

*A touching and intimate family saga*

Nicolette Smabers

## The Gas and Electricity Man



**N**ICOLETTE SMABERS once said in an interview, that ‘story telling is an act of love’. This statement characterizes the way she writes. Withholding important information from children, thus denying them the right to the truth, and resulting in a lopsided view of reality, plays a role in all of Smabers’ work.

Sixteen year-old Eva Porceleyn learns that her parents are planning to emigrate from The Hague in the Netherlands to California. This, to them, is the fulfilment of a long-cherished dream, and they hope that their daughter will be as excited as they are. Instead she bursts into tears. Emigrate to America? ‘You choose, Eva,’ says her father after hours of pleading, ‘between coming to the land of oranges and orchards, and growing sour in this damp and chilly country.’

Eva wants to stay on in the Netherlands, and she wants to become a teacher. Besides, she is in love. But if she stays, her parents and brothers will be gone, and she’ll have to live with her Uncle Leo and Auntie Amanda. Faced with this choice, Eva tries to understand the fraught relationship between her father and her uncle. She delves into her childhood, when her father told her stories every night, fairy tales, Bible stories and memories of the former Dutch East Indies, where the family lived before Eva was born, interwoven with stories about the fortunes of the Porceleyn family.

However, all the stories, fast paced and told with great delight, conceal important details. Eva discovers that some wounds are hard to heal, and that the past ‘is under a spell of silence’. Her search takes her to the 1920s, to a school playground in a town in the middle of Java, where her father and his brothers, children at the time, engaged in a fight which also raged outside: the one between black and white Dutchmen. *De man van gas en licht* (The Gas and Electricity Man) is a touching and intimate family saga showing the power of story-telling cutting across oceans and generations.



photo Mark Kohn

Nicolette Smabers (b. 1948) wrote her debut, a well-received collection of short stories entitled *De Franse tuin* (‘The French Garden’), in 1983. She followed this with the novellas *Portret van mijn engel* (‘Portrait of my Angel’, 1987) and *Chinezen van glas* (‘Chinese in Glass’, 1991), and several children’s books. In 1992, she was awarded the Halewyn Prize. After several years of silence, she published her first novel, *Stiefmoeder* (‘Stepmother’) in 2003. In 2004, a new collection of her first three books, entitled *De Franse tuin. Verhalen en novellen*, (‘The French Garden. Stories and Novellas’) was published. *De man van gas en licht* (‘The Gas and Electricity Man’) is her second novel.

The press on *STIEFMOEDER* (STEPMOTHER):

After twelve years she is back with a brilliant novel.  
*TROUW*

A beautiful composition of carefully styled, evocative  
prose. *HET PAROOL*

Subdued and highly moving. *DE VOLKSKRANT*

A wonderful novel. *STANDAARD DER LETTEREN*

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Sample Translation

*The Gas and Electricity Man*

(De man van gas en licht)

by Nicolette Smabers

(Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2009)

Translated by David McKay

## Guardian of the Winds

1

That schoolyard, the low brick wall around it, the chalk drawings on the gray paving stones, the cries of the children...

The school door opens with a shrill squeak, and there is the frail figure of Sister Inviolata. To hold that squeaking behemoth, she lifts aside the heavy folds of her habit and pushes the doorstep into place with one black boot. After vanishing into the darkness of the vestibule, she returns a moment later with her hand bell: time for school, time for school...

She heads straight for the children at play, swinging the bell now to the left, now to the right, clanging with special ferocity at one stubborn clutch of pupils playing marbles. Within a few seconds, the knots have unraveled into neat rows. Each row led by a nun or another teacher, they pass through the heavy, brown door into the building.

Eve is seated on the little wall by the entrance gate, watching this scene with her mother. She knows that once the doorway has swallowed them all up, she too will go inside. But not to stay: they're only there to see the headmistress. If their meeting goes well, after summer vacation this will be her new school. One of her hands is resting on the red-checked fabric of her pleated skirt. A moment ago it was tired and heavy, but not anymore. She compares it to the other one, inhaling the bitter scent of crushed privet leaves.

Hands are not discussed at the meeting. Legs are, though. Sister Inviolata – who besides being bell-ringer is also headmistress – is concerned about the long walk between Eve's house and the school. Half an hour, four times a day. Can those spindly legs manage it?

