

Early adolescence at a time of war



Bernlef

A Boy's War

A *BOY'S WAR* has a special place in Bernlef's substantial work. Previously published as *Achterhoedegevecht* ('Rearguard Action', 1989) Bernlef has since pared this coming of age drama down to its essence.

Twelve-year-old Michiel is sent away from Amsterdam by his parents in the last year of the war, to the Tulp family in the village of Driewoude, to fatten up. There in the country the war manifests itself completely differently. 'At home the war had been so much easier. It was visible behind barbed wire, it wore a uniform, it was discernible from everyday life. Here it often surrounded him with incomprehensible signs.'

Bernlef shows the world purely and solely through a boy's eyes at the start of adolescence; a fragile perspective that is charged more than ever in wartime. The change from city to country, the forced intimacy with strangers, and living under wartime occupation make a survivor of Michiel. The physical sensations of early adolescence are marvellously evoked by the author: 'Aunt Merel's' fleshy arms, his 'adoptive sister' Alie's hairy genitals, his own chafing ankles, not used to clogs. Michiel also has his hands full trying to distinguish 'good' from 'bad'. The village doctor shouldn't be greeted, because he fraternizes with the enemy, the neighbour is a member of the NSB and a rake, and must be spied on; in order to get into his classmates' good books, he must report things he doesn't understand himself. Before falling asleep at night he comforts himself with a book from home: *Mother Reads* and identifies with Hagar and Ishmael, who, like himself, were betrayed by their loved ones and sent into the wilderness.

By the time Michiel can go back to Amsterdam, he has discovered that not everything is what it seems. The girl with the gorgeous hair is a Kraut whore. He has learned that principles come at a price and that honesty is relative. At the same time, all that he has experienced happened in such a closed world and period that he feels nothing has happened at all. This paradox, of 'all' and 'nothing', is beautifully brought to life in this novella.



photo Chris van Houts

Bernlef (J. Bernlef, b. 1937) has been published regularly since 1960. He has written novels, stories, poetry, plays, and essays. He has also translated the Scandinavian poets Gustafson and Tranströmer into Dutch. He was editor of the literary periodicals *Barbarber* and *Raster*. He received the P.C. Hooftprijs in 1994 for his poetry, but made his name with *Hersenschimmen* (*Out of Mind*, 1983), which is a coolly, yet emotional novel about the fragility of memory. His last novel *Buiten is het maandag* ('*Outside It's Monday*', 2003) was also a big success and was nominated for several prizes.

Bernlef may well have come the closest to the reality of most Dutch people in May 1945.

HAARLEMS DAGBLAD

Bernlef is a real pro who grabs the reader's attention with each novel.

DE TELEGRAAF

A Boy's War is a sympathetic story... Plainly told, with much empathy in the detailing of the daily life of a twelve-year-old.

AD MAGAZINE



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Boy (Boy). Stockholm: Norstedts 2001.
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Sample translation from

A Boy's War by Bernlef
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Translated by S.J. Leinbach

Chapter 6

On Monday he followed Aunt Merel into Dieber’s Stationer’s. As he closed the door behind him (there was no expected tinkle of a shop bell), he looked out through a frayed hole in the lace curtains. A grey cat was crouching under a hedge across the street.

He must be stalking a bird, Michiel thought, mechanically kicking the air with his right clog, as if that would shoo away the motionless cat on the other side of the street.

It was some time before Mr Dieber slid open the stained-glass doors that divided the shop from the rest of the house.

‘Afternoon, Mrs Tulp,’ said Dieber, rubbing a fat finger back and forth under his nose. ‘Hello there, young man.’

While his aunt was asking about the exercise books, Michiel looked through the gap in the sliding doors into the backroom. Two plump moquette tub chairs sat on either side of a smoking table, on top of which was a folded newspaper. He could just see the corner of a sideboard with one drawer half open. Opposite it was a tablecloth, hanging over the edge of an invisible table. An equally invisible clock ticked in the background, resonant and insistent.

‘I can spare two,’ said Dieber, his back towards them, rummaging through the many cubby-holes in the cabinet behind him.

He turned round, eyelids aflutter. He looked like a frog, Michiel thought, hopping around like that behind the counter. He probably stank too.

‘Two,’ he squeaked, holding up the exercise books like a fan. ‘He is a city boy, after all.’ He coughed.

