



Stories of System Change

ANTHOLOGY

Edited by
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Featuring stories from

The students of Stories and System Change
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Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development
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Preface

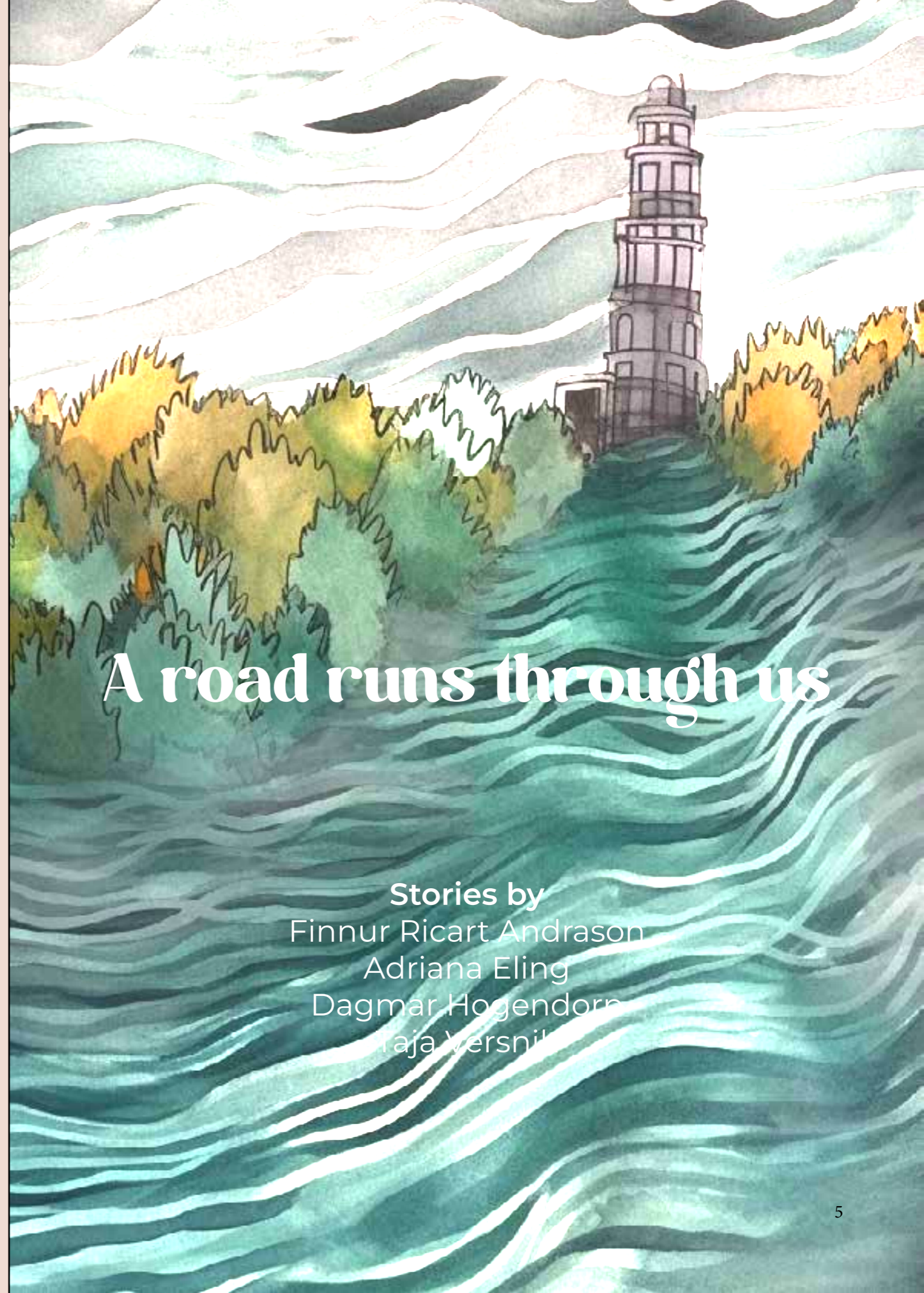
What is your story? How would you describe what it means to be you, to be here at this moment?

Not such a simple question, is it? As a scientist, you're often trained to look at systems, to set aside emotions and take a helicopter view. But if you want to bring about change - or understand why a system seems to refuse change - you need to know more about the actors within it. What does the world look like when seen through their eyes? If it can be hard to find and tell your own story, it might be even more challenging to imagine the world of others, to take their point of view. How would they tell their stories? How does it feel to walk in their shoes? And what kind of knowledge do you need to empathise with them?

These are the questions we explored with students of the course *Stories & Systems Change*, using learning techniques ranging from lectures to roleplay, from creative writing to theatre. Here, you can read the results of their journeys around sustainability challenges of their own choosing, such as the widening of the Utrecht Ring Road, the protein transition in Utrecht and climate induced flooding in the Netherlands. Their chosen perspectives ranged from a policeman to a crocodile, from a child to a mayor, from a farmer to an activist. And, as one of the students put it: 'Of course you know that each actor has his own perspective, but before this course, I had never actually felt it.'

We hope you enjoy reading this anthology.
Will you join us on our next journey?

Wytske Versteeg, Brian Dermody, Josie Chambers



A road runs through us

Stories by
Finnur Ricart Andrason
Adriana Eling
Dagmar Hogendorf
Taja Versnik

A stroll through rugged history

Finnur Ricart Andrason, Adriana Eling, Dagmar Hogendorp, Taja Versnik

“How was it back then?” Lucas asked me.

“I remember those times vividly” I responded. “The times when I could feel the breeze in my hair, the crunching rocks under my shoe soles and the fresh smell of damp vegetation.” I paused and took a deep breath as we walked through the forest on a dry autumn day.

“These days there’s not much hair through which I can feel the breeze though” I added and Lucas chuckled slightly as he turned his head involuntarily to observe the few white hairs still standing on my head.

“Nevertheless, I still can’t do without my daily stroll and I’m glad you came with me. This place is my sanctuary, my hide-out, to escape the overwhelming city noises of Utrecht. A place where I can think, and talk with myself. Observing this seemingly peaceful place, it is difficult to imagine the rich history that these trees have witnessed - the raging conflict the birds have observed on and off for decades.” I was in my story mood and Lucas didn’t seem too keen on talking, so I continued.

“In my younger years I used to go here almost every weekend with my parents or with my friends to play in the forest, go to the petting zoo or on special occasions, visit the teahouse with my grandma. Before the city of Utrecht bought the estate, Amelisweerd was acquired by the wealthy Van Boetselaer family, who transformed it into a grand country estate with a large mansion, beautiful gardens, and a network of gravelly paths. They also constructed several new buildings on the estate, including a coach house, a dairy farm, and a greenhouse. My friends and I sometimes tried to sneak into these old buildings to have a look inside without getting caught.”

“When was the highway built?” Lucas asked. He’s changed a lot this year. He became very enthusiastic about environmental activism and protesting and lobbying against the expansion of the A27 highway, was his way of fighting what seemed like a deep rooted worry that he wasn’t doing enough to better the world. I’m concerned for him, he’s quieter than he was, less cheerful. But I decided now wasn’t the time to bring my worries up with him, he was too closed off at the moment, so I rather decided to indulge on his question.

“Around the time when I was in college, the government made plans for the construction of a highway right through this beautiful area. One of my friends, who I used to play with all the time when we were younger, actually protested in the autumn of 1954 on the Bailey Bridge along with his parents and a few of their neighbors. They were blocking the workers, preventing them from bringing in sand and cement. I remember that my friend, among others, was furious. How could they decide on constructing a highway right next to this beautiful place!” I paused again to allow us to enjoy the silence of the forest; or rather the sounds of the forest. The birds, the rustling leaves, and the gravel beneath us.

