

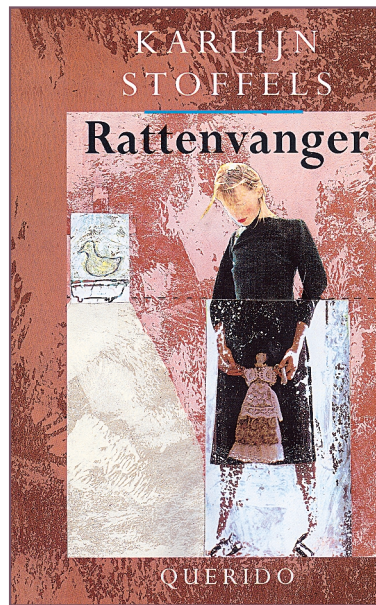
## The story of a vulnerable yet courageous girl

by the award-winning children's books writer

# KARLIJN STOFFELS

## Rattenvanger

### Ratcatcher



Karlijn Stoffels (b. 1947) studied French and Dutch and wrote a series of radio and stage plays for adults. Her first children's book, *Mosje en Reizele*, was published in 1996. A lively book which probes and challenges, it tells the story of Jewish orphans in Poland during the Second World War who manage to keep going with desperate cheerfulness under these formidable circumstances. Stoffels is able to convey in convincing and unsentimental language the mental resilience of young people. Life is far from easy for

Fourteen-year-old Lori, the narrator in *Rattenvanger*, doesn't enjoy much care or love. Her parents are divorced. She sees little of her father and her mother has been a manic depressive for years. In fact, it is Lori who looks after her mother and keeps house, not the other way round. And that's quite something when your mother, in a manic fit, proves capable of painting the whole house blue, furniture included. But Lori doesn't complain. She is able to keep up at school without difficulty, due to her own quick-wittedness, and she makes sure of inviting her fellow students to her home.

This vulnerable yet courageous girl has been impressively portrayed by Karlijn Stoffels. Lori's resilient optimism saves the book from any grimness, however painful and bizarre her home situation may be. Her emotional dilemma – she keeps the outside world at bay while at the same time she longs desperately for friendship – ensures a superb tension is maintained throughout the book.

Her social isolation is broken for the first time when she joins in the school musical *The Pied Piper of Hammlin*. You musn't be so afraid. Let go. You don't dare leave the trail to pick flowers, is what her music teacher keeps telling her, and that doesn't apply just to playing the piano. And then there is her new downstairs neighbour Mark, a student, 'friendly and concerned like a young uncle,' with whom she finally finds a sense of security. However, when he forces the relationship into a sexual one, she becomes deeply confused. Inevitably, she bans Mark from her life and finally dares to embark on a genuine friendship.

Stoffels doesn't paint life to be easier than it really is. At the end of the novel, Lori doesn't land in seventh heaven. But she has developed and grown, just like Stoffels's other main characters, and this offers her a better perspective on life. The way in which this writer is able to convey this so convincingly in her books, which are both moving and charged without becoming oppressive, has meant that in a very short time, she has emerged as one of her country's most fascinating and interesting writers of children's literature. PETER DE BOER

the main characters in *Stiefland* (1997), *Khalid* (1998) and *Rattevanger* (2000). And yet they manage to overcome hardship, and with the required irony and self-mockery, are even able to achieve a degree of inner harmony. *Mosje en Reizele* was awarded the prestigious Gouden Zoen Award in 1997, and *Stiefland* the E. du Perron Prize in 1998, established by the Faculty of Arts of the University of Brabant.

*Beautifully written and constructed* (–)  
*A book that deserves an award.*  
Nanda Roep *in TROUW*

*What makes the book compelling is Stoffel's style, and the witty cynicism with which she weapons her character against the world.*

NBLC

*A laugh and a tear.* (–) *Full of reading pleasure.*

Ed Frank *in* STANDAARD DER LETTEREN

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#### OTHER TRANSLATED TITLES

*Mojsche und Rejsle* (*Mosje en Reizele*). Weinheim:

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*Khalid*. Weinheim: Bentz & Gelberg, in preparation.