‘And what’s that got to do with it?’ said his aunt irritably, taking her wallet from her raincoat.

‘It’s a question of distribution, Mrs Tulp,’ Mr Dieber said slowly as he conjured the small pencil out of his breast pocket with unexpected elegance. His

Adam’s apple bobbed up and down as he wrote the two amounts on a slip of paper, one beneath the other, and added them up.

‘That’ll be one guilder and two cents.’

Aunt Merel handed over the money with a sigh. ‘What is the world coming to? I hope this doesn’t go on for much longer.’

‘Oh, so do I, Mrs Tulp,’ said Dieber obsequiously. ‘So do I. And the sooner the better. But unfortunately these things are not in our hands.’ He let out a noiseless laugh and slid a stack of games across the low brown counter, staring out over the green curtain hanging from its copper rod in front of the shop window. Michiel followed his gaze. The girl whizzed past on her bicycle, her blond curls dancing on the shoulder of her red dress.

‘That whore,’ muttered Dieber. ‘Oh, I do beg your pardon,’ he said, shocked by his own words when he looked back at Mrs Tulp, the exercise books pressed to her chest. But she only winked at him and said, ‘No, you’re right. But we’ll have our day, Mr Dieber. And maybe sooner than we think,’ she added. ‘Come on, Michiel,’ she said as she walked to the door. ‘You don’t want to be late on your first day.’

It was only once they were back outside that he realised how dark and stuffy it was in Dieber’s shop. In elegant, white letters the word *Stationery* curved across the shop window like a crescent moon. The window display itself was nothing but a few faded and torn dust jackets and a cardboard ad for adhesive. Resting against it was a homemade sign reading *And books*. The cat across the street had disappeared.

‘Come on, we have to hurry,’ said his aunt. She attempted to take his hand, but he avoided her. It was bad enough that he had to be *taken* to school. ‘Here, you hold the exercise books then,’ she said, as if to make up for the embarrassment she had caused. ‘They’re yours, but look after them. You heard how expensive they are.’

He took the books and walked on alongside her, listening to the clip-clop of his wooden shoes and his aunt’s heavy breathing. He read the words *Ter Geest* in fat, white letters above the closed balcony doors of Dr Dulieu’s house.

On the playground the children clustered together in groups. Girls, including Gerie, were playing skipping games. A group of boys, most of them bigger than he, were standing in a circle. In the centre a smaller boy was being shoved around the circle like a rag doll, crying and screaming for them to stop. Beside the open door to the school, a man with folded arms watched the playing children. He had a pointed nose and brown hair that jutted forward in a cowlick. The wind played with the legs of his light blue trousers.

‘Good morning, Mr van der Pol,’ said his aunt. ‘This is your new pupil. Michiel, shake hands with your teacher.’

He held out the hand that was holding the exercise books. Noticing his mistake, he clumsily transferred them to the other hand. He felt the teacher’s large hand enclose his own.

‘So Michiel,’ said the teacher, ‘you’re going to be in my class. Stay here with me. School is just about to start.’

He walked onto the playground and clapped his hands. The children trudged towards the school, in the same groups they had been playing in. It was only when they reached the open door that they lined up in two rows. The chatter ceased, and when the teacher snapped his fingers, the left row clattered into the school.

The teacher took Michiel by the shoulder and said, ‘In future, you’ll be in the line on the right, but stand here next to me for now.’

Michiel saw that most of the big boys were also in the line on the right. Some of them seemed to be sizing him up. A second snap of the fingers, and the right line headed inside. Mr van der Pol and Michiel followed the boys into the dimly lit, hollow-sounding corridor. At the coat hooks the air was briefly filled with the deafening noise of clogs being kicked off, bodies shoving each other and

unintelligible shouting. After that, the children all trickled into the classroom. The girls sat in the row by the window and the boys in the other two rows. Michiel stood next to the teacher at the front of the class and looked out of one of the three windows at the now abandoned playground, where someone had left a red-handled skipping rope. White chicken feathers were blowing round the principal’s house backyard garden.

Mr van der Pol picked up a ruler and hammered on the edge of his desk, on top of which were two stacks of exercise books, identical to the one he had in his hand: green with a white label.

‘Verkerk, shut your mouth,’ he suddenly shrilled. Van der Pol’s mouth grew smaller, and the blood drained from his lips, but his eyes retained the same serene, watery gaze.