“That's the whole trouble, Sister Inviolata. Four times a day is too much for her. She was tuckered out just from the walk over.”

“It’s not a problem, Mrs. Porceleyn. Girls who live half an hour’s walk from school are permitted to stay for lunch.”

As soon as they’re outside, she tells her mother she wasn’t tuckered out at all.

“Well, I was.” Her mother stops, lifts her dress to show Eve her bandages, and explains. Her knees are worn out, but she didn’t know whether that was a good enough reason for Eve to have lunch at school. Suppose Sister Inviolata had said, *We’re here to care for the children, Mrs. Porceleyn, not for their mothers’ knees.*

It’s hot and Eve is thirsty. Fortunately, they’ll soon pass a water fountain, next to the filling station near the bridge. She doesn’t have to see the fountain to know that, any more than she needs to look down through the squat gray pillars of the railing on the bridge to know where the dark water is. But what will happen when she starts first grade? What goes on in the darkness beyond the entranceway? Maybe she’ll learn words that Pa and Mama won’t allow in the house, or say the wrong things about her family. How are you supposed to keep it all straight? There’s already so much to remember. Don’t tell them Pa sometimes stays home from work because he can’t sleep at night. Don’t spread it around that Pa believes in God but only goes to church when he feels like it. Don’t talk about Rudi’s soccer team. Don’t say your family’s emigrating to America, because then the other children will think, *Forget about Eve Porceleyn; she’ll be gone again soon.*

And now, her mother’s worn-out knees.

As they pass the privet hedge, she picks a few leaves and crushes them in her palm. In the distance, almost at the filling station, she sees something that wasn’t there before. A tent. Where did that come from? Her mother explains: it belongs to the men who lay the telephone lines. As they come closer, Eve can see that the canvas is grimy and flecked with mud. Behind a warped plastic window, a fire is flickering. The door flaps are folded open, and as they walk by, she lets go of her mother’s hand to look down into the sandy pit. There they sit, the men who install the phones, bringing sticky potions to a boil in blackened saucepans. One of them – a man with cherry-red cheeks and blue overalls – is perched on the edge of the hole, eating a sandwich. What’s he calling out to her? He’s saying something in a

raspy voice, but she can't understand him. Her mother can, though, and snatches Eve's hand, dragging her off. A few steps further, she leans in and whispers, "Don't look back."

"Hey, sugar, how're the tits on you?" the voice rasps after them.

"Don't look back, don't speed up, don't say a thing," her mother says in a pinched voice. Meanwhile, they hear footsteps drawing closer. A high voice, almost a boy's, shouts out, "Hold on, ma'am! I'm awfully sorry, this is a disgrace."

"Don't say a word. Don't turn around."

The voice and the footsteps are right behind them. "Forgive us, ma'am. My buddy's not right in the head. Please, ma'am, please... Hey, little girl. Hey, listen. Tell that sweet mother of yours we're just as sorry as we can be!"

"No looking. No talking."

The footsteps and voice die away.

As they near the filling station, she keeps her eyes fixed straight ahead, passing the water fountain without stopping. Whew, there's the bridge over the canal. What a relief, they're almost home. She lets go of her mother's hand and leans over the railing for a moment. *Hello, bridge, is that you again?*

At dinner, she keeps hearing that boy's high, plaintive voice, and she's furious with herself for not looking back, not saying, "Okay, I'll tell my sweet mother."

"What's with the dazed look, kiddo?" her father asks.

Her mother answers for her: "She had quite a shock this afternoon." Then she tells the whole story.

"That boy was trying to apologize," Eve adds. "He was an angel, or an elf."

"If you'd turned around, you could have seen which," her father says. "An elf has wings, and an angel doesn't."

"You're really something. Make it a little more complicated, why don't you?" her mother protests. "How's a child like her supposed to know whether he's an angel without wings, or a knife-grinder, or a junk dealer, or a charity collector, or

the gas and electric man?” She pushes her chair angrily from the table and starts stacking the plates, even though she hasn’t finished her own.

“It’s not something you see, Eve, it’s something you sense,” her father says with a broad grin. “Angels have the patience of an angel. They never get mad, and they always set a good example.”

