

Sample Translation

Josja Pruis

(Josja Pruis)

by Harm de Jonge

(Houten: Van Goor, 2006)

Translated by Laura Watkinson

1. A forgotten corner of our country

Homme Prins, 13 NOVEMBER 1956

When I walk past the harbour in the morning, Bird Island lies mistily in a grey sea. I haven't been there again since that stormy evening in October. Ada thinks that we need to go, but I keep putting it off. Maybe I'm scared to go back there? Sometimes I can hardly believe that I really went to the island with Josja Pruis. And I think that Josja is a boy I made up. Because we live on the edge of the world here and nothing exciting ever happens. There is a modern cold store by the harbour, where the fishermen unload their fish, that's true. But otherwise everything is exactly the same as in the pictures in my grandfather's photo album and they're from before the war. There's a long road leading to our town, a dead end. If you want to travel further, you have to go back along the same road. The only people who come to our town are people who actually need to be here. A yacht will sometimes sail into the harbour in summer and the occasional tourist drives into the town square by accident. But once they hear that there's not even a decent hotel, they soon disappear again.

And it was in precisely this little fishing town, in that forgotten corner of our country, that Josja Pruis turned up this summer. Even now, it's still a mystery to me why it was our town that he came to. Who decided that he had to come to the Queen Wilhelmina School here? Who knew that Mrs Klinkhamer would take him in? And someone must have seen him being brought here, mustn't they? But if you ask around, no one seems to know anything about it. One day, Josja was simply there. He stayed here for a good two months and now that he's gone, they're acting as though he was never here. But wait a second: Ada and I can prove that it really did happen. Because we have the Red Marble Book, which he used to make notes and drawings in. And when I see the blood on the sides of the pages, I know that terrible evening on Bird Island was very real too.

‘We have to write it down,’ said Ada. ‘Then other people will be able to read later about who Josja Pruis was.’

Now Josja’s gone, I discuss a lot with Ada. That’s something I have to thank Josja for as well. I never used to dare to speak to her. Now I can sit beside her without my throat clamping up. The fact that I’m in love with her is no longer the most important thing. I’ve learnt that you can also be just good friends. And Ada isn’t nearly as cocky as I used to think either. I tell her what I know about Josja and then she tells me things that I missed. You could actually see it this way: I’ve lost my friend Josja, but in return I’ve got Ada back.

This afternoon after school we went to the graveyard. That’s actually the place with the most mysteries. Josja’s, but mine as well. And, in one way or another, those secrets must be connected somehow.

‘Then that’s where we’ll look first,’ said Ada. ‘We’ll figure everything out.’

Homme Prins and Ada Breugel, 13 NOVEMBER 1956

Ada and I run past the harbour to the graveyard. The dead have been given a place just outside of town, close to the sea dyke. It's always cold and windy there and the salty sea air has turned every tree into a weeping tree. A low wall has been built around the graveyard, so our dead are at least lying out of the wind a little.

Ada's running so fast that she whizzes past me. Her blonde hair is dancing above the red of her coat. I race to catch up with her. The gate squeaks as usual. I go straight to a black headstone with silver letters. A pile of leaves has blown against its side. I bend a branch of the weeping tree out of the way for Ada. She's shocked when she sees the words on the stone and she reads them out loud:

HERE RESTS HOMME PRINS UNTIL THE DAY OF RESURRECTION

'My grandmother thought it up,' I say. 'She believes that you come back to life again later. And then you just crawl out from under the headstone.'

Ada's cheeks are red from the cold. It seems as though the blue of her eyes is suddenly much lighter. Perhaps the colour of your eyes changes when it gets colder.

'That's really creepy,' she says. 'Your name, Homme! Just like it's you lying down there.'

'It's Grandfather Homme,' I say. 'He was actually called Homme Tobi Prins.'

'So why doesn't it say Tobi as well?'

I shrug my shoulders. I've already asked my mother several times. But it's still a mystery, just like that other even bigger mystery: where's the grave of my father and my brother? They're both dead, for so long now that I never even knew them. My mother says that my father died a few months before I was born. He never saw me and I never saw him.

