to serve Maria, in more than one sense. The extract introduces Maria as a woman who will eventually carry out her own business in pearl and diamond trading, which is how she will build her fortune. From p. 65 to p.72.

## Willem

I sat on the serambi, clad in black. Those callers who came to condole me didn't have to be of the observant type to notice that I'd changed my corner for Johan's more prominent position. Not only was his chair more comfortable, as I discovered, it was also easier to receive several visitors at once when seated at the big table. 'I thank you for your sympathy,' I said time and again to the men with whom Johan had done business. I smiled at the few married women who came out of politeness, or perhaps to make things easier for me, and nodded graciously to them, perfunctorily, almost lethargically. I was forced to put aside the letter of personal condolence from Pieter de Carpentier, the Governor-General, because my eyes refused to recognize the words.

Some of the stiffness that shot into my body the moment I realized I was a widow abandoned my limbs in the days that followed, yet I still moved as if any unexpected movement or touch could break me.

As soon as the doctor had decreed that an 'ailment of the heart' was the cause of death and had sat at Johan's writing desk to sign the official certificate of death, I said: 'I want to go home now.' Only later did I hear that I continued to repeat this, at various intervals, for the rest of the day and the night. Antonio, who stayed by my side throughout, immediately knew what to do. Not only was he good at perceiving the larger connections in the East Asian trade, but in that little space beside his friend's deathbed, when he carefully put a comforting hand on my shoulder, he also saw what I needed: Elisabeth had to come.

Perhaps it is going too far to say that he saved my life by doing so, but he certainly saved my will to live. And my future.

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Elisabeth, three years older than me, with chestnut-brown hair and eyebrows and a sturdy figure, had made the voyage to Batavia two years earlier so she could finally be reunited with her husband. He was a slave trader who, despite working day and night, could scarcely meet the growing demand for strong, young men to construct the city and beautiful, young women to take to bed. He wrote to his wife to tell her she could come, had a house built, and was on his way to the harbour where a ship with slaves from Sumatra and Celebes had come in, when an arrow shot by a Bantam warrior whistled through the air and pierced his throat. He was still alive when he fell from his horse, but by the time help came he had suffocated in his own blood.

And so a little less than four weeks later, on the Sunda Kelapa quayside, Elisabeth was told she was a widow. The rest of the message was that, in the weeks between his burial and her arrival, the beautiful new house had gone up in flames, no doubt to mask the theft of the slave trader's capital. There she stood, with only a small chest of belongings, because her husband had promised to buy everything for her again. The ground seemed to be sinking beneath her feet, for after all those months on the rolling waves Elisabeth had problems with firm land, just like me. For her, however, this dizzying introduction to Batavia would last far longer. Like me she also wanted just one thing: to go home.

But that couldn't happen. The return fleet would only sail back home after some months and without Elisabeth too, for the simple reason that she couldn't pay for the voyage. She had no money, no possessions, no house, no husband. Out of charity, and because her husband had the reputation of being an upright merchant, she was given shelter at Mistress Qual and her daughter's establishment. Not in the Great School – at twenty-two she was too old for that – but in the Women's House. How exactly she ended up in Antonio van Diemen's household still counts as one of Batavia's best-kept secrets – a miracle in a city where everyone is talked about and everything lies open to the street. Elisabeth was always good-mannered enough to keep quiet about this and Antonio simply never spoke of such things.

That September day, when Antonio's coachman went to fetch Elisabeth, she had already been in charge of his household for a few months. As soon as she heard why she shouldn't delay, she also knew exactly what she had to do.

The reason I could sit on my serambi only days after Johan's death, fittingly clad in black, and that I could change my gown as the time of day or the situation required, was entirely thanks to Elisabeth, who – before doing anything else – had set four needlewomen to work. The very fact that I could sit at all was also thanks to Antonio's housekeeper, because as soon as the sextons had taken Johan away, I took to my bed.

I rolled myself tightly inside the sheet, afraid of falling to pieces, closed my eyes and forced myself to think about Anna's last hours. In spite of the noise in the house – the servants cleaning Johan's bed (for whom exactly?), Antonio speaking in the salon with Johan's agent – I had fallen asleep, sapped by the shock. I remember that I half woke up, because of a movement in the darkness of my chamber. Darkness had fallen at seven o'clock, truly falling, as it only does in that part of the world. I had slept for more than three hours.

More movement, a rustling.

'Is that you, Anna?'

'No, Mistress Libener. I am Elisabeth.'

'You know, Anna had it worse than me,' I heard myself say, and only then did I truly waken. Because of my own voice, and because of the words that often sounded in my head, but which had never been spoken.