‘This is Michiel,’ he said, pointing to Michiel, who felt uncomfortable standing in front of the class in his stocking feet, as if his fly were open. Everybody was staring at him. The girls turned around to engage in hushed conversations with their neighbour in the seat behind them. Just to be on the safe side, he cast a quick look downwards.

‘Quiet!’

The ruler struck the desk again.

‘Michiel is from Amsterdam, and I think you’ll to have to work very hard to keep up with him. Isn’t that right, Michiel?’

He bowed his head and nodded weakly. For a moment the room was perfectly silent. The silence was broken by a short, scornful guffaw.

‘Verkerk, one more sound out of you and you’re going in the corner!’

Michiel was assigned a seat at the front of the centre row, next to a freckly boy called Jaap Steen. When the teacher began talking Michiel noticed that the fifth and sixth grade were taught together. The Dutch assignment was easy, and he let Jaap Steen copy off him.

At break he walked with Jaap over to a small group of boys standing under the corrugated iron roof of an empty bike shed at the corner of the playground. Verkerk was sitting on one of the wooden bike racks, a boy on either side of him, like a king surrounded by his footmen.

‘What are you doing here?’ asked Verkerk, leaning over. He stretched out his eyelids with his index fingers, which made him look Chinese.

‘I don’t know,’ said Michiel as nonchalantly as possible as he put his hands in his pockets. ‘Uh...I guess it was too dangerous in Amsterdam.’

‘Dangerous my ass.’

‘There was shooting in the streets,’ he lied. ‘You could hear the shrapnel ricocheting off the pails on the balconies.’

Verkerk had no response to that. One of the boys, the smaller of the two, with huge jug ears and the red neck of a farmer’s son said, ‘He lives next door to Soutenbakker, at the Tulp’s.’

Verkerk hopped off the rack, but one of his clogs got caught between two of the bars and he tumbled to the ground, hands outstretched, right in front of Michiel. A couple of boys bent down to help him to his feet, but Michiel simply took two steps backwards, his hands still in his trouser pockets. All of a sudden he was master of the situation, the king of the bike shed. Wiping his hands on his trousers, Verkerk repeated the jug-eared boy’s remark in the form of a question. Michiel nodded. That’s right, he lived next to Mr Soutenbakker.

‘You ever see anything there?’

The boys moved in closer. He didn’t understand what he was getting at.

‘Have you ever seen naked ladies there?’ Verkerk grinned and put his hand on his shoulder. A sickly sweet odour came from his mouth. Michiel shook his head and said that he sometimes heard music coming from the house after he had gone to bed.

They came closer, crowding towards him.

‘You mean you’ve never seen any naked ladies?’

He hesitated. He had seen Alie, and before that Dolly in the bushes, but they had nothing to do with Soutenbakker.

‘Have you?’

‘No,’ he said, peering between the heads of the boys around him, looking for the door to the school. ‘No, but one night I looked out my window and saw a girl with curly blonde hair dancing on her back in the attic.’

‘That’s Liza,’ said Verkerk matter-of-factly.

‘She’s screwing Soutenbakker,’ he explained knowledgeably to Michiel. One of the boys cried, his voice breaking: ‘Her thing is this big,’ holding his hands in front of his trousers to indicate a distance from his crotch to his belt. ‘How would you know?’ scoffed Verkerk. ‘How would you know? You have to be our spy,’ he said, turning back to Michiel and jabbing him in the chest. ‘All right?’

Michiel shrugged, then nodded.

‘You have to spy on them at night and find out what happens and then come back and tell us everything. If you see a naked lady or if you see people doing it, you’ve got to tell us.’

He nodded and the circle grew larger, more relaxed. He thought that was the end of it, but then Verkerk grabbed his arm.

‘Swear?’

Verkerk moistened the index and middle fingers of his right hand, and Michiel did the same. He saw that Verkerk bit his nails. His own nails were covered in little white spots. Every spot was a lie, his father used to say, and that might just be true, he had thought anxiously. Maybe it was better to bite them, like Verkerk. Then no one could see you were a liar. Maybe Verkerk was making all this up to tease him.

‘You’re our spy.’

He nodded listlessly.

At the sound of the teacher clapping his hands, they finally let him go and walked slowly towards the door. He was their spy – he had sworn it – but what was he supposed to spy on exactly? And why? Wasn’t it all just a fabrication?