'My mother doesn't want to talk about it,' I say. 'If I ask any questions, she says that I'm still too young, that she'll tell me all about it when I'm older.'

‘Your father must have drowned,’ says Ada. ‘So many fishermen from round here have drowned. But what about your brother?’

‘Tobi was born at the same time as me.’

I tell Ada that my twin brother lived only a few hours. I was given our grandfather’s first name and Tobi had his middle name. My mother most definitely doesn’t want to talk about Tobi. When I ask: ‘Isn’t he buried here, in our town?’ or: ‘Did he look like me?’, then she just clams up. Sometimes she manages a nod before starting to cry.

‘How strange,’ says Ada. ‘Your name’s on a headstone and you’re alive. And your brother’s dead and his name’s nowhere to be seen.’

‘When someone’s dead, people round here act as though that person never existed.’

‘But why do they do that?’

‘They’re scared to talk about it.’

‘They must think that if you talk about it, it could happen to you too.’

It’s only the fact that Grandmother mentioned it once by accident, otherwise I’d never even have known that Tobi existed. It’s just as though every reminder of him has had to be erased. His name wasn’t even allowed on my grandfather’s headstone. Sometimes I think that he wasn’t even buried, that they just threw him away. A pale little bundle amongst the fish waste, and no one noticed it.

Ada has never been to the graveyard before. She wants to see the grave of the German seamen as well. They ran into a mine with their patrol boat during the war. They’re buried in the corner where they put the strangers who wash ashore in these parts. Nameless fishermen, unknown sailors. Perhaps born right on the other side of the world. And then dying here in our town!

The seamen do have names though. Two identical headstones with the names Heinzl Poltzer and Willy Schuhmacher on them. We crouch down by Heinzl’s headstone. Ada throws a few stray pebbles back onto the grave.

‘Did you often come here with Josja?’ she asks.

‘He used to sit here on his own mostly. On the wall there.’

‘Do you really believe that Josja knew Heinz Poltzer?’

I point at the date on the headstone.

‘Died in 1943. Had Josja been born then?’

Ada stands up. She pulls up the collar of her coat. There’s something glistening under her nose, but I don’t find it at all revolting. We walk back. It’s starting to get dark. The harbour light is already on.

‘Do you remember how it all began?’ asks Ada. ‘That day when Josja first came?’

‘I hadn’t realised that he was quite so strange,’ I say. ‘But Lubbe knew exactly what day it was.’

Lubbe Luiten sits next to me at school. He notes down in his diary whatever important things have happened in the world that day. According to Lubbe, it was 17 September, the Monday when Elvis Presley bought a pink Cadillac for his mother Gladys.

‘Then we’ll start our report on that day,’ says Ada. ‘But I can’t write. You’ll have to do it.’

2. The arrival of Josja Pruis

17 September 1956

South African doctors want to make a distinction between ‘black’ and ‘white’ blood for transfusions. Elvis Presley bought a pink Cadillac for his mother Gladys.

Homme Prins, 17 SEPTEMBER 1956

The summer was already long gone, but it was still hot. 17 September: it must have been one of those afternoons when we went straight to the Reedlands after school. We all larked around on the mudflats, becoming grey from the clay and then swimming ourselves clean again in the navigation channel. Josja wasn’t with us: it hadn’t occurred to anyone to ask him along.

That morning the headmaster himself had introduced the new boy to us. His name was Josua Christiaan Pruis, but we were just to call him Josja. Josja didn’t live with his parents: he was lodging with Mrs Klinkhamer in Mosselstraat. People from out of town often stayed at her place: the dredgers who dig out the harbour once a year always sleep there as well. The headmaster didn’t tell us where Josja came from. Lubbe thought that Josja’s parents were dead. Later we heard very different stories about him. That Josja was a foundling, for example. Or that his parents were circus folk from Germany, who had left him in a doorway just after he was born.

The reason I didn’t pay Josja too much attention at first was partly because he was so quiet. The new boy was a queer fish. He wore an army jacket with shiny buttons and he kept his hat on in class. No one could have missed that, even though he sat right at the back, by the picture of Napoleon. But I’d have had to sit facing the other way round all day to see everything. I don’t remember him saying much either and when four o’clock came he quickly disappeared. Maybe Mrs Klinkhamer had said that there’d be trouble if he didn’t come straight home. We knew that the skinny old witch was really strict.