'Mr. Van Diemen has fetched me here,' Elisabeth said. 'You must eat.'

On hearing Antonio's name, I realized again why I was lying in bed. I told Elisabeth that I wished to go home. Later she told me that I had scarcely moved the rest of the night and that I'd said nothing at all, except that one sentence. Elisabeth kept watch by me, as if I was also close to dying, and every now and then she fed me a spoonful of tea and honey. At first light she had the tub filled with water and, with the help of the two servants we kept in our humble household, she carried me to the washroom. There I sat, steaming in the chill of early morning. Elisabeth washed me and kneaded the muscles in my neck, arms and shoulders, as she had seen a Balinese slave-woman do in her master's house.

'Don't speak of it again,' Elisabeth said. 'You can't leave for the moment anyway.'

She was right. Batavia is a prison for women. For a berth on a homeward-bound ship, you either need money or to have committed a crime. Once you arrived in paradise, you were trapped there.

‘If you no longer speak of it, it will fade,’ she said. ‘Don’t worry’.

My life had become painfully lonely. I spent the most part of each day in bed, swaddled like the new-born child I didn’t have, and was now unlikely ever to have. I got up when I had to – for the funeral of course, which by the end of the day I could scarcely remember, and for visitors when they were announced. If I ate, then I did so in bed, leaning on my left arm. Tiny morsels, simply to quieten the nagging pains I took for hunger. I became thin, weak, dull and vacant. Until one morning I woke up and discovered that it wasn’t Johan I was missing, but a better life. Elisabeth, who visited me every afternoon, told me later that she saw the will to live flicker in my eyes, and so she asked Mistress Qual to come.

‘How will I get through this year?’

That was the most important question I asked the headmistress of the Great School a few days later, after I’d poured the tea and she’d assumed a conversational pose, her hands in her lap.

Mistress Qual had insisted that we first pray for Johan’s soul and then spend a moment in silence, and that we should converse only after that. Everything in its time and in the proper order.

‘Works of charity,’ Mistress Qual said, ‘keep one’s thoughts occupied.’

I saw myself standing on the quarterdeck of a homeward-bound ship, bearing down on the Dutch coast, the wind in our favour. That would be a work of charity.

‘Do you have something in mind for me, perhaps?’

The question brought red patches to the teacher’s plump cheeks. It took a while for me to realize that she was blushing, right down into her neck.

‘We shall speak of that in a moment,’ Mistress Qual said, having to clear her throat after every word.

She straightened her back, folded her hands beneath her heavy breasts, shut her eyes a moment, took a deep breath and said:

‘It’s different here, shorter.’

‘Different?’

‘The period of mourning,’ Mistress Qual said, ‘is not as it is at home.’

What Mistress Qual was trying to say, and, after that stuttering start, managed very well, was that in the East a widow was held to less strict rules. The year in black that I feared – that pitiful abandoned state I had so often seen on the faces of the young war widows of Steenbergen – did not have to last a year here.

‘A woman alone here is so unprotected,’ the gentlewoman said.

‘And we, the Colony Women, must of course do what we were brought here to do,’ I said. Mistress Qual looked at me as if she’d rather like to give me a dressing-down for such impudence. Instead, she cleared her throat again and stroked her face, as if she was trying to wipe away the red patches.

‘More important still,’ the gentlewoman said, ‘is that under this tropical sun women are much more ardent.’

Now that the tricky point had been reached she spoke unblushingly, and I understood that the gentlewoman did not have the welfare of a wretched widow in mind, but that she’d come, and had perhaps been sent – for when all was said and done she was in the Company’s pay – to convince me that a young, unattached woman like me, in the bloom of my life, would be too great a temptation for the men of Batavia. Especially those who were married.

\* \* \*

Antonio van Diemen continued to visit me, as if there were no affairs of government on his mind. I assumed he didn’t wish to abandon the widow of a good friend, and he didn’t do so either. He came to visit almost every day, soon after the noontide meal, and left after I assured him I needed nothing. About two weeks after Mistress Qual’s warnings he came visiting with Johan’s agent, to tell me I need have no worries about money. It turned out that Johan had revised his will and testament the day before our wedding, naming me as his only heir.

I wanted to know how much there was, and how long I could manage with it.

‘That depends on what you do with the capital,’ the agent said.

‘Do?’

Antonio smiled and said, ‘You are now the head of your own household. You are no longer a ward. It’s your money and you may do as you wish with it, without having to ask anyone’s permission.’

Johan’s agent nodded in agreement. ‘You may even continue the late gentleman’s business, if you so desire.’