*Stiefland*. Weinheim: Bentz & Gelberg, in preparation. Also in Danish (Høst & Søn, in preparation).

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Sample Translation

*Ratcatcher*

(Rattenvanger)

by Karlijn Stoffels

(Amsterdam: Querido, 2000)

Translated by Lance Salway

I stand up, take the key, and walk down the stairs. I should have gone to see Mark much sooner. I'm feeling better already.

When he opens the door, I don't know what to say. He looks as though he's hard at work. And he doesn't ask me in either. This is a very different Mark from yesterday.

'Yes?' he says, questioningly.

He must think I'm really stupid, the way I just sat there and cried my eyes out. But it was all because of him.

I can't keep standing there like an idiot. 'You said I'd always be welcome,' I blurt out.

At last he smiles and lets me in, but his heart isn't really in it.

I stand in the middle of the room. Mark walks up and down as if something's bothering him. I don't get any tea, either.

I want to sit down and pour my heart out. I want him to listen to me and hold me close and comfort me.

'I hate December,' I say suddenly.

'It's only just November.'

I try again. 'All those holidays and you just sit at home.'

He looks at me. 'At home?'

Why does his voice sound so strange? I shouldn't have come. What happened yesterday meant nothing to him. I walk slowly to the door.

'I expect you're out at parties every night.'

I turn round. What is he on about? I want to talk about Christmas, and about Tim, who isn't coming.

'Parties?' I ask.

'I bet you're very popular.' If only he knew.

'I don't really care for parties.'

'I expect you'd rather go to the movies with a boy. You've got boyfriends, haven't you?'

‘Of course I’ve got boyfriends.’ Hakim and Silvester. But they can never take the place of Tim.

‘There you are, then.’

‘Boys in my class. But they’re only kids.’

Suddenly he smiles. His face brightens, I can see the warmth returning to his gaze. At last. I hadn’t been mistaken, after all.

He walks towards me and puts his arms around me. I lean against him. Tim’s letter doesn’t matter any more. Christmas is a long way off. I’m not alone any more.

He lets go of me and lifts my face. His eyes are shining. All at once he presses his lips to mine.

A strange, warmish tongue enters my mouth. It’s his, I realise. I gag and pull free. I run back upstairs, fumble with the lock, and run straight to the bathroom. I empty the whole tube of toothpaste into my mouth.

The maths teacher turns to face the class and licks at his piece of chalk. You’d think in this day and age they’d at least have an overhead projector. But no. In this educational graveyard we have to make do with blackboards dating from the Eighty Years War. And with pieces of chalk that the teachers lick. I can see the pink tip of his tongue poking out of his mouth.

We are all sitting there, frantically writing. I catch myself moistening my dry lips as I try to work out the problem.

Everyone has a tongue. Hakim too. And Silvester. Usually the thing stays in your mouth, but sometimes it comes out. It shouldn’t. You should go around with a mask over your mouth, like a dentist. Or with a veil, the sort that some women wear. But their husbands have nothing over their faces, and if they have a beard and a moustache their lips look even redder and their tongues even more revolting.

Eating ice cream should be completely abolished.

I haven't had any breakfast. The idea of putting something in my mouth really disgusts me. I'm feeling faint and weak now.

I get up and go to the toilet. I stare at myself in the mirror. I look just the same to me. The same blue eyes as always. If I keep my lips pressed together you'd never know that there was a lump of warm flesh hidden in my mouth that might suddenly flop out when I least expect it, like a cuckoo from a clock.

With my lips tightly closed, I tell myself to stop making such a fuss. People have had tongues in their mouths for centuries, and they're not the only ones.

Dogs have sweat glands on their tongues and they hang out of their mouths all the time. Rabbits use their tongues to take small sips of water from shallow puddles. Snakes have darting little tongues that shoot in and out of their mouths. Cows have gigantic tongues that they use to pull clumps of grass from the meadow.

I even the tongue of a cow once. When I was in a restaurant with Tim. 'You really ought to try it,' he said. 'It's very nice.'