It was only the following day that I realised Josja Pruis was actually very strange. It started with his appearance. His head was bigger than normal and a ripple swirled down the middle of his forehead. It looked like a scar, which started somewhere under his hair and ran down to the top of his nose. And then there were also the glasses he wore, with lenses that made his eyes look bigger. The arm was broken on one side and had been repaired with sticking plaster.

Some of the girls thought he was too creepy to look at. But there were others who were actually attracted by that strange head of his. Ada Breugel, of all people, soon said that she thought Josja was ‘interesting’. And Kokkie Martijn squealed that she wanted to kiss and cuddle with Josja. Of course, this was all very sad: Lubbe and I were in love with Ada and what were we to do if our Ada had eyes only for Josja?

What was really strange, though, was the way that Josja did his own thing in the back row. Before lessons began, he was already sitting there reading a book of his own. Strange books with incomprehensible titles in foreign languages. It was as though he’d forgotten that he was in the classroom with us. He didn’t ask anything, he didn’t look up, didn’t copy anything from the board. Now and then he’d scrawl something in spidery handwriting in his notebook with its thick red cover. Lubbe and I were both astounded.

‘What he’s doing has got nothing to do with the lesson, Homme.’

‘And the teachers don’t say anything about it.’

‘They don’t even make him read his work out in class, man!’

‘They’re scared of him.’

It was obvious: you didn’t come across boys like Josja in our town and the teachers didn’t know what to do with someone like that. They would talk to him, but when they did, it was as though they were studying a beetle on his shoulder. They were just big chickens who didn’t dare to look at the ripple on his head. Or were they scared of Josja’s eyes? They were large and blue and actually very ordinary, but they could suddenly change colour. Then they became greenish and they twinkled behind his glasses. And they looked at you so directly that it gave

you butterflies in your stomach. Lubbe Luiten even claimed that it made the hairs on his arms stand on end. Some of the teachers couldn't take it. Miss Lode went as red as a beetroot and she scratched her arms red from nerves. And Oostzaan started to stutter or his hand would begin to shake. With him, you could clearly see he was scared of Josja. But then why did Oostzaan keep trying to catch Josja out?

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It began in that very first week with Josja's hat. It was a bright red hat with a bobble. No one wore anything like that when the weather was warm and certainly not in class. Was Josja trying to hide the ripple on his head a little? That morning we were copying sentences from the board. Or rather: the rest of the class was! Josja was buried in a book. Oostzaan was sauntering through the classroom with his hands behind his back. We heard him sniff and then suddenly he exploded:

'You there in the back row!'

There was a catch in his voice and he seemed startled by his own words. Josja looked up as though he was just waking.

'Here at the Wilhelmina School it's not customary to keep a hat on, boy.'

'It's not doing any harm, is it, sir?'

'We're at school, Pruis. We don't wear hats at school.'

And when Josja still hadn't shown any intention of taking it off, Oostzaan shouted: 'Take that hat off now!'

Josja shrugged his shoulders and took the hat from his head. The ripple on his forehead stood out white against the brown of his skin. The muscles of his cheeks twitched briefly. Any friendliness trickled away; the white of his eyes flashed. But it all happened so quickly that most of the class maybe didn't even see it. Josja went back to his book and Oostzaan slinked back to his desk. Why was he making so much fuss about that hat and not about the fact that Josja wasn't paying any attention to the lesson? Oostzaan, that grubby old man, always staring

at any naked skin on the girls! It seemed as though he was intentionally trying to start an argument with Josja.

During the break Josja sat reading with his hat on as usual. With his back against the fence of the bike sheds. No one dared disturb him. Only Ada Breugel was crouched down next to him. Now and then he spoke quietly to her. Or was he reading her sections of the book? That wonderful laugh of Ada's, clear, tinkling, as though a bell were ringing. Josja didn't laugh. Actually, no one had ever seen Josja laugh out loud. He did smile though, for example, when he briefly stroked his hand over Ada's hair. It was a strange gesture and it made us jealous at first. Lubbe would pull so hard on his ears that it seemed he was going to tug them right off.