2

Some events from Eve’s childhood remained with her in their crude, unprocessed form, as if her senses had joined together to impress the singularity of those moments upon her. The first time this struck her was when she was talking to her brother about the family’s America plans. The conversation moved on to something else her parents had argued about: the Church. As she told Rudi all about staying over for lunch at school, so far away from their own neighborhood, she suddenly remembered that first walk. Suddenly it seemed so clear, so close. She smelled the bitter scent of the privet, looked down at her hand against her red-checked skirt, felt the sharp edge of the brick press into her bare legs, and saw that little gray tent rise up again ahead of her. In all her life, she told Rudi, she had never felt as foreign and far from home as she had that afternoon. And she’d never again been as happy and carefree as when she crossed back over that bridge. Right at that moment, she had made the bridge her friend. “Really, truly, I did, and it stayed my friend all year. I used to run my hand along its wide gray railing and tell it all my secrets. On summer days, I’d rest on its arched back, just soaking up the heat of the sun.”

“My stony friend,” Rudi cut in, with a snort of laughter. She felt an embarrassed blush rise to her cheeks, and clamped her mouth shut.

Rudi sat with her in earnest silence for a moment, then told the story of why she had to go to school so far from home. “Pa didn’t care,” he concluded. “But Mama thought you should have a Catholic education. Unfortunately, it didn’t make much of an impression on you. Pa was your Mother Goose, and you took those invisible creatures he filled your head with every night at bedtime – elves, nymphs, fairies, and all the rest – and mixed them up into your own special

blend.” Rudi circled his index finger around his temple. “Sorry to tell you this, Evie, but I thought you were an obnoxious little kid. Always running off at the mouth about souls and elves and angels and apparitions. Not to mention the fairy of paradise! She was your Virgin Mary. Wherever you were – at school, at home, in stores – you were always spinning theories for anyone who happened to be around. And the day Pa came up with the angel without wings, that really opened the floodgates.”

The fairy of paradise. The soul. The angel without wings... It was as if a lock had sprung open! All at once she saw her father again, sitting by his bookcase with his back to her.

3

She has her pajamas on now and is ready for her trip around the world with Frederik the Fantasist. Their vehicle is the large desk in the back room, where her father retreats after dinner to smoke and read undisturbed, until she comes knocking at his door – one loud rap, followed by three quick taps.

“Who goes there?”

“Eve!”

She hears scraping noises, then a creak; her travel guide is pulling out her footrest and swiveling his chair a quarter turn. “Come in, Miss Tell-Me-Why.” He is sitting with his back to her, ready to begin. She darts into the room and bounds straight onto the desktop. Now they both have a view of the bookcase behind the desk: Eve with her feet in the foot drawer, and her father with his on the third shelf from the bottom. Pa’s feet are called Left and Right.

To the left of Left is the cookie tin that’s supposed to bring their family happiness. It’s dented and inconspicuous, which is handy, because no thief would ever notice it. If everything goes according to plan – and she has to believe with all her might that it will – then each night as they sleep, the cookie tin will make them all a little richer. It holds the seeds of rare flowers, plus a bunch of old coins and rare postage stamps. Before too long, the coins and stamps will be worth lots of money, enough for four airline tickets. Then the four of them will emigrate to

America in a KLM airplane and settle in Florida or California, as yet they can't say which. Either way, they'll find a new home where the soil is as warm and fertile as Indonesia's – "the country we come from," her father always says.

"Except me."

"Except you, right."

The cookie tin must not be opened under any circumstances. If the rare seeds are exposed to fresh air, they'll sprout. And the stamps are even trickier. Air's bad for them too, and light is even worse; pry off the lid and their colors could fade in an instant.

But what's the point of emigrating, really? Instead of airplane tickets, wouldn't it make more sense for them to buy train tickets to Arnhem and visit their relatives? "Yes, but your Uncle Leo has a car," Frederik says. "He can come to our house first."

Actually, Eve's not so sure about that cookie tin. What exactly is supposed to happen to those precious seeds, coins, and stamps? Well, it's clear enough what they'll do with the seeds once they've flown to America on their KLM airplane. They'll plant them in the warm and fertile soil of the East Coast or the West. And after that? Then, her father answers, they'll probably bloom into magnificent flowers. But what if they're meat-eating flowers? What if, besides insects, wrens, and lizards, they also eat human tongues?

"It seems awfully unlikely," her father replies. "Human tongues? Tell me, missy, what made you think of tongues?"