The meat was tender and spongy, but I felt as if I were sitting there chewing on my own tongue, so I only ate the vegetables and the sauce.

You need a tongue, I say to my reflection. You can't manage without one. You need it to talk with, and there are taste buds on it. It's a very useful organ.

My reflection is not convinced. She keeps her lips pressed tightly together. I can't say I blame her. She's had a shock, just like me.

I gave no one permission to wander inside my mouth just like that. And there isn't a sign on my forehead that reads *Don't bother to knock*. I can see that quite clearly in the mirror.

I don't go back to the classroom. I fetch my coat and go outside. Everyone else can just go to hell.

In the letter box there's an envelope without a postmark, with my name on it. I turn it over. It's a self-sealing envelope. There's a strange address on the back but it's not hard to guess who it's from.

I'm glad that there isn't a stamp on it. Stamps have spit underneath them.

I swallow once or twice as I walk up the stairs. You shouldn't have any saliva in your mouth. It should be clean and dry, just like your skin.

On the first landing my heart starts to pound. If only Mrs Schreiner were here. She's an old sourpuss, but at least everything about her is dry. Her skin is withered, her hands feel like blotting paper, and her mouth is so caved in that it looks as though she doesn't have any lips at all. And when she goes on at me because I haven't been doing enough practising, her voice crackles like a dead branch. I miss her.

I run up the second flight. In my room, I open the letter. A letter of apology from Mark. He doesn't know what came over him, he writes. That makes two of us.

He's going to his parents for a couple of days. He lay awake all night thinking about it and now he's sure. He loves me. It's taken him completely by surprise but he's happy now that he knows. It's a good feeling. He realises that I was frightened but promises that he will never do it again. I can trust him. He will do me no harm. He loves me.

I put the letter in a drawer. A girl should save her first love letter, all tied up with a red ribbon.

I start with the stairs. I brush the carpet and wipe the woodwork. Then I vacuum the attic. I mop the kitchen and the bathroom and clean out the toilet. I scrub the cooker with a pot scourer. I put the sheets in the wash and then my clothes.

Once Mum is up and in the sitting room, I change the bed too. I clean the windows. I scrape the blue paint off the photo of me at the zoo and hang it back on the wall. I fetch an old table from the attic to eat off and put the low table out for salvage.

I climb out of the kitchen window and brush the fire escape from top to bottom. Then I set to work on the shed. I also polish my bike and wash my boots..

When the entire house, the street and the rest of the neighbourhood are clean, I have a bath. I scrub my nails and wash my hair. I lie there in the bath for half an hour and then I brush my teeth. It doesn't help at all.

## Nine

‘Cat got your tongue?’ Hakim asks. I slam the piano lid open and don’t answer. For the last few days I’ve hardly been able to get a single word out of my mouth. Offended, he walks away.

There is only one person more unhappy than I am. No Sweat. Silvester has been giving him a hard time because he isn’t pulling his weight. Now he’s trying out a little dance of his own, well away from the other rats. He’s standing right next to the piano. He’s closer to crying than he is to laughing.

Ivan goes up to him. ‘Why do you want to be an actor if you don’t like acting?’ he asks. His voice is low but Nadia can still hear him.

‘Bet you’ve never seen him folk-dance!’ she calls out.

Ivan turns round and his arm shoots out. For a moment I think he is going to hit her, but he is only pointing, and off she goes.

I understand what Nadia means. Even knitting would be better for No Sweat than this gym full of insurmountable obstacles.

‘I like music,’ says No Sweat suddenly. Ivan nods. ‘But I don’t play anything.’

Ivan waits. No Sweat peers round. None of the bridge rats is nearby. ‘I really prefer singing,’ he says then, almost inaudibly. He turns and looks at me. Very casually, I play a little tune.

Ivan lays a plump hand on No Sweat’s enormous shoulder. ‘I’ll talk to you afterwards,’ he says. ‘Run along to the canteen now and fetch me a cup of tea, will you?’