'I can't watch, Homme. He's after Ada.'

'How does he do it?' I said. 'He's only just got here.'

'It's that weld mark on his head, Homme.'

'It looks as though his head cracked right open.'

'What does it matter what happened, man! I wish I had a head like that.'

So that's what the first days were like then. They were sunny days. Ada and Kokkie laughed a lot and stared at Josja all day long. It was as though Lubbe and I didn't exist any more. Josja didn't have anything to do with us and after school he quickly disappeared. We didn't see him on the street and we didn't see him in the Reedlands. All that time I didn't exchange a single word with him. That didn't happen until the end of the week, on Saturday, when we had a free afternoon.

3 A fishing town crawling with mice

Homme Prins and Ada Breugel, 14 NOVEMBER 1956

Today Ada's brought along the school photo. She's a bit embarrassed about the red heart that she's drawn on it, just above Josja's head. It's the only photo that we have of Josja. And it's also proof that he was here.

We're all standing at the back of the classroom by the picture of Napoleon. Josja's at the front in his army jacket with copper buttons. Ada and Kokkie are standing on either side of him. They're leaning a little to one side, as though they're cuddling up to him. Ada blonde and beautiful, Josja Pruis serious, his eyes slightly narrowed behind his glasses. Even here he's wearing that red hat.

You can see us on the back row to the right. Lubbe Luiten with his spiky yellow hair and his daft ears with no edges. Bertus Belstra with his flat nose, as though he's already had a lifelong boxing career. Jakko Kalkhuis and all the others. There's me with my horse's head, my hair waving down on either side, my parting in the centre.

Smiling faces everywhere. But Lubbe and I, we're not smiling. You can clearly see that we're looking to one side, at Josja and Ada. Even in the photo we can't take our eyes off them. Ada notices it too. Her finger slides over the photo. Is it just a coincidence that her nail stops on Josja's chest?

'You and Lubbe aren't looking at the camera.'

'We're looking at you. We were always looking at you.'

'You were jealous, weren't you?'

'At the time.'

I gaze back at the photo. On the extreme left are a couple of teachers. Oostzaan next to Miss Lode. That little fusspot who came to such a sticky end! He's not looking at the camera either. He's craning his scrawny little neck to look down Lode's blouse!

'Do you think Josja's got a photo too?'

‘Did he take his things with him? Those strange books of his as well?’

‘We could ask Mrs Klinkhamer.’

‘There’s nothing about the school photo in the Marble Book, is there?’

‘No, there’s plenty about the people from round here though.’

I take hold of the Red Marble Book. ‘He gave it to you,’ Ada had said earlier. ‘So we’re allowed to read it.’

It’s actually Josja’s diary. We call it the Red Marble Book because it’s got a red marbled cover. The corners are worn out: brown cardboard is poking through the red. The pages at the back are all crinkled where they got wet. It happened that time on Bird Island. Just like the red marks. I haven’t told Ada yet that they’re bloodstains. I leaf through the book and look at one of the first pages. I point out the lines with my finger. Ada looks over my arm and reads along.

Page 2 of the Red Marble Book

Mice, mice everywhere! This place is crawling with mice. I've never seen anything so odd. It's actually too big here for a village: two schools, a few churches, a fish factory. So that makes it a town, but I still think of it as a village. It seems as though they all know each other here. When you go down the street, they look at you and they don't say anything. But once you've gone past, you hear this rustling noise behind you. And they're standing there with their heads close together, snuffling around.

There are some of them at school as well. One's a teacher: he dashes through the desks as though he's scared that people are going to trip him up. He doesn't want me to wear my hat. That man: what on earth does he look like! Big teeth. A forehead that slopes backwards. A receding chin. A mean, pointed little face. Which would make him a shrew.

Where is it that I've ended up? A fishing town, little houses with green doors. Crocheted curtains at the windows. Time has stood still here.

'That place will teach you how to live,' they said at the White House. 'Maybe you'll be able to work in the fish factory when you're older.' And Fat Pig said: 'I forgive you for what you did. This is a new chance for you. Do your best, maybe it'll make a normal person out of you yet.'