It was difficult to remain calm, to compose my features for the men sitting at my table on the serambi. What I most desired were immediate answers to the hundred and eighty questions spinning around in my head, but it seemed wiser to hold my tongue a while.

That day another new Maria rose up in me, or so it felt. In the years that followed I learned that this Maria had always been there, though stamped by the conventions of her time and circumstances. What I had not the slightest doubt about – a little more than two months after Johan’s death, and just a week past my twentieth birthday – was that freedom was good for me. My decision was made. Now, no delay, no waiting for matters to take their course. That had brought me little good. I wanted to lead an independent life, to let it be seen that I didn’t need a man. Now it was apparent that I had money, I had an opening to a world I had thought would always be forbidden territory for me – here, in Batavia. I wanted to look forward, in my own way.

‘May I continue to count on your help and support?’ I asked the agent.

With that question I took someone into service for the first time in my life. After that I was exhausted and hardly capable of anything. My prospects were both alluring and alarming.

I knew what I wanted. I simply didn’t yet know how to go about it.

Antonio saw what was happening and pursed his lips approvingly.

Only after the agent had nodded politely, looked at me intently, given me his hand to seal the agreement and taken his leave, and I saw him ride off on his horse down the Jonkersgracht, did I dare ask Antonio for his name.

‘Middachten,’ he said. ‘Willem Middachten.’

The following extract is taken from the section of the novel that describes how Maria tries to occupy herself with works of charity after Libener's death. She has concerned herself with the fate of a little orphan girl, Gesina, or Sinie, and this gives her some distraction during her time of mourning.

From p. 76 to p. 79

The trips to the Spinhuisgracht, the visits to Sinie, working out what I could do to help the life of the timid little orphan, all gave me the idea of doing something worthwhile. It wasn't much and I had little hope of a favourable outcome for my pupil, but it filled my thoughts. That is to say: on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I showed the outside world that without much ado I was adapting myself to my new life. In the privacy of my house, where without Johan's business few people now came to visit – except the once-more pregnant Hendrikje and Willem Middachten, who occasionally came to discuss the state of my affairs – I had many days without thoughts, with nothing to do. Even waiting for a child, my main purpose in life during the previous year and a half, was stimulating in comparison to waiting for Tuesdays and Thursdays.

So it was for lack of anything else to do that I went into Johan's study, as I had done countless times after his death, and sat at his table. Nothing had changed since two days previously. There was a colourful cotton cloth over his narrow couch, which I had put against the wall. The cloth had undoubtedly come from one of the cargoes he had purchased. Beneath it were a tight cover and two cushions, which I'd managed to provide with new fillings and clean ticking to prevent the spread of any possible disease. His chair stood by the window, without employment, just like his pipe on the little table beside it. I stood up and did something I had never done before: I lay down on his couch, simply from ennui. It was only when I sat up again that I felt something poking into my shoulder. I got up, pulled the cloth away and found a little pouch under the cushion with a pearl on a gold chain inside it and a folded letter. The maidservant had probably left it untouched as a sign of her honesty, as a decent servant should, thinking I would discover it myself in the course of time. I couldn't ask her, because I didn't know her new place of work.

I stood in front of the mirroring window and put the necklace on. As the pearl nestled into the hollow of my throat, I read.

To my wife Maria van Aelst, on her twentieth birthday

I heard your name when drinking a good glass of wine with the chief merchant of the Mauritius, and then another and another. I knew him because I'd sailed under his command a few years earlier. As soon as the ship that brought you into my life weighed anchor, the story went through the city that the commander's wife had not survived the voyage. That was why I invited him to be a guest in my house. On the second evening I steered the conversation to the young women on board. I was interested in marriage, because I knew that my future lay here, and not in Amsterdam. What I have never told you is that my intended bride from our native land had died on the voyage a year before your arrival. My former master knew that, although we never spoke of it, nor did we do so that evening. He did however say that one of the Colony Girls had impressed him as suitable material and he praised her from the bottom of his heart. 'Beautiful and spirited,' he said, and wrote down your name. That was enough for me to send some men to the Marriage Mart before me so they could report their impressions.

I think he had wanted to write a little more at a later date, not knowing that later would never come. So it wasn't a dream, as I'd thought. My name wasn't whispered to him, but slid across on a note, while drinking a good glass of wine, and then another and another. 'Suitable material'.

So that was me. Should I see myself in this way from this time on, or was that suitability long gone? If that was the case, was such material good for something else?