Silvester lets the other rats dance. Love Gerritsen is waltzing with Pepsi. Jan Piet is jiving with Achmed and Nadia does a belly dance for Shirley.

Hakim stands in the middle and wriggles all over the place, in a vigorous imitation of a pop star. He swivels his hips, shakes his shoulders, and curls his tongue round an imaginary microphone.

I give a start, and bang down hard on the keys. The cheerful waltz that Ivan has written acquires a few discords as I play. It isn't quite out of tune, but it starts to grate.

The dancers on the stage don't notice, but Ivan looks up.

Halfway through I play a couple of high piercing notes, holding my foot down on the pedal so that they fill the room. The pedal looks like a thick, gilt, protruding tongue. I put my foot down extra hard. It lets out a miserable 'ouch!'. Serve it right.

The ending is all wrong. Ivan has made it deliberately slick and polished so that the parents can go off to the coffee room satisfied.

I throw in Dylan's theme for good measure. Rats steal your flour and children play. Some people stuff their faces, while other people are starving. Planes drop bombs and the waltz begins.

My right hand shoots back and forth across the keys and my left rumbles in agreement. Every now and then the pedal gets another vicious thump.

*The rats have eaten the lot,  
tralala!  
Your old horse is lame,  
flippety-flame!  
No one seems to care,  
The cupboard is bare.  
What are we to do?  
Happy birthday to you!*

Exhausted, I drop my hands and look up. Way off in the distance I can see the rats standing onstage. For a long time no one moves. Nadia's hands are still raised gracefully above her head. Jan Piet is standing, rigid, on one leg, and Love is leaning backwards in Pepsi's arms like a fainted tango dancer.

Then they start to clap quietly. Ivan runs to the piano, but Wanja is faster. He runs up to me on his crooked little legs, jumps right up onto my lap and licks my hand. A pink tongue darts back and forth across my fingers.

I start to scream. I jump to my feet. Wanja falls on the floor and starts barking like mad. I stagger. Ivan catches me. I push his arms away.

They have stopped clapping now. I walk stiffly down the hall and out into the corridor. At the door, Hakim catches up with me.

‘Lori?’

‘Piss off,’ I say, and run out of the school.

All the bikes in the rack have flat tyres. The comedian has been at work again. Someone who wants to become a stand-up comic and is now practising on us. The punch line of his joke is sometimes just a loosened valve, and other times, a fat nail.

I unlock my bike and walk away. A cold rain is falling. The drops sizzle on my glowing cheeks.

I am Lori, always so self-controlled, always so *normal*, an example to everyone. I never scream. I never throw innocent little dogs to the floor, and I don’t push away well-meaning arms. I’m not like that.

As I trudge through the puddles in the park, pushing each of my cold hands into my coat pocket in turn, the truth slowly begins to dawn on me like the rain trickling down my neck.

My head is a pot of rubbish soup with a lid on top. And now the lid has been taken off. Ivan was the one who did it, with his improvisations and his nice little chats. *Just let yourself go, Lori. You can do it, I know you can.*

I *have* let myself go. And all the nuts and bolts in my head have shaken loose. It won’t be long before I’ve become the sort of person who screams and shrieks and empties rubbish over balconies.

I don't want to go home. I want to go back to the gym where it's warm and friendly and where you can have a good laugh. And that's exactly what they'll do: have a good laugh at me.

I daren't go back. I'll send Ivan a letter and very politely resign. He'll have to find another pianist. But I can't go home either. I've got to close the lid tight on my brainbox first.

All I need is one ordinary, safe person, someone like Tim. Or Mrs Schreiner. But they're a long way away.

I need someone who will listen to me. I'm so glad that Mark is there. I heard him come home again yesterday evening. He'd been away for over a week. The house was empty and cold without him.

That kiss, he couldn't help himself. Why did I have to tell him that I had so many parties and boyfriends? I wanted so much to seem older and grown-up. Well, I'd certainly managed that all right.

I reach the cycle repair shop just before closing time. My hands are so cold that I can't get the tyre off. Fred pushes me gently to one side and does it for me. I pull the nail out, patch the tyre, and cycle home.