They had no idea what they were saying. As though I could become normal here! How do you live here? I really don't want to become a fisherman. That's for the boys from school. Homme and Lubbe. Sometimes I see them looking at me. I think they've got a boat. Maybe we could have a bit of a laugh with it.

Homme Prins and Ada Breugel, 14 NOVEMBER 1956

I glance to one side and see Ada from very close up. She's chewing her gum slowly. Her eyes are that strange colour again. I'd really like to know what it's called. Royal blue? Peacock blue? What kinds of blue are there?

Ada points out my name in the Red Marble Book. Her hair is tickling my cheek. I can smell that scent again, the one that Josja really liked too. It's the scent of the pudding that Mum makes on Sundays. I asked her about it: it's vanilla pudding. But Ada gets it from a bottle, of course.

'So you wouldn't have become friends without that boat then?' asks Ada.

'We were going to Bird Island,' I say. 'We bumped into him at the harbour. He was sitting on the grass by the anchor.'

'You actually dared to say something to him then?'

'Lubbe started. Lubbe's not frightened of anyone.'

4 A brother in your head

22 September 1956

The one-millionth fugitive from East Germany has been counted.

Princesses Irene and Margriet went water-skiing behind a speedboat near Marken.

Homme Prins, 22 SEPTEMBER 1956

We were on the way to our rowing boat when we saw him. He was sitting with his back against the anchor of the Fishermen's Monument, staring at the fishing boats. His red hat had slipped down over his forehead. We were just going to say 'hi' and walk on, but Lubbe suddenly waved his arm and stopped. Where daft old Lubbe got the nerve from is still a mystery to me. He just started speaking to Josja.

'What d'you think of our boat?' he asked.

He made a sweeping gesture towards the eastern pier. The tide was still out and some of the harbour bottom was uncovered. Our rowing boat was lying on the mud like a dead fish. Josja slowly turned his head. The light flashed on the lenses of his glasses.

'Must have sunk,' he said. 'Where was the leak?'

'You don't get it,' said Lubbe. 'Soon, when the tide comes in, the boat'll be floating again. We're going out into the shallows.'

He went and sat beside Josja and pulled a clump of grass from between the cobbles.

'Nice boat,' said Josja. 'Where did you get it from?'

'Homme's grandfather.'

'We're going to row it over to Bird Island in a bit,' I said.

Those were the first words I ever spoke to him. Josja put one hand above his eyes and peered out at the mudflats beyond the harbour. Bird Island was a yellow hump of reeds and dunes a couple of hundred metres from the coast. On its

highest point was a stray tree that some hooded crows had built a nest in. The navigation channel meandered past it like a ribbon.

‘You’re not actually allowed on Bird Island,’ said Lubbe.

‘There’s no one living there, is there?’

‘It’s swarming with seagulls.’

Lubbe told him that during the war a boat had exploded and that the wreck was still on Bird Island. Josja wanted to know exactly what kind of boat it was and who had been sailing in it.

‘If you go digging there, you can still find bullets from the war,’ said Lubbe.

The three of us walked together to the eastern pier. Slowly, like old men on a warm summer’s day. It was only then that I noticed Josja walked oddly. His right leg swung out and curved forward. I also saw that he was wearing a strange shoe on that foot, smaller than normal, but with a thick sole and with leather over the ankles.

‘In the afternoon we go swimming in the Reedlands,’ I said. ‘On the other side of the pier.’

‘What’s the point of swimming?’ said Josja. ‘I never go swimming.’

They had apparently nailed some iron under his shoe as well. He stamped along the wooden planks like a horse. We sat down on the jetty, our legs swinging above the rowing boat. Lubbe started talking again. There was a shrillness to his voice.

‘But they’ll be expecting you.’

‘Who will?’

‘Ada and Kokkie, of course!’

‘Expecting me?’

‘We’re both after Ada, you see. But not Kokkie.’

Lubbe took a deep breath. He’d said it! He waited to see what Josja would say. Josja looked right at us for a moment, his eyes large and blue behind the lenses of his glasses.

‘You mean that Ada’s yours? But Kokkie’s allowed?’