“But what happened? What did the protesters do wrong?” Lucas didn’t seem in the state of mind to enjoy the peacefulness of the forest. And I didn’t blame him.

“Unfortunately, there was nothing we could do. They had made a decision, and they executed the plan. Even though the decision was horrible, after a couple of years, the anger ceased and everyone dealt with it in their own way. Of course there was a lot more noise and activity and the place felt more restless than ever before, but we still had our playgrounds, teahouse and forest paths.” The story

could’ve ended there but I could feel that Lucas wanted to hear more, so I kept going.

“Then came the 1970s. Just when everything had settled down again and I had started taking your mother on the occasional Sunday stroll in Amelisweerd, speculations surfaced about another expansion of the highway. The response was harsh: thousands of activists sitting tightly on the highway for hours and living strapped high up in the trees for days on end. For several years came waves of sit-ins, marches and rallies. One of the most notable of these was the occupation of the park by squatters in the 1980s, who set up a large protest camp in Amelisweerd and refused to leave despite numerous attempts by the authorities to remove them. The only time you would see the police give a damn about the forest way was when they had the joy of pulling activists from the trees and arresting them! Otherwise radio silence. The goal was of course to stop the expansion plans and there were moments where people were hopeful that this goal could be reached.”

“It was different this time right? The protesters won?” Lucas asked. He had probably heard more about these protests from his work with the older Extinction Rebellion activists than he had about the protests of the 1950s. Not many of those veterans are still standing. And those who still are don’t have the capacity, neither physical nor mental, to take part anymore.

“Well, despite this opposition, construction on the expansion began in the late 1980s, leading to several clashes between the protesters and police. However, in 1992, a court ruled in favor of the protesters, stating that the environmental impact of the highway had not been adequately assessed and that the construction should be halted. Since then, the proposed highway expansion has remained a contentious issue in Utrecht, with ongoing debates and activism around the future of Amelisweerd and the surrounding areas; but of course, this I don’t have to tell you my beloved activist!” Lucas didn’t really respond. Only a faint noise to say he had

heard what I said.

I like the silence, but not when it’s loud. And this silence felt loud. So I kept talking.

“This long and tense history of the forest has shaped what has now become a more fragmented forest, a mere sliver of what it used to be. Some of its magic remains but it is seldomly visible on the surface for us humans to observe. Nowadays, the whizzing noise of cars driving on the highway can be heard deep into the heart of the forest making it one of those eerie places that most people have gotten used to but will never adapt to entirely.”

I saw Lucas had become tense, probably becoming more and more on edge as I explained how the protests back in the days had failed. We kept walking in silence. I should’ve held back a bit. My story mood carries me away and before I know it I’ve said too much. Maybe it’s the old age?

What could I do? It hurts to see my boy like this.

When the decision by The Hague to go through with the expansion was announced about 8 months ago, I observed from a distance and through Lucas how the activists seemed to collapse into a coma of inaction full of sorrow and paralyzing despair. It feels like they had never allowed themselves to imagine the possibility of Utrecht Municipality losing to The Hague in their long standing power struggle and legal battles; and when you suppress all thoughts about a possible outcome of a conflict which then materializes in real life, it hits, and it hits hard. I know from personal experience, all those years ago. Same highway, different times.

The Hague’s executive decision, pushed by the Minister of infrastructure, has changed the city. Those civil servants know nothing about our city and our nature. Instead of the vibrant and lively Utrecht everyone knew and loved, its character is now entirely different; it is calmer and quieter but the silence is loud and uncomfortable for most. Rather than a silence of tranquility on a slow and

cozy Sunday morning, it is a silence of instability one can imagine to feel in the days following a deadly accident or a terrorist attack. Although in this case, there is no unifying solidarity. The community is polarized. People are on edge, friendships and families are falling apart.

After the scaffolding was removed from the Dom Tower last year, it was expected to reclaim its place as the crown jewel of the city and bring joy to residents and tourists, but instead its bright new facade is in constant juxtaposition with the tense atmosphere creeping like fog around the streets of the city.

Articles about the decision and its impacts are a regular sight in the newspapers although most reporters approach the issue in a highly diplomatic and neutral manner out of fear of being accused of siding with one of the two camps. There is one reporter, however, who's articles seem to be getting more attention than most other articles on the topic. This attention is not a result of her excellent diplomatic skills or well written articles, but for her inconsistent stance on the issue. She goes back and forth, first taking a stance with the forest activists and then a week later siding with the expansionists.

What intrigues me about her strange approach is the detailed evidence and arguments put forth in her articles, regardless of which side she takes a stance with. But I guess she has been covering the topic for a long time now and must have gathered lots of sources over the years. Perhaps she's got contact with insiders in the activist groups. They are known to be moles who are happy to provide insider information to the media, and this fact is one of the many things that has plagued the activists and their fragmented campaigns. I'm guessing they've spent almost as much time fighting with each other about the premises for their opposition and which approaches to take as they've spent actually campaigning and protesting against the expansion.

Ironically, the only thing that has kept the semi-united front intact is the changed stance of many

actors in the private sector. Having previously been pro-expansion many companies took a 180 degree turn as the pandemic hit and as remote working became a more dominant regime in the years after - it was more in their interest to keep employees working from home to save costs on office rent and other costs related to running a full sized workplace for tens or hundreds of employees.

Lucas and I completed our loop in the forest as I emerged from these thoughts. We had been walking in silence for almost thirty minutes. I would say we were enjoying each other's company, but I didn't know where Lucas's head was at.

"You alright Lucas?" I asked carefully.

"Yeah, I'm alright," Lucas responded calmly. I was relieved, it seemed like he'd loosened up again. Oh what magic the forest can work!

A deadly duality

Finnur Ricart Andrason

I. Powerless

"Stupid ... fucking ... government!"

One light, two lights, three lights, splash.

"Breathe! BREATHE FOR GOD'S SAKE!" I shouted, pounding my chest with my cold wet fists as I struggled to breathe, grasping for air between every word I shouted into the abyss. My wheezing echoed in the empty streets as the lamp posts flew by.

I couldn't sleep, so I ran. The panic crept up on me and slowly took over, controlling every single thought and every single movement.

Splat, splat, splat, thump.

"Ahhhh! Fuck!" I exclaimed as I slammed into the asphalt at the intersection right before the bridge. My legs gave out at the sight of the A27.

It seemed as if the overworld was crumbling. The heavy raindrops were like debris indicating that it would all come crashing down. The roaring thunders were unbearable; like needles, puncturing my eardrum every few seconds.

"Stupid ... fucking ... highway!" I shouted at the universe as I gasped for air. The hairs on my skin arose as a paralysing chill ran down my spine.

I was running almost blindly, only seeing the thoughts in my head. An image of the news article was stuck in the centre of my vision; it's all I could see and all I could think. Yet, it was the last thing I wanted to see and the last thing I wanted to think about. I wanted to get out, out of my own head.

My thoughts imprisoned my mind after seeing the highway, so it's all a bit hazy after this point. But I

remember my body forcing me to slow down to be able to breathe despite my head telling me to keep running. Running from my thoughts. I stopped for a few seconds, bent over putting my hands on my knees, wheezing in and out repeatedly. But I couldn't stop for long. Terrifying visions of the highway started compiling in my head. I had to keep running.

Splash, splash splash, boom!