The light is on in Mark's front room. I climb the first flight of stairs and stop outside his door. My head is buzzing. I walk up the second flight.

It's cold in the flat. The fire is out in the sitting room and it's dark. She isn't in bed, the bathroom and toilet are empty, there is no one in the kitchen. I go up into the attic. She isn't there either. Where can she be? She never leaves the house at night. I walk round the flat once more. The cold, empty rooms are gaping holes.

Without thinking, I run down the stairs and ring Mark's bell. It is some time before he opens the door. I'm already beginning to regret it. I am just about to go back upstairs when the door opens.

He gives me a nod. His face is pale and his eyes are watery. He must have caught a cold.

'Have you seen my mother?' I ask.

He shakes his head.

I turn round.

‘Isn’t she at home?’ he asks rather stupidly.

I turn round again. His voice sounds distant. No warm light in the grey eyes. No smile.

He’s quite right. I’ve made a real fool of myself. It was only a kiss, after all.

I’ve made a real mess of things, here and at school. I even lashed out at Hakim. If I end up on a lonely ice floe, abandoned by penguins and seals, I’ll have only myself to blame.

‘Are you worried about her?’ he asks.

I shrug my shoulders.

‘I’ve got a late tutorial soon,’ he says. ‘If she isn’t back this evening, will you come and let me know?’

I nod. He raises his hand and closes the door.

I shuffle up the stairs. Still, I’m feeling a little bit better, as if a small light has started to burn at the end of the dark passage.

Do my homework, that’s the answer now. ‘Work towards your future,’ Tim always says.

We are reading *La peste* in French. The teacher chose it specially because rats play a part in it. I have to finish a chapter by tomorrow. I take the slim book out of my bag. It’s a school edition with a vocabulary at the back. It’s all about rats that carry the plague. I don’t know a lot of the words. Carbuncles. Fester. Pus. Mucus. Surely our teacher doesn’t really think that this is useful vocabulary for a beach on the Mediterranean?

‘Good morning, Jean-Pierre. How are your festering carbuncles today?’

‘Très bien, Lori, there is pus coming out of my leg. Let us go and have a swim.’

Perhaps it’s her intention that I develop a passion for French literature. If so, then she’s out of luck. I don’t mind reading about bursting boils, but not if I have to look up the words in the back one by one. I’d rather do maths.

The homework is a good distraction. But by the time I've finished she still isn't back. Has Mark come home yet?

I open the kitchen window and step out on to the fire escape. I take a few steps down. There's a light burning in his kitchen. I climb back through the window and pick up my keys.

Mark opens the door and leaves it open a crack so that I can hear Ma coming home. He's busy in the kitchen. It smells good. I've forgotten to eat.

I switch on the television and watch a soap. When they start to kiss I switch the television off.

Mark comes in with two plates of nasi goreng. He puts one in front of me and pours a glass of beer for us both. I don't fancy any beer, but I don't say anything. I mustn't act like a small child. I'm fourteen. And a half. And I look a lot older.

The food is good and Mark seems much friendlier than he was this afternoon.

'Did you get my letter?' he asks.

I nod. I don't want to talk about it.

'It just happened,' he says. 'I'm really sorry. Can we be friends again?'

I nod again.

'I've got to study,' he says when he's cleared away.

I stand up.

'Stay where you are. Find yourself a book if you want.'

The titles mean nothing to me. I take a book at random from the shelf and sit back down. Mark doesn't look up.

I pretend to read but the sentences don't seem to mean anything. I'm feeling tired, but I don't want to go. The fire is roaring.

I hear the outside door and jump to my feet.

'You can take the book with you if you want,' says Mark. 'Just bring it back when you've finished.'

I run up the stairs and wait for Ma. She looks cold.

‘They made a fool of me,’ I hear her mutter. ‘I managed to shake them off.’

I put the book in my room. ‘Just bring it back when you’ve finished,’ Mark had said. That means that I can go back at least one more time.