In class he passed Jaap Steen a note: *What’s with Soutenbakker?*

Steen wrote back: *He’s a Nazi.*

It was quiet in the classroom. Mr van der Pol was reading a story, but Michiel wasn’t listening. He looked at the meadows outside, gazing into the distance at the oblong skeleton of the bridge. Briefly he heard the draught excluders on the doors at home screech and sing. For a split second his head was filled with the sound. He turned towards the window, so Jaap Steen couldn’t see the tears in his eyes. He found himself staring at the blonde hair of a fat girl in the row alongside the window. From time to time a ray of sun fell across her head, revealing dark and light spots in her hair and the pink skin of the razor-sharp parting in the centre.

Because Jaap Steen smelled faintly of piss, he didn’t wait for him after school and walked home alone instead. The fat blond girl walked a few metres ahead of him. Now and again she turned around, stopped for a moment, then started walking again as soon as he had almost caught up to her, like a dog trying to coax its master into playing a game. But Michiel wasn’t in the mood to play. He thought about Liza, the girl with the curls, the one Mr Dieber had called a whore and the one Mr Soutenbakker was screwing, at least according to Verkerk. Screwing...whore...it was something dirty. Something between your legs, like the thing Alie had, dark and hairy. After that he thought about Mr Soutenbakker, his friendly, calm voice, his hat balanced on the back of his head at a jaunty angle. Mr Soutenbakker didn’t look like a Nazi. He didn’t have any placards in his windows, like that nutcase Driessen who lived on his street in Amsterdam. Amsterdam. As he opened the front door Michiel didn’t notice the German truck parked on the concrete strip beside the house.

Chapter 7

He stopped when he saw the huge soldier in front of him. He looked up at the dark, dull butt of his rifle, the cracked leather boots on his spread legs, the helmet covering his neck. A few metres in front of him in the half darkness of the hall Aunt Merel, Jan and Uncle Johan stood next to one another with their hands in the air. He couldn’t hear it, but his aunt was crying, he could clearly see two tremulous canals running from her eyes into the folds of her neck, eventually disappearing into the dark cleft between her breasts. His uncle’s arms were only halfway up, so his hands were in line with his ears. He looked in Michiel’s direction, but it was as if he didn’t see him. His thin hair was dishevelled. Behind him the staircase rose into darkness. Jan had his hands folded behind his neck. His eyes were almost shut, and he seemed to be concentrating intently on a mouldy brown patch on the ceiling. Nobody made a sound.

Then the soldier half turned towards him and said something he didn’t understand.

‘Go to your room, Michiel,’ his aunt translated. It was only then that he could hear that she was sobbing. When he went into the next room where Gerie and Alie were sitting at the table staring at the door with fearful faces, he could hear other sounds: loud blows, like iron being struck by a hammer...raucous German voices...a shuffling, as if people were moving heavy furniture in the mill, on the other side of the wall.

‘Why...’ he started to speak, looking at Alie.

‘They’ve come for the boiler,’ said Alie.

Gerie started to cry and held out her hands stiffly towards her sister. He walked to the window and a line from his book popped into his head: ‘Poor boy! However could it have happened?’

‘Ach Mensch, du siehst doch, ich kann ja nicht schneller!’

He didn’t know that Germans could get so close to him, that they could be in the same house. Suddenly there was no barbed wire fence between him and the war. It surprised him that he wasn’t more afraid.

No one made lunch. Aunt Merel sat at the table crying, her face buried in the crook of her arm. Alie and Gerie followed her example. It was more than he could take. He left the room and crossed the front hall, where there was no sign that the Germans had been there. He paused for a moment to see if they had dropped any bullets and then went through the open door next to the staircase and into the mill.

They were right: the boiler was gone. Sticking halfway out of the wall, a metal tube, twisted like a petrified snake, proved that the Germans had had a hard time removing the boiler. Where its legs had been were now deep, rust-filled indentations in the concrete. The tub, which stood opposite the place where the boiler had been, was still there. A pile of sugar beets lay next to it in a puddle of condensed water. Jan Tulp was sitting on the edge of the tub, hands on thighs. Michiel walked slowly over to him. He stopped in front of the tub and looked at the layer of cut-up sugar beets on the muddy bottom. His ankles suddenly started to ache.