She points to the illustrated book about the tropics.

He picks it up and the words start pouring out of him. When most children think of the tropics, they picture palm trees, tigers, monkeys, snakes, and crocodiles. Everyone knows those stories. What they often forget is that the seas, rivers, and lakes near the equator are full of wondrous underwater creatures. He flips the pages, pointing out sea anemones with fine-spun crowns of tentacles that vaguely resemble fashionable ladies' hats, and sea horses with ramrod-straight backs – look at them, just like floating chessmen. Or how about all these fantastic

fish: reddish-purple with long, luminous bodies, and yellow-gold with wiry silver whiskers and tails like speckled veils.

“And in the jungle they have...” she says, leaning over and turning to the page that shows the carnivorous plants. Some look like round, waxy cups made of marzipan. You could almost bite into them, but no, they might bite back.

“You’re right about that, Miss Crunchy-Munchy. So remember, no biting. Here, I’ll show you some pictures of the garden of paradise.” Her father puts back the book about the tropics and shoots his hand out towards the row of fairy-tale books, but in his haste he grabs the wrong one. It opens to a picture of a giant lumbering down a winding path to the land of milk and honey: grassy fields in the distance, glittering brooks, villages strewn here and there like tempting trinkets.

“This is a very friendly giant. And he doesn’t eat people.”

The giant is holding the broken-off top of a tower in one hand and a mighty club in the other. There’s a hungry look in his eyes as he peers down into the valley. He’s sure to gobble up that little cow in the distance.

“Yes, that’s a shame, isn’t it? And you’re right, there’s no excuse for killing and eating animals. But let’s be fair, Eve, regular people do the very same thing. So what are you getting so worked up about?”

He’ll finish that little cow in just two bites. Then he’ll start in on the villagers. She just knows it.

“That cow’s not as small as you think. Plus, giants aren’t as big as everyone thinks.” He nudges her, then sticks out his thumb and holds it close to her face. “This is a giant. See how big it is?” Then he moves it away. “And see how small it is now? Not much bigger than Tom Thumb.”

This new perspective cheers Eve up. She says, “You know what else? You can be a giant and a dwarf at the same time.”

“Um, no, I’m afraid that’s impossible. It’s one or the other. Or... hold on a second.”

Her father ponders silently. It takes a while, but he works it out.

“Yes, it is possible. But you’d have to be a giant with fingers as big as tree trunks and smaller fingers branching out of them, and even smaller fingers branching out of those, and tiny little ones branching out of those, and so on. If you look very carefully – with a magnifying glass – you can see that the very smallest fingertips are covered with Matter-Nots, tiny creatures with their own little eyes and ears and feet. They can fit into every nook and cranny, and even into the keyholes in people’s front doors.”

“Even into your soul,” she says.

“Your soul’s invisible, isn’t it?”

“No. But it’s even smaller than those little creatures.”

“I’m going to write that down,” says Frederik the Fantasist.

That’s how the blue spiral notebook came into her life. “Pay special attention to the hard words,” her father said. “The ordinary ones will come naturally. I’ll help you.” He’d pasted scraps of paper to the edges: twenty-six squares that went from A to Z. He would write with invisible ink. Then she would dip a brush in a glass of vinegar water and make the words magically appear. The S stood for “Soul.” And next to the letter F were the words “Fairy of Paradise.” The tale of the fairy of paradise had been made up by Hans Christian Andersen, but Frederik had added a few twists of his own.

*Where east becomes west*

*And north becomes south*

*Who lives there?*

*The guardian of the winds and his four sons.*

Eve had to say the fourth line out loud. Then her father would tell the story of the guardian of the winds and what he heard one day from the four winds, who were his sons. His favorite son was the East Wind. Not because the East Wind could circle the earth in a single night – the other three could do that too – but because

the East Wind flew to paradise (or what was left of it), where the fairy of paradise made her home.

Yes, paradise still existed, somewhere near China. There, people and animals lived in peace with one another, the rivers teemed with fish in marvelous colors that no artist could ever duplicate, and the trees were hung with porcelain clocks that went *ching-chang, ching-chong*, like the voices of Chinese children. The fairy of paradise was radiantly beautiful, of course, and she didn't walk – no, she floated through the air. If you looked outside through the colored panes of the windows in her majestic palace, you could see everything in the world that had ever happened, from the first man and woman to the present day. All those events had been engraved in the glass by Time: every possible scene, in every color of the rainbow.