There are plastic bags in the hall. I’d forgotten that it was late night shopping. She’d been out for a few things, that’s all. In one of the bags is a tin of paint and a brush. The respite is soon over. And the flat is so nice and clean. I heave a sigh.

I walk into the kitchen and heat up a meal for her in the microwave. I put it on the table and go to my room.

I daren’t look Hakim in the face. He’s probably avoiding me like the plague too. Luckily we have a test. Everyone in the classroom is busily writing.

I finish quickly, because I did my homework. I write a note to Ivan, telling him that, for personal reasons, I can no longer take part in the musical.

At break I walk out of the class before anyone has a chance to say anything to me. In the hall it all goes wrong. Madelon and her friends from the orchestra are there, whispering to each other. As soon as they see me, they come up to me, Madelon in the lead.

‘Lori,’ she says.

‘Get out of my way.’

Her eyes widen like those of a sweet little cat just before it goes for you with razor-sharp claws. ‘All I wanted to say to you was...’

I push her aside, but the other girls are waiting right behind her.

‘I think you play the piano so beautifully,’ they blurt out.

I stop dead in amazement. The orchestra girls nod.

‘Just like my horse,’ says Madelon.

I don’t know what kind of a joke she thinks she’s playing, but I know for certain that it’s not going to make me laugh. I take a step forward, but the girls stick to me like limpets.

‘Temperamental, I mean,’ says Madelon. ‘When you’re playing.’

The girls nod. They're not giggling any more. But what was all that about a piano-playing horse?

'A thoroughbred is temperamental,' says Madelon. Her face reddens. 'Well, see you at rehearsal,' she falters.

I've no idea what's going on. What does she want from me?

'Well, you've certainly got what it takes.' This from Silvester.

I don't know what to say. The note to Ivan has become a grubby wad of paper in my clammy hand. 'What?'

'Your piano playing,' Silvester says.

'Artistic temperament, that's all,' I say.

'Yes, that's the word,' he says. Until now no one has told me off. But then, I haven't done anything to him or Madelon.

I walk away to put the letter in Ivan's pigeon hole. He'll be glad to be rid of the raving lunatic.

Hakim waits until the lunch break. 'You're giving it up, aren't you?' he says.

'How did you know that?'

'You put a letter in Ivan's pigeon hole. Knowing you, I don't expect it was a letter of apology.'

'Should it be?'

'Yes,' he says. No compliments from him about my 'artistic temperament'. I've behaved badly and that's all there is to it.

'You can tell me to mind my own business,' he says. 'I ought just to leave you alone. But Ivan's only trying to help you.'

I begin to take a great interest in the tiled floor. Interesting pattern.

'I'll apologise to him,' I say.

'And will you join in again?'

'No.'

'Then that apology won't be worth anything.'

He turns and leaves me standing there. I watch him go. The lonely ice floe drifts closer towards me.

I try to picture the coming months without music rehearsals, without Ivan, without the cheeky rats.

I fish the note out of the pigeon hole.

## Ten

I had forgotten all about the bag with the paint, but Ma has the memory of an elephant. As I come along on my bike I see that inspiration has struck her once again.

Our house number has been painted over. The outer doorpost isky blue. The inner one verges onbalt.

I wasn't exactly dreaming of a blue Christmas, but when I look in the letterbox I stop worry altogether. A card from the post office. There's a parcel for me.

I sprint upstairs to fetch my passport and run all the way to the post office.

It's Tim's Christmas present, just in time. I've already sent him mine, a lovely silver tiepin.

I wait in the queue and look at the brochures of sunny beaches. None of that for me this winter but I don't care. Mark has invited me for Christmas.

I had gone to return the book I borrowed and hung around, hoping for a chat. He was very busy, he said, but I was welcome to sit down if I wanted. I wanted.

'I've been thinking about Christmas,' he said. 'We could do something fun together.'

'Go to the movies?' I said hopefully.

'I've got to go to my parents first. But later in the evening we could have a Christmas supper. How does that sound?' He was the old Mark once again, friendly and caring, like a young uncle.

I was starting to feel warm. 'Sounds good to me.'