"Stupid ... fucking ... golfcourse!" I screamed as a lightning bolt struck a tree on the golfcourse in the distance.

"Stupid ... fucking ... rich people!" No one ever talks about it, but the rich people and this disgusting sport had destroyed just as much forest as the initial highway.

The lights were gone. The gravel under my feet made me even more unstable than before. Its loud crunch was excruciatingly loud. I swayed left to right, running in an irregular zig-zag.

The running wasn't enough anymore. Panicked thoughts about the news of the A27 expansion and my failure to stop it flooded my mind as the rain had flooded the streets. I tripped again and this time I couldn't get up. The silhouettes of the tree canopy were spinning; spiralling among the raindrops and news articles in the dark sky. The forest floor was wet, but I didn't notice. Not in that moment.

II. Emergency

I woke up this morning to Kamaal knocking on my door.

"Are you coming?!" he asked. "Where?" I asked back. "To the emergency meeting - didn't you hear?"

My phone was still hidden among dirty clothes in my laundry basket so I hadn't seen the messages. I hide it there when I need to chop away the chains that it hooks to my brain. My subconscious had

probably decided I didn't want anyone to be able to reach me, disturb me last night when I rant to the forest.

There were over 300 unread messages in the XR Signal group chat, they had been planning an "emergency meeting" to discuss our response to the news of the expansion. I felt a chill at the thought of it. The news article flashed in front of my eyes for a split second.

—

"Are you concerned?" Kamaal asked.

"Hm?" I said as I emerged from my spiralling thoughts.

"You're very quiet, are you concerned about the expansion?" he repeated.

The XR headquarters were a 30 minute bikeride to the opposite side of the city and when we were half way there I had barely said a word. He could notice that something was off with me.

Usually the forest helps. Usually it's the only thing that helps. What happened? Why didn't it help?

The stupid men in suits in The Hague destroy everything. They can't respect anything we want, can't see that we're a part of nature and that if we destroy it we destroy ourselves. And there's nothing we can do to change their mind, it's as if they're untouchable.

"I don't know Kamaal, are you okay?!" I lashed out at him.

"Sorry," he responded. The anger in my tone had probably made him decide not to continue the conversation.

We biked in silence.

—

"Everyone is so quiet." Kamaal whispered as we walked into the HQ. I remember falling in love with the aesthetics of this place when I first came to the HQ. The roustique second-hand chipboards covering every square-meter of the floor and walls with colourful yet elegant XR logos spray painted here and there. The warm, bright colour of the wood used to make me feel at home and the sight of the paint splatters and boxes of old signs and banners used to thrill me. But today, the silence drowned the thrill. Today the HQ felt cold.

I didn't answer, but Kamaal was right. Usually everyone is busy chatting and laughing before our meetings start, even if it the meetings are serious. But the silence didn't surprise me. I like Kamaal, but he just doesn't get it sometimes. He doesn't understand the scale or the urgency of what we're dealing with. We're talking about the biggest setback to our efforts in decades. What has just happened is exactly what our predecessors have been fighting against since 30 years before we were born.

"Alright rebels, lets get started." Jona announced, waving her hand to signal all of us to come upstairs to the workshop.

It was much tighter than normal in the workshop. As my eyes scanned briefly around the large paint-stained wooden table. Many usual suspects, but there were also several unfamiliar faces. I subtly scrolled through those 300 unread messages as people were settling down and saw there had been a debate about whether or not to invite the other activist groups to the meeting or not. Seems like the result had fallen in favour of inviting the three biggest Amelissewerd activist groups.

"Thanks for coming everyone, today is an important day" said Jona. "We've got some new allies with us and I believe it'll be beneficial for us all to do as we should have been doing from the very beginning: working together." she continued and I could see some subtle whispering and exchanges of looks across the table. "Now more than ever, we need to resist. We need to resist the oppression of The Hague

and safeguard nature and future generations. To do so, a few of us wanted to propose a blockade on the highway right by the bridge next to the golfcourse."

A sharp, excruciating pain in my abdomen made me involuntarily kick one of the legs of the table. 'Don't do it! Hold it in!' I thought to myself as I squeezed closed my eyes and made a weird face to resist with all my force letting out a sound expressing my pain.

"I don't think another blockade is gonna do anything." one of the new faces said from the back of the room. "Look at what we've achieved so far. We've never been further from our goal and I think it's time we stop pretending our old tactics are working. I say we demand a meeting with minister Harbers to discuss our stance with him and demonstrate to him with facts why the highway shouldn't be expanded rather than making ourselves look like fools again without getting the attention of anyone who matters."

Here we go again. These people don't know what they're talking about. They think facts can change people's opinions and that we just have unlimited access to any minister we like. I felt the urge to speak up but didn't have the strength to do it. Luckily Paul responded.

"And what exactly do you suggest we say to him? That his highway is gonna make some trees be cut down and kill a few bugs in the process?" Paul asked sarcastically. "These people in the ministry don't understand that this isn't just about this one case, that it's about the larger picture. All we can do is be as loud as possible, get as much media coverage as possible, and sway the public opinion."

I sat a bit calmer after Paul's firm response, but only for a second, then the nonsense went on.

"Why are you so narrow-minded? If you're not willing to attempt to engage in a constructive dialogue with those in charge, you're the one who doesn't understand." said another one of the new faces while staring Paul in the eyes.

"Fuck this! If we can't agree amongst ourselves, how the fuck are we going to get the people and the government to agree with us on stopping this madness?!" Amanda shouted and stormed out of the workshop.

The room went uncomfortably silent.

Four others stood up, picked up their backpacks and quietly followed out the door. My breaths were getting shallower and shallower and I could feel myself getting lightheaded. I couldn't take it. The wheezing was coming back and I felt like my brain was collapsing in on itself. I frantically stood up, swung my backpack over my shoulder and half-ran out the door. A roaring feeling of discomfort and nausea poured itself over me as I struggled to stay standing as I made my way down the stairs.

Shit! Why did I leave the meeting? What's wrong with me! Now it seems like I can't handle anything and Jona is going to hate me for siding with Amanda. "AHHHH!!"

—

Just as I arrived home and crawled under my blanket in the dark, Kamaal texted me to ask why I had left the meeting. He also told me that several others had left as more disagreements came up but that the meeting had ended by the remaining people deciding we would go ahead with a blockade two days from now. But I didn't care. We had failed. I had failed. The earth is going to shit and I was naive to have ever thought I could do something about it. I can't even sit a meeting without running out with my head spinning.

I reached for my phone out of habit to suppress my spiralling thoughts with meaningless scrolling. I froze as a post from the Utrechtsop1 showed up on my feed. A sharp, cold shiver went through me, like a 50 volt jolt of electricity. I couldn't believe it. I had to read the short text that had been placed over an image of a candle twice to fully comprehend what it said.

“Vera Maartens, the project manager of the A27 highway expansion has been found deceased at her home in the outskirts of The Hague. The police has indicated that they are investigating her death as a potential suicide.”

It felt as if I was lying on the wet forest floor again. The patterns on my ceiling spinning, my body strapped down into my mattress, suffocating from the heat under my heavy blanket.

Am I really worth it? Does my activism really make a difference? I’m just a weak boy, unable to do anything meaningful. I’m sure they don’t want me anymore. They’d be happier to protest if I wasn’t there. The protests don’t even matter anyway. What’s a fucking highway expansion going to do when Kim Kardashian is flying 20 minute journeys in her private jet four times a day.

I jumped from under my blankets and began pacing up and down my bedroom.