‘W-well, yes, hang on,’ said Lubbe.

He began stuttering a little – perhaps he’d looked into Josja’s eyes for too long.

‘She doesn’t even know we exist now that you’re here,’ I said. ‘How do you do it, man?’

Josja took off his glasses and wiped his thumb over the lenses.

‘Do you know what’s funny?’ he asked. ‘You can read the name Ada from back to front. You can do the same with “borrow or rob” – did you know that?’

How can you tell someone what you mean when you don’t know them properly yet? We wanted to tell him that we’d been after Ada Breugel for a really long time. And then along came this stranger with a ripple down his head and he completely showed us up in no time at all.

‘It’s not about the name,’ said Lubbe. ‘She’s really beautiful, man.’

‘That’s not important,’ said Josja. ‘Is she beautiful, by the way?’

He put his glasses back on and started kicking the jetty with the heel of his shoe. A seagull landed screeching on the mud and began to tear apart a crab. We were muttering in indignation. The wonderful Ada Breugel! How dared somebody doubt that she was beautiful? All of the boys dreamt about her. A threatening silence fell. We heard Josja’s shoe thumping away the seconds. Regularly, as though a big clock were ticking away. Lubbe pulled at his daft ears and breathed in with a whistle. I knew that Lubbe would start fighting if he got really angry. Josja pushed back his hat and nodded.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘If that’s what you really want to hear, she’s beautiful – that’s fine with me! I’m not that interested in Ada, you know!’

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Lubbe breathed out: it hissed like a deflating bike tyre. What Josja had said put our minds at rest a little. But it wasn’t an answer to the question about how he’d managed to do it. Or did he not have anything to say about that? Was it the most

natural thing in the world for him? When we thought that he wasn't going to tell us anything else, Lubbe asked him what the story was with his head. It looked like there was a thin trail of candle wax, there on his forehead. Josja came straight out with it and told us that he was actually a twin.

'A Siamese twin,' he said. 'You know: two people who have only two legs between the two of them or something like that.'

For a moment we thought he was just joking.

'But there's no sign of anyone else on you, Josja.'

'It's all inside.'

'But you must have two lots of something, mustn't you?'

Josja nodded.

'There are two of us, but we have only one body. We've just got two sets of brains in our head, you see?'

We kept on staring at him, our eyes wide open in surprise. Lubbe's mouth even fell open and stayed that way for a while.

'Has that ripple on your head got something to do with it, Josja?'

'There's a partition behind it.'

He explained precisely how it worked. His brother lived inside him, as it were. Josja was on the left of his head and his brother was on the right. We needed a little time to picture that. But then a rush of questions immediately occurred to us. Was it Josja or his brother who said something? When you were playing football and Josja kicked at goal: who was actually doing the kicking? And why was it that we called the body of two people 'Josja Pruis'? Didn't the other one have just as much right to be there? Lubbe asked him.

'But your brother does have a name as well, doesn't he, Josja?'

'He's called Kai. You don't get to hear him. He doesn't like speaking very much.'

'But we call both of you Josja.'

'If you can see only one of us, isn't one name enough?'

'Are you certain that it's a brother?'

‘What d’you mean?’

‘Well, it could be a girl’s brain on the right, couldn’t it?’

That was a good question. Josja pushed up his glasses and pressed his thumb and forefinger into the corners of his eyes. But then he came out with an answer that had us confused all over again.

‘There’s a willy down there, man. That would be hers as well. Have you ever heard of a girl with a willy?’

He pulled down his hat again, nodded at us and climbed to his feet. He clumped back down the wooden planks. His right leg swung to one side. We watched after him until he disappeared into Mosselstraat. Two sets of brains? A twin brother who shared a body with Josja? We’d never heard such a strange story. It made me think of my dead brother. We were twins as well. I didn’t know what Tobi had died of. If only he’d been in my head as a twin, then he’d still be here. Then I’d have been able to talk to him in my head.