'I'm a very good cook,' he said. 'You won't need to do anything.'

That hurt my pride. 'I'll make the plum pudding.'

He didn't know what that was. I was proud to be able to explain something to him. 'My gran taught me how to make it,' I said. 'I always do it at home.'

He looked at me very closely again. ‘That’s what I really like about you,’ he said.

I didn’t know that you could feel cold inside and boiling hot outside, all at the same time. I stood up.

‘Don’t look so startled,’ said Mark. ‘I’m paying you a compliment, that’s all. You must be used to that, surely? Go on, sit down.’

I sat down on the edge of my chair.

Mark smiled at me. ‘The girls at my college are all so immature. They’re always going on about clothes and pop music and boyfriends. And yet here you are, at sixteen, doing all - ‘

‘Fourteen,’ I said.

‘ – the housework and looking after your mother... what did you say?’

‘Fourteen, I’m fourteen,’ I blurted out. Now he would think me too young to be friends with him. I carried on talking. ‘I already knew how to cook when I was eight,’ I said. ‘And my gran left me her cookery book. Sometimes when I’m bored I read through all the recipes. Just as if it’s a really exciting book.’

Mark said very little more and I went back upstairs. The next day there was a card in my box with an official invitation to a *Christmas Supper At Home, 25 December at 10 pm, party dress compulsory*.

The parcel is soft. Perhaps it’s a sweater. Just so long as it isn’t something childish, a jumper with a little bear on it, or a baby seal. Sometimes Tim forgets just how old I am.

I wait until I’m back home before opening it. In the parcel there is a long black dress. The card reads *Happy Christmas*. It’s almost as if Tim knows how I’m going to celebrate Christmas, even though I haven’t said a thing about Mark.

I try the dress on right away and it fits really well. I stand in front of the long mirror in the bathroom. I look about twenty. I turn round and look at myself. I must do something with my hair, put it up perhaps, then I’ll look really grown-up. I hold the little bottle of nail varnish under my nose. It smells

nice. I've varnished my nails twice and had to clean them again each time. I can't quite get it right yet. But I'm learning.

This is the best December for years. The time is flying past, thanks to the two music rehearsals each week. Ivan has moved the orchestra on to the platform near the piano. 'You're now going to practice together,' he said. 'Lori will set the tempo. If anything goes wrong onstage, she'll improvise and you can follow her.' I thought that they'd object, but nothing happened.

Marie-Louise and Derk Jan had no trouble keeping up with me. Ivan made a simple outline for the others that they could fall back on.

After the first practice, Madelon came and sat by the piano. The other girls were hanging round her. Derk Jan was left abandoned on his chair.

'I do wish I could play like you,' Madelon said. 'Making up things as I go along.'

'It's all a question of practice,' Marie-Louise said gently.

After that we all played together and we smiled at each other when it went well. I had never had so many girlfriends before.

Ivan had another little surprise. Or a big one, if you consider the size: No Sweat.

'We need another singer,' Ivan said. 'The rats can't tumble and jump and sing intelligibly all at the same time.' He nodded at No Sweat, whose name really didn't suit him at all. 'No Sweat is going to audition. The opening number, Lori.'

We sat and waited, open-mouthed. The only one whose mouth was closed was the maestro himself. He rocked quietly, back and forth, miserable. He looked like a ship in distress, in urgent need of a lighthouse.

'Just look at me,' Ivan said gently. 'I'll give you a nod and then you begin.' I was also beginning to sweat in sympathy, but it wasn't at all necessary, as it turned out. Because when No Sweat opened his mouth, our mouths snapped shut. No Sweat sang like a rather shapeless nightingale.

The day after St Nicholas Eve I phoned Mark. He had left a marzipan heart in the letterbox. It wasn't a very original idea but I wanted to thank him just the same. I had made him a cake, from Gran's cookery book, not in the shape of a heart but just an ordinary round one.

He admired my handiwork and asked if I wanted to sit down. I didn't. I thought that he'd get fed up with me if he saw me too often.

'You're really very advanced for your age,' he said. 'In everything.'