I just know it. I know we’re never going to make the 1.5 degree target. Whatever I do is useless. The pain and suffering is inevitable. Hundreds and millions of people. Dead. The morbid images in my head acted as claws, plunging into my brain and deactivating any remaining sanity.

The pacing made me nauseous again and a throbbing headache had now been added to the cocktail of discomfort. I collapsed down onto my thin carpet. The shock of hitting the hard floor sent a shockwave through my knees and wrists.

I was boiling. And freezing. Simultaneously. My nose was dripping and my vision blurred by the tears accumulating on my eyeballs. My mind just as blurry as my vision.

My hand reached for my desk drawer, absolutely determined. As if it had its own independent will. Pulled out the drawer and reached for the right corner.

The colour of my stiff right forearm matched that of the red Victorinox Swiss army knife.

My left hand scrambled for my phone on the edge of my bed. I was dual wielding. Total darkness, forever. Or a lifeline. All or nothing.

The panic hit me again. The blood-red knife terrified me as it moved in waves, up and down with my shacking arm. My body pulled itself backwards. I was as far into the corner of my room as physically possible. My shoulders digging into the walls.

I remember managing to hectically send a onehanded, misspelled text to Kamaal:

“ita not wortj it my lufe isn’t worh it i’m sorru”

But then everything went black. I don’t remember anything between that point and Kamaal showing up. I later saw that he had called countless times on different platforms but I hadn’t picked up.

—

“Lucas!!!” Kamaal shouted as he pounded on my thick wooden door. “LUCAAAS!!!”

I don’t know how long it took him to get here, I had lost all sense of time and place. But I think he was fast.

I jumped and my heartrate skyrocketed as the sound of a smashing window echoed in the hallway. Kamaal came running into my bedroom but stopped right in his steps upon seeing me, still cornered up against the wall with the killing machine in one hand and the other hand holding the wrist of the hand with the knife.

He didn’t hesitate for long, though. “Put the knife down!” he exclaimed with a voice of determination.

Nothing.

“Lucas, put the knife down.” he repeated but with a

slightly calmer voice this time.

Again, nothing.

I wasn’t fully registering what was going on. I wasn’t panting anymore, or even crying. Just shaking with bloodshot eyes.

“Lucas, listen to me!” Kamaal shouted. “Okay?”

My eyes moved and made eye contact with him. I gave him a slight nod. My face still full of fright, red, wet, and disgusting from the long and panicked bawling.

“Whatever you’re thinking, don’t do it. Please don’t do it.” I could feel Kamaal on the verge of breaking down himself. But he held onto his courage, kept his composure and continued talking.

“Please don’t doubt yourself Lucas. If every activist doubting themselves would disappear, that’s when we would really have a problem, that’s when the movement would fall apart.” Kamaal continued. I could feel his words vibrating on my chest. It was calming.

“But if every doubting activist would believe in the cause and recognize the potential of our collective efforts, then we could truly succeed.” Kamaal added. He was crying.

“I love you Lucas.” He said as his voice broke. “Please stay with me. Put the knife down. Say something.”

My forearm unclenched, my fist slowly unfolded, and the knife dropped to the floor. Kamaal slowly bent down and reached for it. He closed it and slid it in his pocket before throwing himself onto me and giving me a long tight hug of relief.

I felt absolutely destroyed. Drained and lifeless.

III. Blockade

I haven’t spent so much time with my family for a really long time. Its only been two days but the calm and quiet has made it feel a lot longer. It’s strange, but it’s comforting.

However, along with the comforting feeling of being at home with my family is also a gnawing regret and shame, eating away at what could’ve been a perfect hide-away. A shelter from my thoughts and the outside world.

I’m still rather on edge and not very inclined to engage in a conversation about anything more than just about what I wanted to eat. My mind is still tired and my body can feel it.

The psychologist I spoke to recommended me to take it slow for some time and avoid using my phone. I asked my mom to hold onto it to prevent me from being too tempted to use it. She had been in contact with Kamaal in the past two days, told him about what the psychologist said and made sure he knew I was okay. He still wanted to see me despite knowing I was doing alright and I approved when mom asked me if it was okay if he would come over for a bit.

“Hey!” Kamaal said cheerfully as he came in the door and hugged me. Unlike the other day, I hugged him back this time.

“Hi Kamaal.” I said and smiled a little as we looked each other briefly in the eyes.

My parent’s living room was nice and warm, both temperature wise and in terms of the aesthetic of it. Two soft couches, a large thick rug, potted plants and warm yellow lamps. Sitting here with Kamaal was calming. We talked a bit and despite it not being about anything important, I could feel how it soothed my mind. I usually hated small talk, but this simple conversation with Kamaal was nice.

There was a pause in the conversation. Not an

uncomfortable one, just a simple enjoyable pause one has in a conversation with a friend they are not afraid to sit in silence with. But I still had something burning on my mind. I was trying to build up the courage to bring it up. Should I ask him? I felt a few butterflies starting to fly around in my stomach and decided to just say it before the few butterflies would turn into a swarm of wasps.

“Has the strike happened yet?” I asked carefully.

Kamaal turned his head towards me but didn't say anything. I felt like he might be scared to enter into a conversation about anything related to our XR work. And I understood him. But then he responded.

“It'll be tomorrow.” Kamaal said and looked away again. I could feel the hesitation in his voice.

“What time?” I asked, a bit more confidently this time.

“Lucas, I don't know if we should be talking about this.” Kamaal responded and let out a slight sigh.

“Why not?” I asked, but quickly added that I was sorry. I didn't want to put Kamaal in an uncomfortable position. But I just couldn't resist knowing. There was something inside me that, despite what I had felt just two days ago, made me crave knowing everything about the strike. Maybe it was what Kamaal had said to me the other day?

“I don't know what it is Kamaal, but I just can't help wanting to know about the strike.” I couldn't keep my thoughts locked in, I had to express them out loud. I wanted to see his response.

“Didn't the psychologist recommend that you take some rest?” Kamaal said.

“Maybe. But you said that if every activist who was doubting themselves would disappear, that's when we would really have a problem, that's when the movement would fall apart. And I feel like if I'm not

at the blockade, its the same as if I would disappear.” I said enthusiastically.

“Lucas, I know what I said. And I meant it.” Kamaal said. I don't think he liked that I quoted his exact words from the other day. “But I just don't think its a good idea for you to come so soon after ... “ He didn't finish his sentence. He didn't know how to phrase the end of it.

“I need to do something Kamaal, I can't just sit here on my ass and do nothing knowing that all of you are out in the streets fighting the biggest battle we will have ever fought.” I said, with my words painting the air with my feelings. It felt good. “I need to get out. I need to shout. I need to feel like I can really do something that can make a difference.” I said, holding back to not say more. I wanted to tell him how much I was craving that thrill that we all get when standing in solidarity with one another, shouting in unison. But I didn't want him to feel like I was in some sort of mania. Because I wasn't.

“I don't know Lucas.” I could feel that Kamaal didn't know what to say.

“If every doubting activist would believe in the cause and recognize the potential of our collective efforts, then we could truly succeed.” I said, again, quoting what Kamaal had said to me the other day. It was provocative, but I didn't care.

Kamaal shook his head lightly. Then turned to look at me and couldn't help but smile a little when we made eye contact. Then he shook his head again, but not in the same way. It was a shake of simultaneous defeat and excitement.

—

We could hear the crowd roaring before we could even see it. The were already warming up with some of our classic chants.

“What do we want? Climate justice!” I lifted my fist in the air and mouthed the words.