“Feast your eyes on that, East Wind,” the fairy of paradise said. “It’s all preserved right here. You could even find your own life there somewhere. Everything you’ve ever experienced, or seen, or thought, or read, or heard. Everything. Nothing is lost, just forgotten for an instant. As soon as someone thinks of it, it comes straight back to life.”

“Do the windows show you tomorrow?”

“No, not tomorrow, Eve. Those windows take time to make. But yesterday and the day before are there, and so is the very first day of the very first people. Wouldn't you like to see that first day, Eve's day before she ate the apple?”

What does she care about eating some old apple? She asks, “What about the day after tomorrow?”

“The day after tomorrow? What are you going on about now? First you want to see tomorrow, then the day after tomorrow. Come here, Miss Broken Record, bring me your little hand-book.” She holds out her hands, and he reads the lines of her palms: “The day after tomorrow, Eve Porceleyn will start the first grade.”

## The Blue Notebook

1

Staying over. Overworked. The new girl. Carrot top. The one from the other parish. This is what she hears when she thinks of first grade.

“Which parish? Where do you live?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you go to school in your own neighborhood?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t know” is often the best thing to say, but not to Mary de Bruin the fourth-grader.

When the weather is bad, they don’t go outside to play. When is the weather bad? That’s up to Sister Christina, the nun who does Religion and is usually in charge of the children who stay over for lunch. She decides whether they go out and play at the end of the period. Sometimes it’s a tough decision, but the day Eve is first sent to the corner, the lunch room darkens so suddenly around quarter to two that they have to turn on the lights. It starts to hail. What’s going on? It’s summer. They all run to the windows to see this spectacle of nature. The hailstones bounce high, noisily battering the windowpane with every gust of wind. Then all at once the hailstorm turns into an ordinary shower, and they shuffle back to their seats.

“You sure have a stupid milk bottle,” a voice says next to her. Eve smells the familiar odor of onions and feels the first pinch on her upper arm. Mary again. Mary de Bruin always reeks of sweat whether it’s hot or cold, and her nails are sharp. She takes a fold of skin between her thumb and index finger, and twists. “And that lunch bag is really weird.”

She’s right, it’s a weird lunch bag. This morning they were out of the little white bags, so she put her sandwiches in this brown one, which is way too big. It used to have cooking apples in it. And it’s true that her bottle is different from the

other kids' milk bottles. At the start of the lunch break, Sister Christina always brings a crate of school milk into the lunch room. She sets it on the front desk near the door, and every child gets a bottle. The bottles are topped with foil and come with white straws.

Eve doesn't drink school milk. When children ask why not, she says, "I don't have to." She doesn't suck on one of those nice white straws either. Why should she? Her mother gives her delicious buttermilk with sugar in a bottle with a screw cap. But today she has a different bottle, one with a cork; it used to have soy sauce in it, and the label hasn't been washed off yet.

Mary reads the words on the yellow label: Ketjap Manis. "Is that Indonesian?" she asks. "You're not Indonesian, are you?"

"I don't know." She changes seats.

Mary slides into the chair next to her and tugs at the stray hairs at Eve's temple while kicking her in the shin. She says, "You don't know anything. Are you retarded or what? Course you're not Indonesian."

Is that really true? She and her mother have fair, freckled skin and curly red hair. Rudi and Pa are brown-skinned. Pa has wavy black hair, and Rudi's is dark and wavy too, but lighter. Some people in their neighborhood can't believe the four of them are a family. They ask, "Where do you come from?" Mama thinks Eve should say, "I don't know." Pa thinks she should say, "My brother comes from the jungle and my father from Hispania; my mother is the Marquise of Carabas and I am Tinkerbell."

Now that Eve's at a loss for words, Mary gets to think of an even worse way to bully her. Eve gets up and goes to the lavatory. When she returns, she sees that Mary has snatched the blue spiral notebook from her school bag and is reading it. Is Mary out of her mind? Suddenly she's furious; rage prickles her neck. She runs straight up to Mary and yanks at her sleeve. But Mary's a lot taller. She holds the notebook high above her head and waves it around. "W is for who, what, which, and why!" she yells.