I gave a careless shrug but felt very flattered.

'It's because you've been through so much.'

Been through so much? My life has always seemed rather dull to me. But I didn't say so and did my best to look grown-up. And then I immediately went and spoiled it again.

'I've got masses of homework to do,' I said girlishly, and left.

Things aren't too bad at home. Ma is taking her pills again. I don't know why, but I'm glad all the same. When I come home from school she's usually sitting there, knitting. Then I do some homework and play the piano for an hour and in between we have a meal together at the table. She can't cook but at least she's doing it again. Everything would be completely normal if only she'd talk to me.

One day there was a Christmas card from Mrs Schreiner in the box. There was a strange animal on it with huge frightened eyes and a young one on its back. At first I thought it was a koala. I couldn't see what it had to do with Christmas, unless it was a jungle version of Mary and the Christ Child.

I switched on the light in the stairwell and turned the card over. I recognised her microscopic handwriting at once and thought of five finger exercises. *Dear child*, she wrote. *Dear child! We saw this little animal at the zoo. My sister says that it's a Plump Lori. Though you're so slim. Funny, isn't it? Oh yes, very funny. The young one is clinging very tightly to its mother. Or father, I'm not sure which. Are you practising hard? Sometimes I think I can hear you*

*tinkling away right across the world. Give my regards to your dear mother.  
Happy Christmas, your teacher.*

I've stuck the card on my bedroom door.

Tim gets cheerful letters from me. His are much shorter than usual but that's understandable. He's got other things on his mind. So have I, come to that.

I've been to the hairdresser and filed my nails and gone looking for clothes in the sales. These aren't things that I usually bother about, but if you want someone to think that you're beautiful then you can't go about looking like a scarecrow.

I know that Hakim thinks I'm nice, but an adult man who likes you, well, that's different.

I managed to keep away from Mark for a few days and so when I rang his bell one evening he was really pleased to see me. You should always keep men wanting more, as Gran always used to say.

'Long time no see,' he said cheerfully when he'd given me some tea.

'I haven't been feeling too good,' I lied.

'Your period, I expect.'

I clutched the cup in my hands as if I wanted to crush it.

'Do you think it's awful of me to say that?'

I sat numbly on the sofa, scarcely able to nod.

'I know that you don't want to talk to me about that sort of thing,' he said after a moment or two, 'but who else have you got?'

I felt my scalp starting to tingle, as if my hair was standing on end, like an animal's. You are not an animal, I told myself firmly. The tingling stopped.

'No one.'

He leaned forward and looked straight into my eyes. 'It's very natural,' he said.

I thought so too. That's why I wished he'd stop going on about it.

‘All young girls feel that way,’ he said. ‘You’ve just got to get used to the idea that you’re growing up. Don’t you agree?’

I didn’t agree but I didn’t say so. Deep down in my heart I knew he was right. Other girls talk to their mothers, or their sisters, or to friends.

Mark patted my hand. ‘You wish you could stay a child but things will be so much better once you’ve been through it, believe me.’

It sounded like going for a swim in a cold sea, and I didn’t have any desire at all to ‘go through it’.

‘I must go back upstairs,’ I said. ‘Ma will be getting anxious.’

Mark went to his parents that weekend and when I saw him again we didn’t talk about difficult things. We watched a film on television and he came and sat close to me.

‘We’re friends,’ he said gently when I moved away. ‘This is what friends do.’ He put his arm around me.

I had to get used to it, he was right about that. No one ever touched me, unless you counted Tim’s kiss when he greeted me. That’s why I started to think very hard about Gran, and after a while I found that it was very pleasant to sit together like that.

When I think about it now I have to laugh at myself. It must be the most natural thing in the world. This past week I’ve been going there every evening. He never seems to have any visitors.

We sit together on the sofa, and he puts his arm around me. Then I think about Gran and start to chatter away like a child, just as I used to, and talk about anything that comes into my head. And he just listens and listens and it’s almost like it used to be, only you could always have a good laugh with Gran.

A good neighbour is better than a far-away father.