This time my legs didn't fail me. Every step towards the A27 was firm and I walked with my head high. As the bridge, the highway, and the golf course in the distance appeared, I felt a slight shiver. It wasn't paralysing though as I had been slightly scared it would be. The powerful sounds of my fellow activists blocked out any negative thoughts arising from my memories of the panic attack.

The approach was thrilling. The vibrant chants and the bright morning sun amplified each other, creating a perfect empowering harmony. Apparently we were expecting about 5000 to 7000 people to show up to the blockade, which I found amazing.

“Did you remember to leave your ID at home?” Kamaal asked. He was a little quieter than usual. Perhaps he was concerned about me.

“Of course!” I responded cheerfully. “Do you think I would forget the basics just like that?”

“No, of course not, that's not what I meant to imply. It's just that there have been some rumours and concerns about arrests and the heavy police presence that's been announced.

The first step on the tarmac was incredible. I felt a rush go through me as we made our way through the crowd. Again, not too many familiar faces, but that made me happy. It meant that they had managed to unite at least parts of the other activist groups despite the clashes at the meeting. As we were about to reach the frontlines of the blockade, I spotted Jona. She was going from facilitator to facilitator, whispering something to them. I couldn't tell what it was, but she moved quickly from person to person along the front of the blockade, all the way from right to left. Just as always, they were wearing their neon pink vests, both to be in the same colours as the XR logo but also to make sure they stood out from the neon yellow of the police who had lined up in a tight line with their shields facing the crowd. 10 meters between the shields and us sitting in the front line of the blockade.

As the clock struck 11:00 a wave of silence went through the crowd from the front to the back as we all sat down on the tarmac and went quiet. Five minutes of solidarity. The traditional one minute of silence wasn't enough to pay respect to all the people already suffering from climate change, all the people who are expected to suffer from it in the future, and all the non-human beings who we share this planet with who are also being heavily impacted. This was the XR way of doing things.

11:05. Paul struck the big gong as Jona raised the megaphone to her mouth:

“How are we feeling rebels?!” She shouted and her words echoed briefly between the tall concrete walls on either side of the empty highway before the roaring battle-cries and whistles of the crowd sent rumbling soundwaves through every single particle of air in the area. We all sprung to our feet at the sound of the gong and were now jumping up and down as if we were listening to the last song of the night at a club in the city centre. Only that the energy level was many-fold higher here than in any club in Utrecht.

7 meters between the shields and the front line. We had subconsciously shifted forward towards the police by a few meters.

Jona kept initiating new chants and managed to keep the crowd very well engaged. The drum squad had now joined in and the big bass drums shook my chest every time they were struck. The rhythmic shouting, drumming, and dancing felt rejuvenating. I was soaking in the energy of the sun and channelling it out through my vocal chords and shaking limbs.

4 meters between the shields and the front line. We had shifted another three meters towards the barrier of shields and policemen. The pink-vested facilitators were pacing hastily up and down the front line asking the crowd not to advance further. The policemen looked tense and weary.

We were still chanting and jumping up and down but then I saw someone trip and fall over in the direction of the shields. It all happened so fast that the policemen closest to her thrust their shields forwards, probably as an automatic reaction as they expected her to be charging at them rather than tripping. One of the shields crashed against the head of the woman who had fallen over and those of us closest to her let out a cry of outrage before some of us ran towards the shield to push it back away from the woman.

“Lucas!” I heard Kamaal shout. I didn’t care.

I put all my leg and arm strength into pushing the shields away from the woman who was struggling to get up after the big shock.

“Ahhhh!” I exclaimed as a shield came ramming into my side. My legs gave out from under me and I crawled back towards the front line of the blockade. As I looked back and shouted “Stupid fucking police!” I made eye contact with the policeman who had forcefully thrust his shield into me. He didn’t move. We maintained eye contact for several seconds before he broke it by looking down. It was strange. He was hiding behind his shield, yet I could sense his vulnerability.

My attention was re-oriented towards the woman who had been pushed down who was now being absorbed into the barrier of policemen, disappearing as they re-aligned their shields together. The crowd turned louder but simultaneously went out of synch.

Chaotic charging towards the shields ensued before the policemen all took several steps backwards at once. Then came the jet. The police had activated their water canon which thrust water at insane pressure towards us.

Rather than moving out of the way of the trajectory of the water gun, we rapidly sat down, huddled together and locked arms right under the powerful jet of water. We had trained well. We knew exactly what to do, and I think this came as a surprise to the

police judging from the uneasy body language of some of the officers standing behind their shields in front of us.

“Power, power, power to the people!” the crowd roared louder and louder as we held on tightly to one another. The police never learned. It seemed as if they were unable to understand that using the water canons on us only amplified our message and swayed the public opinion in our favour.

Despite the chaos we maintained a good morale and sang as fake rain sprayed down on us on this sunny day.

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“Check it out!” Kamaal said as he directed his phone screen towards me.

We had come back to my parent’s place once the blockade had been dissolved by the police spraying a thick cloud of pepperspray over the crowd. We changed into dry clothes and sat in the soothing livingroom under warm blankets.

“No way!” I responded with my tone displaying obvious surprise.

“Yeah! They’re all vowing support for our blockade!” Kamaal explained as he scrolled through various different news sites which were reporting on the public statements being released one after the other by other activist groups in the country, workers unions, NGOs, and even companies.

“Here it says that an article on the Utrechtsop1 about the infringement of workers rights that would’ve taken place according to the expansion plans had prompted one of the biggest workers unions to send out a public statement in support of the XR strike on the A27 earlier today.” I said as I started reading the articles on my phone.

“This is amazing!” Kamaal said and I could feel his excitement.

The rush I got from standing among the crowd earlier today was slowly wearing off. The sun had been stronger than I had realised and along with the chanting and being sprayed by the water canon had taken its toll.

“But what now?” I asked abruptly. Kamaal looked confused. “We’ve had a blockade and we’ve gathered some extra support, but the cars are riding on the highway again and who knows if all our efforts will really have any meaningful impact.”

I killed the mood completely. The air in the room stopped carrying the feeling of a comfortable calmness to being empty and edgy. All the plants might as well have died all at once and the carpet might as well have burned.

Kamaal remained silent.

“I hate that I get these thoughts that just suck the thrill out of what we’re doing but I just can’t help it. I’m sorry Kamaal” I added to try to fill the silence with a bit more clarity.

“No, it’s okay. I understand.” he responded calmly, but I could sense a bit of grief in his voice, as if I had sucked the thrill out of him too. “Strategize, protest, rest, repeat.” he added with a rhythmic ring to his words as he drew a circle in the air.

I laughed at his silly attempt to visualise what felt like our eternally repeating loop.

“Strategize, protest, rest, repeat.” I repeated while I looked over to him and smiled.

Police agent's true colours

Taja Versnik

These hippies can't get a rest, who decides to protest on a Sunday, it's also my weekend! Now I can't take the girls out, Lisa has been needing more help lately. Seeing them is the highlight of my week if I am honest, it is always fun taking the little ones out, being cool uncle Jan. Gives me a satisfaction no job or achievement can, they are really my number one fans. The smallest tricks impress them, going to have to let them down again. It's hard trying to be there for them and give them the support they need, being a sort of father figure. That's a pressure I did not expect to have at 25. I can not imagine how it feels like for Lisa, poor Lisa losing her husband just as life was really starting to work out. Being the happiest family to being a widowed single mom, no one could wish that on someone. Another weekend that she will get no help. Besides trying my best to assist them I am trying to get on my feet, independent for the first time in my life. Finally got my own palace! Nice little place in Leidsche Rijn, 20 minutes with the bike and I'm in the city centre. I love that it's nice and calm. My sister makes fun of me saying I live in a starter home, with every young couple in Utrecht that just moved in. I have been sleeping on an air mattress for 6 months, no couch or dining table. It is rough, a work in progress you could say... My body will never forgive me for this, my back is cracking in places I am pretty sure shouldn't crack. I am getting permanent back damage from quite literally sleeping on hardwood floors for half a year! On the one hand I want a nice place, furniture would be amazing! The base salary for a police officer, a real rookie, is not cutting it, it is barely covering my rent. Everyone has had this when moving into their first place, right? At least I keep telling myself that. A table would be nice, well a bed would be even nicer.