I now judge myself less harshly than then, after all I was still a little lamb. Yes, I'd let myself be taken in by his play-acting in the courtyard of the Great School. Do I find that so terrible? I did then. Later I had to admit that of our cargo of girls, I'd chosen the best husband, just as I'd promised myself then. With the knowledge of human beings that I've acquired in the course of my life, I now say that Johan Libener sensed that he would not grow old,

which was why he'd done his very best to get himself a bride. Perhaps out of loneliness, and because he knew he would not survive the voyage home.

The cause of his death had answered my questions as to why I'd continued to be without child: his heart had been too weak. We had scarcely mingled in Batavian society for the same reason. As a result I had become acquainted with very few people, but I also lacked sufficient experience of the etiquette of social relations in this new city, which meant that I didn't really know how a woman in my position and of my standing was supposed to behave in public. Moreover: what was my standing? As an officer's daughter there was nothing to guess at, nor when I was a Colony Girl. While I was married, I had my husband's status and I did not have to consider anything at all. Thrown back on myself, in mourning, but at the same time liberated, what was my place?

Sometimes, on rising in the morning, I would ask my image in the gleaming silver platter, standing on its side in the cupboard: Who do I belong to now? What face should I wear? What am I doing here? Batavia was a terrible place: hot, filthy, and dangerous. At least in Steenberg I had known how things worked. I could go outside to play when the artillery stopped for a while. I knew people, girls like myself. In Batavia I risked my life every time I visited Sinie or went to church. A tiger could grab me, or a warrior. Whenever the heat and silence and emptiness threatened to overwhelm me, the answer and solution to all these questions rang through my head: *home*, I thought, *I'll go home*. Yet however much I said it, I never went.

In the last month of the year 1627, I decided I'd been sitting long enough on the serambi. I shook the mourning from my shoulders and put on my light-blue gown. While I made myself ready for the journey to the orphanage, I hummed the love song my mother used to sing: 'A little snow-white bird I spied'. It came of its own accord, all seven couplets.

From that day on I no longer asked questions of my mirror-image. I took action. For myself, so I could know how others perceived me, and because the words came out more easily now.

*Good day. My name is Maria van Aelst. A good friend told me that you trade in pearls. Shall we do business?*

It was still some time before I could actually speak those words.

The novel continues to follow Maria's course of life in both the Dutch East Indies and the Netherlands. Because each of the marriages she makes is with increasingly powerful men, she learns a great deal about trade and politics, particularly with regard to the workings of the Dutch East India Company. She becomes a woman of great social standing and learns to operate at the very limits of what is expected of a woman of that time. Through her acumen she is able to help her third husband maintain the monopoly in clove-trading, and shapes the social life in Batavia according to her will. She starts trading in diamonds, in spite of all prohibitions, and is eventually regarded as the 'Queen of Batavia'. When she returns to the Dutch Republic in 1646 and settles in Amsterdam, she is one of the hundred richest citizens and a very powerful woman.

## AUTHOR'S SYNOPSIS

### A Self-made Woman

#### The Story of Maria van Aelst and How She Made Her Fortune

She was the Queen of Batavia and one of the richest women of the Dutch Republic, yet she has been forgotten.

It is 1625 and Maria van Aelst is only eighteen when her parents send her to the other side of the world, to the East Indies. Batavia needs young women: respectable, decent Dutch girls, so the men of the Dutch East India Company can contract respectable, decent marriages. It is only with the help of such women that the Dutch city imagined by its founder, Jan Pieterszoon Coen, can rise and flourish. He sends for the women as if they're cattle, as if their only purpose is to bear children.

The voyage takes nine months, nine months in which every day could be Maria's last. She faces storms, pirates, filthy drinking water, and merciless diseases that claim two or three lives a week. Three of her fellow 'Colony Girls', orphans aged only fifteen years, are buried in the cold, dark water.

'Batavia is a paradise' is what people say. Maria's parents are also convinced their daughter will have a better life there than in their war-ravaged native country. But when the ship arrives it becomes clear that the city, which is still under construction, is a foetid, sweltering heap of rubble, a mosquito-infected swamp. Tigers and crocodiles lurk at the edge of the jungle, trying to claim back their stolen land, as do the bands of Javanese warriors. And a hundred men or more line the muddy roadside, yelling for joy: 'Stewing pears! The new cargo of stewing pears has landed!' This is how they see the Colony Girls.

Every fleet from the home country brings a cargo of young women for the colonization. They are taken to the School for Girls where they're deloused and taught good manners, if necessary, and crammed with lessons for their forthcoming married life. Then they're displayed at what very soon becomes known as the Marriage Mart. As extra bait for the men, the Dutch East India

Company provides them with a dowry: a woman in bed plus a nice purse of money. The only thing the men have to do to earn this is have a church wedding, then get their woman pregnant.