Eve kicks at Mary's shins and ankles, as hard as she can.

“Stop that, Eve. Now give it here, Mary!” Sister Christina bustles over, her habit flapping around her, and pulls the notebook out of Mary’s hand with an exasperated tug. At the same time, she grabs Eve by the wrist and drags her to the corner behind the teacher’s desk. “Children, it’s clean-up time,” she calls out a few seconds later in her full, resonant voice. “And no running on the way back to your classrooms.”

Are those instructions meant for naughty children too? Probably not. Eve bears her punishment with devotion, practically pressing her nose into the corner as she listens to the other children talking and leaving the room. Soon she feels Sister Christina’s hand on her head. It’s time for her to turn around now. Sister Christina leans in and grasps her by the shoulders. Sister Christina wants Eve to look her in the eyes, but she’s moved in too close, and Eve can only see one eye, a dark one with red lines in the white. Sister Christina stands up again. She picks up the notebook from her desk and starts to leaf through it. After a while she asks, “Your father doesn’t really come from Spain, does he?”

“I don’t know.”

“So why do elves have wings, but not angels?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re quite a piece of work,” Sister Christina says. She puts her things away in a black satchel: a pen, a small black book, a timer – then suddenly the blue notebook vanishes into her bag. What’s going on? That’s not a school notebook. It’s her own notebook from home; she only brought it so she could draw at lunchtime.

“Off to class, Eve, quickly. You’ll get your pretty blue notebook back tomorrow.”

She says the word “pretty” as if it were against the rules to have a spiral notebook, or a blue one, or tabs on the pages. It’s as if every notebook in the world has to look like a school notebook, the color of pea soup with two pieces of string through the spine.

A few moments later, she's standing at the door to her classroom. She listens to the clang of the bell in the schoolyard and the columns of children advancing, their voices swelling to a roar.

2

At the end of the week, right after inflicting another wild outburst of clanging on her pupils, Sister Inviolata shows up at the door to Eve's classroom. The teacher hurries over, craning her head and upper body forward in her rush to get into earshot. After Sister Inviolata has left, the teacher says, "Eve Porceleyn, please report to the office."

The office is quite warm. The chair that Sister Inviolata pulls up for Eve is a prayer kneeler with a folding seat. The blue notebook is lying on her writing desk. The headmistress says, "I called your mother yesterday, and she told me your father is overworked. Do you know what that means?" ("Don't breathe a word of it, Evie, or people at your school will get all kinds of ideas about us.")

"You won't talk?" Sister Inviolata asks in a soft, raspy voice. "Well, my dear, it doesn't matter. The best thing we can do for him now is pray." She gets started at once, praying for Pa for a moment or two with her hand on her heart and her head bowed. No signs of the cross, though. Does Sister Inviolata know that Pa doesn't go to church every Sunday?

After praying, the headmistress picks up Eve's notebook and starts flipping through it, just like Sister Christina. Around the S for "Soul" is a drawing of a house with a magnifying glass next to it. She asks, "Why does the S live in a house?"

"This is a trade secret," says the page next to the drawing, so there's no need for Eve to explain.

Sister Inviolata peers at Eve. "Does your family say the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary every night before dinner?"

Eve nods. It's just a white lie. The headmistress turns to another page: "D is for 'death.' Then we live on in our second bodies in a big family home." The

corners of her mouth curl mockingly. “Death sounds like quite a get-together. Would you care to tell me more about that family home in the afterlife?”

Afterlife. Eve silently counts to ten, giving the question time to disappear, or make way for a new one.

“Honestly, dear, I’m not going to eat you,” The headmistress closes the notebook and pushes it to the farthest corner of her desk. To make sure the words don’t escape, she places the bell with the round wooden handle on the cover. “Do you like Sister Christina’s religion classes?”

Eve nods, and on the inside she thinks no. That way, yes and no are in balance. Yes. She loves to hear about the miraculous powers of the Son of Man, how he multiplied the loaves and, in the blink of an eye, turned water into wine, how he healed the blind, the deaf, and the lepers with just a few words. No. Please, no more stories like the other day, about the early Christians. How they burned with divine fire and then got eaten by the lions of the cruel Emperor Nero.