On the plus side, I won't be in my empty apartment this weekend... Yay overtime!!! Thank you to the hippies... Not. Damn 5 year old me for wanting to be a police officer. Why didn't I dream of being an

accountant or something like that. 9-5, come home, decent paycheck, lovely. Bet accountants never have a call at 2 am to come into the office. Not a 'call you whenever we need you', kind of situation 24/7, job. The more I think about it, being an accountant kind of sounds like the dream job. Bet accountants can afford a bed. I do love being a police officer, I really do. Being the youngest in the team is brutal sometimes, doing everyone's paperwork, getting coffee. I imagined this to play out a bit different from when I was in base camp. It is my weekend, but getting out on the field is something I am very excited about. This will be my first protest. How sick!!!

I am so excited to get out, but it is only with some green tree huggers, so also won't be super thrilling, but again I will take anything over sitting at the desk doing paperwork. Somehow deep down I am still a bit nervous how this will play out. Ya ya tree hugger and not Al Qaeda, but as we got taught extremist are still extremist. Knowing my rank I will probably be so far away from any action. Still excited to "keep the public safe, abide by the law", literal quote from my textbook. Also a big bonus, because of protests and the weekend, kaching! First stop IKEA! Get myself a bed and a table. On top of that, take the girls on a trip, maybe to the zoo or go shopping with them.

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Last day before the protest, we had so many briefings about this I am kind of getting sick of hearing it. "Keep it peaceful, the law is your bible, keep things calm and do not let it get tense". The instructor's 5 goals of the protest are stuck in my head. He kept repeating it "Crowd control comes first, then protect the public's safety, enforce the law, don't be afraid to communicate with protestors and gather intelligence". I GET IT! You would think they

could make it into a catchy rhyme or something. But what kind of intelligence do they want us to gather? That not everyone there is vegan? What their favourite nut milk is? Will be fine. I do have some exciting news, I actually will be sent deeper into the protest then I thought. To give the rookies a chance they are putting them with the special task force, to get more experience, more training. So the weekend got even sicker! I will get fully suited up! Going to look like one of the Avengers. I will stand closer to the front, maybe even get a chance to talk to the protestors. I kind of am interested why they would protest on their free Sunday. I can name at least 10 things that are more fun to do on your Sunday than protest.

I heard about the expansion, it was just a small part of the road that they are expanding, so just a part of the trees on the side will be cut, not the whole forest? So why is there such a fuss around it? Some manager committed suicide due to the stress of it. Really shocked me. That such an expansion claimed a life. Because the project itself does not seem like such a big fuss to me but clearly it is very important to people to die, commit suicide, for the cause. The tension of the protestors must be high. I called the girls before dinner to tell them that their uncle will most likely be in the news and that they should keep their eye out for the superhero keeping everyone safe.

Tomorrow's wake up call is at 5! Got to be at the protest before 7 am and it's all the way on the other side of Utrecht it will take so long to bike to there. Because we are meeting so early we don't need to all meet at the police station before that. All the rookies can go to the site immediately. Won't have to listen to the aggravating voice of my team captain Kevin the whole way there. During the day I can't stand him, can't imagine what he is like before his first cup of coffee. We need to be there early to make sure the preparations of the highway are complete. Close it off before some loonies start running around on the highway, we don't want someone to get killed... Someone else to get killed. So I need to go to bed early, but my adrenaline is so high, I am not tired!

Feel like I am finally doing what I have dreamt of my whole life. Patrolling the streets, or arresting all the crazies at Central Station, is nothing compared to this, this is by far the most exciting job, a proper mission nearly.

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Utrecht in the early morning is as serene as the city ever gets. You can hear the occasional birds chirp, otherwise utter silence. In a bustling city hearing a penny drop is a delight, everyone is sleeping. You are the only one awake, it feels like you are the last survivor, very dystopian. It feels kind of creepy but the sun starts to slowly rise, through the skyline of all the buildings. A lively, young, fast paced city that is turned off. My phone said it would take me 40 minutes to bike there. With no traffic and the streets to myself it took me a shy 30 minutes. I saw the vast forest line as I was approaching the meet up location. I have to say with the sun rising behind it, it truly is beautiful here. Such a shame that I have never visited, maybe I should go with the girls sometime soon? I think this might be the best work location you could be sent to.

My daydreaming gets broken off by the sight of all of the police car lights as I near the meet up point. The rosy hue of the sunrise gets overshadowed by the red and blue lights of the police cars. Now it's time, focus switched on, we have a job to do today. The police Chief Van der Gooi began the briefing, this someone I can see myself being in the future. As soon as he walks into a room everyone's attention goes to him, a natural thing. People really respect him for his service in the police force. He talks to us in a gentle manner, the calm before the storm, he can level with us which I appreciate. I had some higher ranked officers that are on a power trip, forgetting where they started off, some by the name of Kevin rings a bell, I can't stand that. Van der Gooi informs us that the road workers have safely closed the highway and that we are all set to begin. My job today is making sure the protestors stay safe and stay within the bounds on the highway. Sort of a shield for them and for the rest of the citizens,



Altercation between the police and protesters in the Amelisweerd forest in 1982 (NOS, 2021)

crowd control. My team and I begin our way to the highway. There are already a couple fanatic activists with sleeping bags laying on the highway. Kevin presumes it will take a couple of hours before the real protest begins, he says we have to save our energy until then. For now I take my place and stand and observe my surroundings.

We walked down some bushes to reach the highway. It is really a wall of forest on each side of the road. The green trees are mounting over the road on either side. It feels weird to see how we transformed a road in between the forest. Nature vs man. Forest vs asphalt. You can hear the birds chirp on either side, you probably can never hear this when cars are racing 100km/h between them. Engulfed by forest while trying to be interconnected with cars. The highway is also massive, 10 lanes! It's ridiculous. I can't imagine that a highway that is now mostly empty will be full of protestors within a couple of hours. I can not see it happen, can't phantom it.

It is 1 pm right now. I have been awake for 8 hours already. After a rough night of 5 hours of sleep, I am struggling. Now the protest is in its full capacity, so many screaming people jeez. They are screaming at a closed off highway not sure where that will get them. Screaming into thin air. There are more and more people coming and some leaving. I did not expect that this many people cared so much about this forest. Bit overwhelming if anything did happen, not saying that it will, it's me vs 100 guys. We are really outnumbered. The signs they brought with them are nearly soaring as high as the trees. I am getting tired now, hope they wrap it up soon.

Update: It is 5 pm right now, they are still here! If I hear their stupid chant one more time I will flip. It's driving me insane, a broken record that you can not turn off: >> "What do we want? Climate justice! When do we want it? Now!" <<. What do I want? To go home! When do I want it? NOW!!!! Their chants are half as bad as Kevins complaining. Their chants I can deal with for one more hour, max. Kevin, I need to get as far away from this guy, or I will lose my last nerve. It has been 12 hours since I have been

awake. I have been on my feet the whole day, I am getting agitated and tired. The protesters are getting more and more provocative. There is a group that is stirring the whole crowd up. We are keeping a close eye on them because they are slowly moving in closer to my team at the barriers of their bounds. We have warned them once, but no change in their behaviour.