Maria makes up her mind not to settle for just any man. Nor does she have to, because she's chosen by no less a person than Johan Libener, a former chief merchant of the Dutch East India Company, who has registered as a free citizen of the new city. He has his own house, a small fortune, and kind eyes.

Within eighteen months, Maria is a widow. Her husband's health was too weak to withstand the sweltering humidity of Batavia, and also too weak to give her a child.

But widows are not expected to mourn for long in the East. Maria must do what she came to do, and so within a year she marries Bartholomeus Havickszoon Kunst, Governor of the Chamber for the Estate of Orphans. It is an eventful union, not least because Batavia becomes embroiled in two wars with the neighbouring Sultanate of Mataram and is plagued by a cholera epidemic that causes hundreds of deaths during which Jan Pieterszoon Coen, the Governor-General, loses his life, as does Bartholomeus Kunst.

Maria attracts attention in Batavia, because of who she is and what she does. And also because of what she doesn't do, because her second husband Bartholomeus was also unable to give her a child. The few other Dutch women, if they manage to survive childbed, are always busy having babies. There is little else for the women to do. They can't go outside, because it's much too hot and dangerous. The carriages are reserved for the men of the governing Council of Batavia. All the housework is carried out by servants and house slaves.

Motivated mainly by boredom, Maria begins to trade on her own account. She knows the rules: private trading is prohibited. Yet most of the Dutch East India Company men do trade on their own account when no one is looking. But Maria van Aelst is the first woman in Batavia to ignore the prohibition. And she discovers she has a talent for business. In the empty days she spent seated, apparently absorbed in reading the book of psalms on her lap, she was eavesdropping on her husbands' conversations with their agents and fellow traders. She feigned a lack of interest, but was really pricking up her ears, which is how she learned. She begins discreetly, by trading in pearls, which she admires for their beauty; moreover, they have

good market value. Her husbands' legacies fund the purchase of the pearls and the agent's fees. Maria now has money.

Antonio van Diemen, a friend of Johan Libener, Maria's first husband, is attracted to Maria, and her inherited wealth is an added incentive. He is less wealthy than his future bride, but he compensates for this with his burning ambition to be the next Governor-General. Maria is beautiful and knows she is. She longs for a child, but until that wish is fulfilled she wants only one thing: to help Antonio reach the highest position and to become the Queen of Batavia. And she succeeds.

The marriage with Van Diemen ends as it began, without children. By the time Antonio dies in 1645, twenty years after her arrival in Batavia, Maria van Aelst has shaped Batavian society to her own will. She was the one who made the *joie de vivre* of the later Dutch East Indies possible, albeit unwittingly, and who ensured that women were no longer invisible. She made it clear they could do more than simply bear children.

She meets her fourth husband when she is sailing back to her native land, after Antonio's death. Carel Constant, a former director of the Company trading post in Persia, is a passenger on the same ship. No one on board needs to guess Maria's status: while ordinary passengers can only take, at most, two chests of belongings with them, Maria has had all the contents of the Governor's house packed up to take on board. Naturally, her faithful housekeeper, Elisabeth, travels home with her, as do six of her house slaves. Her pearl-trading has been followed by diamond-trading, and she has built up an enormous fortune. She is the first and only woman to do so, against all prohibition, simply because she can, but also to alleviate her longing for a child. And because she likes things to be the way she wants.

Carel Constant also has knowledge of diamonds, something Maria finds attractive. His fortune may be nothing in comparison to hers, and she suspects he only wants her for her money, nevertheless within a year she agrees to give him her hand in marriage. For the first time in her life, Maria is in love.

Ten months later, in the summer of 1647, she gives birth to a daughter. She and Carel name the little girl Anna Maria. Five days later Maria finds her child dead in her crib.

She survives her fourth spouse too. After the official period of mourning is over, lonely and spiritually bereft, she marries the former mayor of Utrecht, Gijsbert van der Hoolck. With him, in the last phase of her life, she

discovers a beauty that can't be bought. Van der Hoolck corresponds with the philosopher René Descartes and is an admirer and connoisseur of Rembrandt's work.

At this last stage of her life, Maria loses her faithful housekeeper, Elisabeth. As she feels her own end approach, her portrait, which she and Antonio had commissioned from Rembrandt, is hung in her bedroom. Thanks to Gijsbert she now sees it as a precious work of art. Just before her end comes, Maria discovers that the love she always sought is in fact very close at hand. It has been with her for a long time already.