‘Are you going to throw them away now?’ he asked, pointing at the beets in the tub.

Jan didn’t answer. He just shrugged his shoulders and continued to stare straight ahead.

‘You can bet that son of a bitch Soutenbakker is behind this,’ he said suddenly, his voice filled with quiet rage. Michiel didn’t answer. At that moment he felt afraid. If Soutenbakker could have the Germans take the boiler away, why wouldn’t he have him arrested if he realised he was being spied on? He had to make sure Uncle Johan didn’t notice anything either, since he was already furious at Soutenbakker too.

‘Where’s Uncle Johan?’ he asked, looking down at his clogs.

‘In the barn, I think, but I wouldn’t go there if I was you.’

Michiel momentarily considered going back to the house. He was hungry, but the thought of his crying aunt – that big, shuddering head on the grey, quivering arm – put him off. He walked towards the side door where he had seen Soutenbakker come in for the first time, and went outside.

Vroegop, the tall, skinny manager of the post office, stood behind the window, cleaning his ear with his finger. He withdrew it, examined it briefly and then quickly scraped it on the underside of the windowsill.

Michiel kicked off his clogs, knelt down in the street and pulled down his socks to expose his ankles. The pain was so intense that he nearly fell over. He ran his finger along the inside of one of his socks, picked the dried blood off the material and arranged the brown scabs in his hand. After that he looked at the white dents, the little holes in his ankles, which slowly filled up with pink blood, from the outside in. He dropped the scabs and crushed them with one of the clogs.

He hated them. His crying aunt, the blubbering girls, Jan who had talked to him as if it was his fault the Germans had come and Uncle Johan, who had gone off to hide in the barn, scared of Soutenbakker! He hated all of them! He wasn’t afraid. He didn’t plan on being afraid either, not he.

‘I’m not afraid,’ he whispered and stood up.

He was going to spy on the house next door because that’s what Verkerk had ordered him to do. Tomorrow he’d know more than they did. They would come to him and he would hold court in the bike shed, sitting astride a bike rack, just like Verkerk.

Next morning he ran to school. He had to tell them about what had happened the night before. Stooping forward, he sprinted down the road. His ankles kept knocking against each other, but he didn’t care now. He couldn’t feel any pain.

‘Hey! You there!’

He slowed down, almost stumbling over his clogs, and looked around. A woman in a light-blue wool dress was standing in the driveway next to the doctor’s house, beckoning. He looked at her, but stayed where he was.

‘Come here for a second, Michiel.’

He didn’t know her, yet she knew his name. As he slowly walked over, he saw that her nails were long and pointed. There were two light pink circles on her cheeks. Her nose was large and pointy, and this, with her round, green eyes, gave her a birdlike appearance. She stood there, calmly waiting for him, one hand resting on her out-turned hip, the other still frozen in a beckoning gesture. A gust of wind blew a bit of grey packing paper past the hedge into the driveway. She bent down to pick it up, but the paper blew out from under her hands and continued across the street, as if it were alive. When she stood up again, he was standing in front of her.

‘So, you’re Mr Tulp’s foster son?’

Michiel nodded, although he wasn’t entirely sure what a ‘foster son’ was.

‘The Germans were at your place last night, weren’t they?’

Did he have to answer her? Could he tell her what had happened? He looked past her, through the cluttered garden to the sombre house that bore the name *Ter Geest*.

‘Come inside for a minute,’ the woman said suddenly and turned around. She went on talking with her back towards him. ‘It’s too windy to stay out here for long. You don’t have to be at school yet, do you? Oh no, you’ve still got another twenty minutes,’ she said, glancing at her wrist.

Michiel followed her across the uneven gravel path, watching her white legs. Every so often the wind tried to lift up her dress, and she pushed it down again absent-mindedly. The door, which was on the side of the house, was open. As he stood on the brown mat in the doorway, the woman turned round in the vestibule and put a finger to her lips. He saw that the finger trembled.

‘The doctor is upstairs,’ she whispered, pointing past the swinging doors decorated with a white lily pattern, which separated the vestibule from the front hall, to the wide staircase with its burgundy-coloured runner.

Michiel left his clogs next to the heavy bronze umbrella stand and followed her into the hallway, which smelled faintly of paint.