A young guy from the group approached us, Lucas, after we gave a warning, he seems like a nice guy. He came over to us, trying to diffuse the tension. Levelled with us, he explained a bit why the group is so provocative today. We gathered intelligence from him, and it turns out the Minister of Infrastructure is a sly little scum. Taking unlawful steps in order to speed up the decision of the 'tweede kamer'. Slithering his way up the ladder to get his way. Using his connections higher up the ladder to get private meetings and get more members on board. How about doing it the legal way? I can understand why they are mad and protesting now. This whole situation is off. This is making me rethink if I am standing on the right side of the barrier. My whole life it seems that staying neutral is the way to go, that can never be the wrong answer. But if even the people we work for can not follow the law and follow protocol then why are we? I am not sure how far they want to go today, because with their anger I would understand they would want to break this whole barricade down, break down the doors of the tweede kamer and let them be heard. If you want justice nowadays you have to go get it yourself.

It stayed peaceful for a bit after our talk. Kevin was not as convinced by his story as I was. What else is to be expected from Kevin. He is making me realise that he is everything I do not want to be in a police officer. If he could, he would ask us to be his footstool, sadly for him the police force deems that as 'dehumanising'. I have a feeling he tried it once and got told off for it. Kevin believes that the protest will get out of hand. I know they are being provocative, climbing trees, getting mouthy with the police but I don't see this getting out of hand like he does.

I make eye contact with the nice guy from before, he is mouthing something to me, I can't decipher what he is trying to say to me. My team is getting anxious by the commotion. Hopefully no one is feeling trigger-happy. From the corner of my eye I see something flying towards me. Rocks! Rocks are flying towards us! Instincts kick in, flight or fight. I duck trying to avoid getting hit. Officers are screaming commands "GET BACK". The water cannons are getting fired up. My heart is racing, this is the last thing I thought would happen today. As I look back to make sure I won't be hit by the water cannon, I see the group charging towards me! This is happening for real now. I freeze. All noise of the commotion blocks out. All I hear is my heart pounding in my chest, my thoughts are blank. All my training seems to have left my body. What do I do now? Adrenaline is not helping. For the first time I scream at the activist, "GET BACK", "STOP WHAT YOU ARE DOING"! I am gesturing to them to go away, get back. One guy doesn't follow my instructions. He keeps walking forward. He stops less than a metre away from me. I step forward, grab him and push him to the ground. I am choosing to fight. I stop screaming. I look around at the rest, time seems to have stopped for a second. The activist group looks shocked. I am standing inside their bounds and just pushed an activist in an area where he is allowed to protest. I AM STANDING IN THEIR GROUNDS. Through all the commotion I started walking closer to them, they were not charging at us. I was charging at them. What have I done? I messed up big time!

All hell breaks loose. "LET'S GET THE PIGS" the main provocator screams. The activists begin throwing more rocks. Now for the first time they really are charging at us, not just in my imagination. I messed up. What have I done? How did I let this happen to me? I just pushed an innocent guy! Screaming, sirens begin blocking out my thoughts. Kevin comes and pushes me back right before the water cannons go off and spray all the protestors. My blood is rushing through my body, I can't see straight. I feel like I am about to pass out and throw up at the same time from what I have done. Guilt,

disappointment and shame are the only emotions I feel right now. Kevin shakes me back to reality. I'm dreading this, I think it's best if I really do pass out now, then at least I won't have to be conscious for whatever is about to come, a slap, pure screaming. Neither of the two are happening. Somebody pinch me, did I pass out already? Kevin isn't telling me off, ripping me to bits for what I have just done. Kevin's arms wrap around me, he hugs me tight and says "It's ok buddy, just relax". For a second I forget what I have done. For just a second I did not make the biggest mistake of my life. Kevin then turns around and begins giving tasks to the others.

I sit disconnected from the pure mayhem I have created that is happening a few metres away from me. Oh and the girls! What will the girls think of me now? "Uncle Jan just pushed down an innocent guy. I don't feel safe around him anymore." They won't see a superhero on TV but a wanna be police officer that is not made for the police. This is not what a superhero does. All hopes for this forest just as for my career are fading.

Trapped in the system of a civil servant's life

Dagmar Hogendorp

Ugh, Monday morning. The weekend slipped away too quickly. Despite my alarm set for 7 am, I found myself awake since 5 o'clock due to my two little boys snuggled up beside me. Usually, I would pass them on to my wife Elise, but today was my turn to prepare their breakfast and keep them entertained before Elise took them over and I go to work. As I slipped into my clothes and made my way downstairs, I attended to my kids, Jamie, and Thom, making them a sandwich with peanut butter and a cup of milk, and put on some 'Peppa Pig' on the television. I then walked over to our loyal dog Scotty and fed him his breakfast as well. His tail was sweeping enthusiastically against my leg while eating, this has always been a cute way to thank me for the food. I then poured myself a warm cup of coffee and took some time to read the daily newspaper 'Utrechtop1', catching up on the current happenings in our city. Ah, the waterboard elections are just around the corner, and I must check if I have received my ballot yet. Of course, the regular news about the Amelisweerd group activists and their deceiving plans to protest are up again as well. It almost feels like the reporters try to do anything to get this fire started again, which no one is interested in of course.

After sipping two cups of coffee, reading the newspaper, and playing with my boys for a bit, I finally felt alive again. These last few months have been insane, what with the sleepless nights that come with caring for my toddlers and the constant demands at work. I have been tasked with following up on a significant project on behalf of the Government. This project entails the expansion of the highway A27 through the nature area Amelisweerd. My boss Angela, who normally doesn't care about anyone but herself, handed me the responsibility. She trusted me with her "baby," and it's been a massive opportunity for me. Who knows, this could be my chance for a promotion. With a family to support, and finances being a challenge lately, this project has become even more critical.

One thing is for sure; I can't wait until we can finally move away from Utrecht. This place used to be fun, but it no longer feels like home. I studied here, made my friends, and met my wife Elise, but I crave some remoteness. Somewhere I can just live freely with my kids and walk through nature with Scotty. Not here, where my bike gets stolen every six months, and drunk students wake me up in the middle of the night with their drunken chants. I've outgrown this place, but for now, I'm stuck like every other civil servant, trying to make ends meet. Oops! I almost forgot the time. I need to get my ass up and make sure I won't be late for work. Angela will kill me if I am. We have a crucial meeting with the project manager today. I give my boys a tender kiss, bid farewell to Elise, and make my way to the car. Starting the day in the regular traffic jams surrounding Utrecht.

As I arrived at work in The Hague, Angela was already waiting for me. "Busy traffic again, Jonathan? Are u ready for the meeting?" she asked me with her deceiving smile. I can never truly understand her intentions. Does she really think highly of me or secretly wants me to fail on this project? I need to keep her on my side if I want to get promoted by that sour woman. So, I reply, "Yes, definitely! Did you have a good weekend?" I am not at all interested in her life, especially not on a Monday morning, but a little bit of kindness costs nothing and may earn me some empathy from her. After her story about her tea garden party last Sunday, we quickly visit the coffee room. I grab a hot cup of coffee before we meet with the project manager. I suspect he has nerves of steel, having endured all that criticism in the news and protests lately. Fortunately, the decision has been made, and we can finally begin with the realization of this long-awaited project.