(“Eaten alive, that’s right. And why? Purely because they stood up for their faith, our Catholic faith,” Sister Christina had said with righteous indignation. “Ordinary Catholics like us don’t have to be as holy as they were. But would it be too much for us to treat the God of our faith to a mortification or good deed every once in a while?”)

(“No, no, not murder-fication, Evie. That Sister Christ-Almighty at your school was just trying to say that God eats people’s goodness, not with a fork and knife, but spiritually, you see? God is a spiritual being, not a man looking down at us over the edge of the clouds.”)

Sister Inviolata rests her elbows on the tabletop, bringing the tips of her fingers together to form a cage. “You won’t talk? Why won’t you talk?” She removes the bell from the offending object. “Please, dear, leave that pretty blue notebook of yours at home from now on. And tell your mother it’s a good idea. A good idea. Don’t forget, now.”

With a soft moan, the school door opens, just enough to let through one last child who should have been home already. The schoolyard's empty now. Where's Mama? She breaks into a run. Her mother is waiting for her at the corner.

“What did you talk to the headmistress about?”

“I don't know.”

“Do you have a message for me?”

“I don't know.”

3

On the way home, her mother asks again what Sister Inviolata talked to her about.

“I don't know.”

“You really don't know? What a hard-headed child you are, Evie. Did you get your notebook back? You know, you never should have taken it to school. Here, give it to me. I'll hold on to it for you.”

She takes the notebook out of her bag and gives it to her mother. Then she walks on quietly, now and then sliding her hand into her mother's coat pocket, a habit she's fallen into over the past year. And during the walk home, whenever the sun breaks through the clouds, their shadow walks ahead of them like a single person. As they pass the filling station, she remembers the message for her mother: “Sister Inviolata said it's a good idea.”

“What's a good idea? Oh, it's a good idea. Oh, good.”

Eve sees the bridge and runs ahead. At the highest point she kneels and sticks her head through the pillars of the railing, looking down for a while at the dark waters of the canal. Then a few things happen that she will never forget.

A boat glides out from under the bridge, and at the same time she hears the excited cries of a flock of seagulls. Something flutters through the air – a blue-and-white-winged bird. No, it's her notebook! The seagulls dive for it, then screech indignantly and veer away. For a moment she hopes – an insane hope – that the captain will appear on the deck of the boat, a captain with a white cap and rich embroidery on the sleeves of his uniform, to snatch her notebook out of the

air. But no, the blue spiral-bound notebook with tabs from A to Z lands in the churning water behind the boat and an instant later is gone.

Her mother runs two fingers along the hollow in the nape of her neck. “It had to happen. What’s done is done, sweetheart.”

She doesn’t want to be comforted. Who said it had to happen? It surely wasn’t Pa. Sister Inviolata? No. Suddenly her anger breaks through again, like a predator, jumping her from behind and seizing her by the throat. She almost chokes with rage, and her head grows large and red-hot. Her head is growing? Yes, it’s growing. Suddenly she’s got a giant head to worry about. It’s a good thing that right now she can just stand there, looking down at the dark water, at that smooth, black, peacefully streaming surface. And it’s a good thing she has this bridge around her. Boy, that hot head of hers is pounding, pounding on the left and on the right, as if it were knocking on the cool stone bridge, asking to be let in. Supposing it gets caught between these two pillars. It’s already happening... The force of her rage seeks an outlet in the grey, stony mass to the left and right of her ears, and the bridge melts into her. She is sitting *in* the bridge, and the bridge is all around her. If she stands up now, a piece of the railing will come with her. Is that a bad thing? No. With that mass of stone protecting her, with that rock-solid chunk of bridge like a helmet – surrounding and covering her head, down past her ears – she will make her way home. Separate and alone. Not with her hand in Mama’s. Not with her hand in Mama’s coat pocket. No. And she will never speak to her again! What good are words that aren’t true? And she’ll never go to that lousy school again, either. No. No one can make her. This bridge and Eve Porceleyn, the two of them, are strong enough and hard enough to stay stock-still if someone tugs on them. They will stay where they are, motionless, joined in a single statue.

She feels her mother’s hand stroking her neck. She hears her voice. The boat has almost reached the harbor. By the waterside, a couple of boys are fishing. The number four bus drives over the bridge; she can smell its smell and hear it rattle

by. Suddenly her head is back to normal size. The pounding has stopped, and the anger is gone.