She led him into the bright, high-ceilinged front room. Most of the light came from the sunroom, which was empty but for a grey metal smoking table with a green book on it. Hanging above the mantelpiece was a large dark oil painting of a man holding a riding crop at an angle in front of the gleaming copper buttons of his overcoat. He stared impassively over their heads into the distance.

‘That’s my husband’s – the doctor’s – great-grandfather,’ said Mrs Dulieu. ‘Have a seat,’ she said, pointing to the black sofa against the wall next to the mantelpiece. She was still speaking quietly, or did it only seem that way because they were inside now and the walls absorbed the sound of her voice? She sat down next to him and crossed her legs. He cast a brief glance at her narrow kneecaps, without thinking, without seeing. ‘Oh you little devil, are you looking at my legs?’ she laughed, contracting her painted eyebrows into two wrinkles and pursing her red lips. She wagged her index finger at him admonishingly and pulled down the blue dress so far over her knees that he could no longer see them. He still didn’t know if he had walked into a trap. What did she want from him?

‘How long are you going to stay here?’ she asked.

‘Till the war’s over, ma’am.’

He looked between his legs at the floor and saw that the big toe of his right foot was protruding through a hole in his sock. He bent the toe, in an attempt to get it back into the sock. He carefully put one foot over the other. His ankles became to throb again.

‘Do you like living with Mr and Mrs Tulp?’

‘They’re kind,’ he said.

He placed his heel over the sock with the hole, slid the other foot back and felt his toe slip back inside.

‘What were the Germans doing at your house?’ she asked, and her voice suddenly sounded anxious, fearful. She was now talking much faster. ‘Did they take your aunt and uncle away, or Jan?’

Michiel shook his head.

‘They pulled the boiler out of the wall and loaded it onto a truck,’ he said solemnly, holding out his hands to indicate the size of the boiler.

‘What boiler?’ she asked.

‘The sugar beet boiler,’ he said, looking at her in surprise.

‘Oh right, of course.’ She nodded emphatically a few times and laughed at him. ‘And that’s it?’ she laughed. ‘They didn’t take any people with them?’

‘They had to stand there with their hands in the air,’ he said, spontaneously adding, ‘We all did.’

‘Weren’t you scared?’ she asked, running her hand over his hair.

‘Oh, it wasn’t so bad,’ he said. He felt himself blushing and looked at the ground. He rocked back and forth uncomfortably on the black sofa and then stood up.

‘I have to get to school, ma’am.’

‘Oh yes, of course you do. And now I’ve almost made you late. If they give you extra work on my account, you can bring it here,’ she joked when they were in the hall. She suddenly seemed in a very good mood.

‘It’s not as if I have anything to do,’ she added lackadaisically, tapping him on the neck with her long fingers. He had recognised her voice.

He ran to the playground. Verkerk and the other boys were playing leapfrog. They hadn’t noticed him. He walked over to Verkerk, who was just about to take off, and tapped him on the shoulder, but instead of turning round, he ran off and started jumping. Michiel ran alongside him, gesturing at him to stop, but Verkerk didn’t see him (or pretended not to) and went right on jumping. Once he had leapt over the entire row of boys, Michiel stood in front of him with his legs spread.

‘Soutenbakker took away my uncle’s boiler,’ he said in an agitated tone of voice.

Verkerk looked at him, puffed up his cheeks and let out a loud raspberry.

‘That was the Krauts, dummy,’ he said. ‘Wim Winter saw it all. He lives on Vijzellaan too, you know.’

‘Yeah, but it was Soutenbakker who made them do it,’ Michiel mumbled as he turned around and walked off. Resting on the horizon was the bridge. Behind him, a few girls from the lower grades were reciting a rhyme in sing-song voices.

He leaned against the low wooden fence that surrounded the school playground and stared into the distance.

Chapter 8

After the meal he got up from the table and asked to go outside, but no one answered.

Jan, eyes screwed up in rage, had again voiced the opinion that Soutenbakker had to be behind it all, but his uncle had only stared vacantly into space, twirling his spoon between the fingers of his right hand. Aunt Merel had been as busy as ever, nimbly filling each plate from her place at the table, not spilling a drop, but in silence unlike most evenings, eyes fixed on every spoonful of cabbage stew, as if she wanted to be sure that her hand didn’t give any of her tablemates more than he was entitled to in an unguarded moment. Michiel could detect silent sorrow in her face: the dark bags under her eyes, the folds in her neck, the flared nostrils.