At night in bed I was still thinking about Josja. I had never met anyone who made me think so much. That was the real difference between him and Lubbe. With Lubbe I’d talk about football, about homework, about Ada. With Josja it was about things I’d never heard of before. Josja knew so much more than other people as well. At school it looked as though he was never paying attention, but he’d still get the highest marks in a test. He spoke English with Miss Lode as though they were both born in England. He didn’t need Oostzaan for his French. And then there was that strange language that we didn’t understand a word of.

‘It’s Russian,’ reckoned Lubbe. ‘Or an Indian language from the jungle.’

‘Maybe it’s a secret language,’ I said.

Josja would say, for example, ‘Cadeem quadeeck.’ We’d look at him like the sheep on the sea dyke and we had to ask him what he meant. Josja would sigh and say it in normal language. He sometimes used to close his eyes when he did so. We suspected that he was letting his brother say it. He definitely thought that we weren’t the sharpest knives in the drawer. ‘Cadeem quadeeck’ meant of

course that we should quickly come with him. How could we not get that! Were all of the boys in this strange fishing town that stupid?

20. A seal in the Reedlands

24 October 1956

The people of Hungary revolt: workers in Budapest pull down the eighteen-metre-high statue of Stalin. In Harlingen, a milkman's horse bolts with a four-year-old child sitting on the front of the milk cart.

Homme Prins, 24 OCTOBER 1956

A damp wind blew into our faces. It had been gently raining for some time. Lubbe and I screwed up our eyes to slits and stared out over the shallows to Bird Island. A yellow smudge against the grey of the sky. If you believed the stories, the ghosts that Mrs Klinkhamer often talked about must be floating around out there right now. They were the dead German soldiers and other victims of drowning, who had died far from home. They would always keep on searching for their homes. On stormy nights you could sometimes hear them calling out in distress.

Suddenly Ada appeared beside us. The cod-eaters' nails had left red scratches down her cheek. A piece of the lining was hanging out of the sleeve of her coat. She was chewing gum with her mouth open. Her eyes were scanning the shallows.

'Josja's rowed off with the Shrimp, hasn't he?'

'He's off to the wreck,' I said. 'It's his father's boat.'

'You should have stopped him.'

'He'll be back,' said Lubbe. 'But the Shrimp's going to have to spend a night on Bird Island.'

He brushed the water from his face. His ears were red from the cold wind.

'Exiled,' said Ada. 'Napoleon did that too.'

'Yes, and Napoleon did it on an island as well. Because he'd lost the war.'

A flock of geese flew cackling over our heads.

Lubbe went and sat on the concrete base of the harbour light. Ada tried to keep her whipping hair out of her face.

‘I don’t understand,’ she said. ‘Why does the Shrimp have to be punished so severely? And staying out for a night on the island all by himself? He can just walk back over the mudflats, can’t he?’

‘There’s no getting back without a boat,’ I said. ‘The tide’s coming in already and the wind’s up.’

‘Josja’s not daft,’ shouted Lubbe. ‘Of course he’ll tie the Shrimp up.’

Ada rubbed her cheek.

‘Why is it that he’s so angry? He’s doing things that he’d never do otherwise. Just like we are.’

I realised that I’d braced myself against the wind. That at times we could hardly catch what we were saying to one another. Lubbe was stamping his feet and had retreated so far into his jacket that only his spiky hair was still sticking out of the top. The water in the navigation channel was rising. Here and there it was already shining on the mudflats. A fishing boat was ploughing rapidly through the waves to the harbour. The sky had become grey and foggy. We’d hardly be able to see now whether a boat turned up at Bird Island. For a few minutes, nothing happened. Then Lubbe tugged at my sleeve.

‘It’s not good if I’m not home by six,’ he said. ‘I’ve got to go, Homme.’

He turned around and ran down the pier. He was skipping a little, as though he was happy. Perhaps he was relieved, because he didn’t have to see what was going to happen with Josja. Ada looked at me, opened her mouth, then quickly closed it again. Her face was shining from the rain. I’d never been alone with her before. It made me happy, but nervous at the same time. I used to learn sentences by heart before I spoke to her. And when I said them, they sounded so strange that Ada must have thought I was a halfwit. In recent weeks it had become easier and Ada also talked to me more. When Josja’s seat at the back of the class was empty, she sometimes came to ask me if I knew where he was. That change had begun after the trouble with Oostzaan.