What's supposed to happen now?

"I'm sorry, Eve, I didn't know you'd be so upset."

Don't say a word. Don't put your hand in her pocket.

"I'll ask Pa to start a new notebook for you," Mama says as they walk on. "But then you two will have to make regular words. 'Table, chair, sheep, tree.' Those are the kinds of words you have to learn to write."

No, no, no. That's exactly what she doesn't want to do. From now on she'll only learn Pa's words, nobody else's. The rest of the walk home she spends in studied silence, her hands jammed deep into the pockets of her coat.

"Sister Inviolata has a good idea!" she blurts out as soon as they get home, flinging open the living room door. "Sister Inviolata has a good idea!"

Pa is dozing in his chair with the paper between chin and shoulder. This is a new development. Whenever he gets drowsy in the daytime, he quickly folds his paper into a pillow and rides the wave of sleep.

Rudi is in the garden, tinkering with his upside-down bicycle again. Rudi and his bicycle – will it ever end? At the dinner table, every conversation is about bicycles, bicycle maps, coatguards, patches, and tire levers. And if it's not that, it's Maurits Timmermans, Rudi's new friend. Rudi calls him Maup now. Maup Timmermans and Rudi are going on a cycling tour together in the summer. And Uncle Leo and Aunt Amanda's daughter Renate is going with them, along with a couple of her friends. The whole gang of them are planning to cycle around the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg. Three countries in one vacation. It'll really be something.

She goes over to her sleeping father and sings softly in his ear: *Rock-a-bye baby, on the tree top...* As he rubs the newspaper creases out of his cheek, she tells him what happened to their blue notebook. First it was snatched away from her twice, and then Mama threw it into the canal.

Mama comes into the room to contradict her. Of course she didn't throw the notebook into the canal. It blew out of her coat when she reached for her handkerchief. Pa folds his arms, one over the other; his arms are raised high on his chest, almost up to his neck. He doesn't say a word, so Mama goes back into the hallway – to make another phone call, of course. Without her phone, she's only half a woman, Pa always says.

A while later, she comes back into the room with an everything's-hunky-dory expression on her face. Her eyes seem to say, "Let's change the subject." The new subject is summer vacation, which starts in a week. Mama will give it some serious thought this summer: maybe she can find someone in Eve's second-grade class who can bring Eve home for the lunch break to eat her sandwiches and play. That'll be more fun than staying at school. "These last few days, just keep your distance from that Mary girl," Mama says.

Pa sniffs contemptuously. "Listen, Eve." He looks her straight in the eyes. "You don't always have to follow the herd. I think you should teach that little imp a good lesson. Pour some castor oil in her milk at school; go on, Evie, just do it. Give that little rat the running shits. Castor oil should do it, or a healthy splash of olive oil. You know where we keep it, right?"

"Cut it out, Fred. She'll do it, you know."

That night her father brings it up again. "Remember, don't get all meek and mild on me, and you don't have to believe everything people tell you. Come here, Freckle. Bring me your hand-book." He scratches and scrawls a few invisible words into the palms of her hands and tells her what they say: "I don't always have to do what the herd wants."

"The herd?"

"The herd says yes and amen. The herd does things the way they should be done. But the herd does exactly what everyone else does, without ever stopping to think. Like those thousands of people who stroll into church every Sunday."

She thinks about the well-dressed families walking to church every Sunday morning as the bells ring, sometimes taking up the whole sidewalk: the stiff-armed married couples with their hats and handbags; the girls with their little white socks and black patent-leather shoes; and the boys with their damp hair. Her family isn't a part of it, because Pa thinks what happens at the altar has nothing to do with God. It's more like synchronized swimming on dry land. And since the news leaked out that Rudi plays soccer with a Protestant team, he's given up going too. Mama thinks it's disgraceful. That's why she says things like "Women are the ones with staying power" and "Are you ready, Evie? Time to go pray for our lost lambs."

Does Mama really try hard enough to bring back her lost lambs? When sheep wander off, you're supposed to round them up. Is Pa even a Catholic anymore? And if you're not a Catholic, what are you? A heathen. Practically a savage.

"Pa, are you a Catholic?"

"Indeed I am," he says, taking his feet off the bookshelf and swiveling around in his chair. "Your pa's a Catholic, all right. But in his own way."