He crept out of the room on tiptoes.

It was still too light to do any spying, so he decided to take a walk down Vijzellaan. In a little while he would slip behind the barn and creep over to the hedge that formed the border between their backgarden and Soutenbakker’s. He would move slowly and deliberately, on hands and knees if need be. Once he got there, he would take cover in the hedge. As he walked down the road, he looked through the bay windows of the houses he passed. Behind one of the windows a man with a narrow, bald head sat opposite a woman who was holding her pink knitting right up to her face. The man looked outside and said something to the woman, who said something back without looking up from her knitting.

Michiel picked up a white pebble and took aim at a warbling blackbird in one of the bushes under the window. The singing stopped immediately, but he didn’t see the bird fly away. Behind the window, the bald man sprang up from his chair, tripping over something on the floor and falling against the glass with his hands spread. The woman shifted her knitting to her other hand and looked at him in surprise, her mouth a gaping black hole in her round, white face. Michiel stuck out his tongue at the couple and walked on, trying to imitate the trills of the blackbird. Behind him he heard someone tapping against the window with a sharp

object. He waited for the tapping to stop, turned around and slowly walked back. The blackbird was back in the garden. Or maybe it was a different blackbird. Michiel crouched down and felt around for a stone with one hand while trying to keep his balance with the other. The man and the woman were standing next to each other behind the window, and in the deceptive half-twilight it seemed as if the man was holding up his hands to protect himself from the menacing knitting needles in the hands of his wife. She took a step closer so that her frizzy hair must have been touching her husband’s head and her knitting needles jabbing him in the side.

Michiel jumped up and ran away. It had only been a very small pebble, but the sound it made as it struck the glass was clearly audible. He didn’t stop until he was behind the barn, gasping for breath. He pressed his ear to the cold stone wall and listened to the sound of Maja dragging her hind legs over the concrete floor. It was nowhere near dark, still a sort of pale dusk, which he knew would last for a while. But he couldn’t wait any longer. First he looked at his uncle’s garden, but there was nothing special to see there. Soutenbakker’s garden was obscured from view by the hedge. There was a light on on the top floor of his house. Behind the wall of the barn Maja began to piss. The urine pelted loudly against the floor of the barn and streamed outside through a hole in the wall right next to his feet, before branching off into several foamy rivulets. For a moment he watched the steaming liquid before it soaked into the ground (the foam bubbles remaining there for an instant before bursting). After that he crept off towards the house. He was at the hedge in no time; no one had seen him. He dropped into the bushes, pushing the small, stiff leaves away from his eyes so he could see. He peered through the leaves at the back of Soutenbakker’s house. From where he was, he had a good view of the kitchen door and the small lit window above it.

There was a rubbish bin in front of the kitchen door. The kitchen itself was dark. He crouched down further and listened, but apart from some loud voices, the dark fluttering of a pair of birds’ wings just above the hedge and frogs croaking in the distance, he heard nothing, not even any music. After sitting like

that for a half hour, he got up, stiff and dejected, and headed home. By the time he climbed into bed, it was so dark he could hardly read the letters in his book.

Do you see his mother?

She sits over yonder, weeping. She can’t help her dear boy. He asks her for something; he repeats the question again and again, but she can’t give it to him: she doesn’t have it. And there’s nowhere she can get it, nowhere... Wracked by grief, she looks everywhere for it, but here in this hot, lonely land there are no houses, no people who can help. The mother and child are utterly alone.

Oh, her poor, poor boy!

She feels such compassion for him. And bitter sorrow. Oh, isn’t there anyone who can help her boy?

When it got too dark to read, he listened for Soutenbakker. But he didn’t hear a thing, not a sound. But above him, way up in the sky, so high that he might have been imagining it, the Americans zoomed past in their aeroplanes. They didn’t know that he was down here, lying here all alone in a strange bed. They would never know. He realised that he was lonelier than Ishmael, who was after all rescued in the end (he had read the story so many times). The question was whether *he* would be rescued. And by whom? He could no longer hear the aeroplanes, not even in his imagination. Only the frogs. Kneeling back on his heels he opened the drawer of the bedside table and felt around inside for a roll of silver wrapping paper. He unrolled it and carefully slid the cold, crinkly strip under his pyjama top and onto his chest. Then he rolled over on his stomach. A moment later he was asleep.