‘Can you stay on Bird Island at night, Homme?’

‘Not when it’s high tide and there’s a storm.’

‘The tide’s coming in, isn’t it?’

‘There’s a lot of wind from the sea. Another few hours, then it’ll be high tide.’

Ada went to the furthest point of the pier. Her hair was blowing all around her head. All of the lovely scents must have blown away. She raised the collar of her coat. Just in front of us the water was climbing higher along the blocks of basalt. Sometimes it splashed up and blew into our faces. All of the mudflats between here and Bird Island were now under water. Did Josja know that the tide was coming in? Would he be able to manage the rowing boat all by himself? If he were to row back now, the current was fortunately in his favour. Ada turned her back against the wind.

‘With a wind like this, Bird Island’s going to be submerged again, isn’t it?’

‘Oene Braam!’

We must both have thought of him at the same time. Little Oene, who had hidden on Bird Island, because he’d had an argument with his father. It was a year ago, also on a stormy autumn day. They’d found him later in the Reedlands, lying there like a dead seal.

‘Josja doesn’t know what can happen there.’

‘You’re scared that he’s not going to get back in time, aren’t you?’

Josja didn’t know the sea the way we did. He hadn’t been born here. Maybe this was the first time in his life that he’d ever been in a fishing town. What would happen if he couldn’t get back? If the water was really high and there was a storm, Bird Island might wash away. That had happened so often with sections of the dunes. I suddenly knew what I had to do. There was no point in waiting here any longer. I pulled off my shoes and rolled up my trouser legs.

‘I’m going after him,’ I said. ‘Josja doesn’t know anything about the tides.’

‘I’m going with you.’

Ada chewed nervously on her gum. I knew she’d say that, but it was of course better for someone to stay behind in case it went wrong. If she didn’t see me

coming back in an hour, she had to go and get help. I didn't want to wait any longer: I could still get over the mudflats to Bird Island. In an hour, the water would be too wild. If I hurried, I'd be with Josja in half an hour. Then we'd have just enough time to get back with the boat. I knew where to row better than Josja did. Maybe the two of us could row together.

First, I ran some way along the Reedlands, where we always used to go swimming. That meant I wouldn't have to go through the navigation channel and that I'd stay dry for a while. I knew the spots where the ground was hardest. But I still sometimes sank in up to over my ankles. Now and then I looked back at Ada. She was leaning against the harbour light and she waved at me. The water came rolling in from the sea, sweeping through the navigation channel with white foaming crests. The current seemed to have more force than usual. On the mudflats the water was already coming up to my knees in some places. I kept on following the navigation channel, trudging on as quickly as I could. On the eastern pier, the red splash of Ada's coat was becoming smaller and smaller. If only I can get to Josja before he starts rowing back, I thought. I would never be able to reach him so quickly if he was in the middle of the current. Then he'd shoot straight past me and I'd end up difficulties myself.

I went on for another hundred metres or so and then I was able to turn right, making a diagonal line for Bird Island's northern beach. My clothes had become heavy from the water. One of my feet hurt: maybe a shell, a piece of glass. The ground was becoming harder. I ran the last part. The rowing boat was in the spot where we always left it when we were on Bird Island. With every wave that rolled in, the boat banged against the dunes. When the water swept back, the rope tightened and the boat tugged at the peg that Josja had stuck into the sand.

The water was already at the foot of the first small dunes. Josja and the Shrimp must be at the wreck of the German patrol boat. I climbed up the dune and looked around. A few seagulls were swishing through the air high above me. I heard Josja shouting before I saw him: a high-pitched howling sound that the wind ripped holes in. I slid down the dune and climbed up the next one. Just act

normal, I thought. Don't start yelling. I had to go up to him as though it was the most natural thing in the world: I was just coming to have a look at Bird Island and happened to see that Josja was there too. Something like that.

I stuck my head over the edge of the second dune. The wind was shoving me in the back. In front of me was the dip in the dunes with the wreck of the navy boat. Josja was bending over the Shrimp, a length of grey rope in his hand. The Shrimp was lying in the sand beside the wreck, his knees to his chest, more crooked than ever.