With my hot cup of coffee in hand, I walk to the room where the meeting will take place, and as I open the door, I almost drop my coffee in shock

at what I see. Instead of a man with nerves of steel sitting at the end of the table, there is a young woman. Gallantly, she walks towards me and extends her hand. “You must be Jonathan, the one who will guide me in the realization of the highway expansion? Nice to meet you, I’m Vera, the project manager.” I try to quickly recover and say, “Yes, that’s correct. Nice to meet you too. I didn’t expect someone like you.” What was I thinking to even say that?! She laughs and answers: “Were you expecting an old, boring man with ideals that were shorter than his own nose?” I didn’t expect her to be so forward, so I quickly sit down and take a sip of my coffee and say, “Shall we get on with this meeting then?”

The meeting proceeds smoothly, and we quickly made another appointment for a follow-up meeting. There is still much to be done, and important decisions need to be made. I have to say, I am looking forward to our collaboration. Vera is nothing like what I expected from a project manager; a beautiful young woman who knows what she stands for. She stands up against all the morals of the people of Utrecht who are against the road expansion and has pushed through these kinds of projects since the early 2000s, all under her leadership. This particular project has been the breakthrough for her career. Because of this, she receives a lot of criticism. Well, what can I say? Tall trees catch a lot of wind.

As we both walk out of the meeting room, I ask Vera if she has any plans left for today. Hoping she would say no so I could ask her to grab lunch together, however she answers: “Yes, I have an interview planned with the reporter from Utrecht¹. I’m a bit skeptical about the interview itself, but I think it could be a good moment to really get my message out there and say something about my point of view to the people from Utrecht without getting interrupted or threatened, you know.”

I can’t quite put my finger on it, but there is something about her that intrigued me. She is new and fresh and nothing like all the other people I have been working with in this cold and boring place. She is absolutely stunning, from the way she carried herself in her long dress and high heels to her chestnut-brown hair and mesmerizing eyes. Her eyes were particularly captivating, and I found

myself lost in them every time we locked gazes during the meeting. It was a successful meeting and I feel much better than this morning. I say goodbye to Vera and walk to my department. I just need to finish up some paperwork and then I’ll take a nice lunch break in a bit.

The meeting with Vera is still on my mind for the rest of the day. The road widening project is a great step for the National Government to upgrade the infrastructure network, in the Netherlands. It’s praised from higher-ups, but I know from my position, as someone who lives in Utrecht, that it’s going to be a terrible step for many people. That is why there was so much controversy going on in the newspapers and on the streets of Utrecht, included with protests and threats towards the National Government and Vera.

To be completely honest, I don’t really care. I’m not planning on staying in Utrecht for long, and if I get my promotion out of it, I’m fine with anything. On the other hand, Vera sees it as an opportunity to put Utrecht back on the map. She will do everything in her power to make it happen. I admire her for her approach and her passion. I wish I had that kind of drive too - the courage to just say, “fuck it, I’m moving, and no one can stop me.” But I can’t, I have a family and a big responsibility, and to be able to follow my dreams, I need the money for it.

As I arrived home in the evening, I was met by the sight of my wife and children already seated at the dinner table. Feeling irritated, I asked Elise why they couldn’t wait for me. She responded aggravated, pointing out that I had been overworking yet again. This was the eighth time in the last two weeks that I had been late, and she had decided to start without me so that the boys could get to bed on time for once.

Of course, she was right, but she too knows that I am extremely busy with my work now, and I am the one in our family who brings in the money. Because of this occurrence, my good mood of the day had turned into the same irritation and tension that has been going on between us for a while now. I didn’t have the energy left to argue, so I just sat down mumbling that at least someone had to pay for dinner and that money doesn’t grow on trees. Just loud enough for Elise to hear it, she gave me a devil’s

look and continued feeding Jamie and Thom. As we ate, the tension boiled up, but we both didn’t want the boys to notice. So, we continued to eat in silence. After putting the boys to sleep, Elise poured a glass of wine and sank into the comfortable cushions of the couch. With a wry smile, she turned to me and inquired, “So how was your meeting with that ridiculous man who fancies himself the ‘project manager’ of this stupid highway expansion?” Elise has never been a fan of this road expansion plan. Which makes sense, because she was born and raised in Utrecht, and lived her whole life here. She has always been deeply connected to the city and its surroundings. For her, Amelisweerd was a cherished sanctuary, a place of tranquility and natural beauty that she could always turn to when the stresses of daily life threatened to overwhelm her. So, when I told her I was the appointed person at the infrastructure department to start leading this road expansion project through Amelisweerd, she was furious. Even though, things cooled down after a couple of weeks, she still was not fond of the idea. She had reluctantly come to terms with the reality of the situation (just like all the other Utrechters), but that didn’t mean she had to like it. And so, as we sat there on the couch, she couldn’t help but needle me about the project.

“It’s she” I corrected her, referring to Vera. Elise looked momentarily confused, then a sly smile crept across her face. “Ah so it’s a woman now, is it? That must be more interesting for you, then?” Elise quipped, her sharp tongue betraying her concern for our relationship. I knew what she was doing, of course. Elise had always been quick-witted, and enjoyed bantering with me, but her words had an underlying unease that was impossible to miss. Ever since I was given a role in the road widening project, our relationship had hit a rocky patch, marked by frequent fights, arguments, and long discussions. As tension grew between us, we struggled to find common ground and reconcile our differing opinions, interests, and dreams. I could feel the weight of our unresolved issues pressing down on me. Despite our fights and arguments, we had avoided discussing the elephant in the room – our divergent paths and uncertain future.

I took a sip of my wine and replied evenly, “She is indeed an interesting and ambitious woman”. Elise wasn’t satisfied with my answer and asked

again; “So what are the plans for now then, having meetings and ‘overwork’ more hours?” I sighted and brushed her question away with a hand wave. “I don’t have the energy left to argue, I’m going to bed.” As I finished my glass of wine and left the room, I couldn’t help but feel a pang of sadness. Elise had always been more than a partner to me – she was my best friend. But since the things have changed in Utrecht, our strong bond seemed to be fraying at the edges, and I didn’t know if we would ever be able to find our way back to each other.

As the weeks went on, Vera and I had been working tirelessly on the highway expansion project, attending countless meetings and appointments to ensure that everything was on track. Our collaboration had been going smoothly, and we were just about ready to begin construction. But then, everything changed after that stupid interview of Vera was published...

Tuesday. As any other day I was in a hurry to get to the office. I was running late, and unfortunately, this time I didn’t have time to grab my usual cup of coffee. As I entered the meeting room, I was surprised to find that Vera wasn’t there yet. In all our previous appointments, she had always been punctual, whereas I tended to arrive either just on time or a few minutes late. “I like to use my time as efficiently as possible,” she had told me once.

As I waited for her, I couldn’t help but wonder where she could be. Had she forgotten about our meeting? Was she stuck in traffic? It occurred to me then that, despite working so closely together over the past few weeks, I didn’t know much about her personal life. Who was Vera, really? What were her hobbies and interests? Does she own a cat or dog, or is she allergic? Does she have a partner...?

As I pondered these questions, Angela barged into the room. “Jonathan, did you see the news?!” she exclaimed. Startled, I replied, “No, why?” Angela walked over to the television in the corner of the room and switched it on to the news channel. The headline blared: “Breaking News: 28-year-old Woman Commits Suicide at the A27 Highway near Utrecht.”

“I just got off the phone with her parents,” Angela continued. “They were wondering if Vera was already here.”

My heart was pounding in my chest as I hear Vera's name. What if this woman was indeed Vera, that wouldn't be possible right? The Vera, he knew was vibrant, vivacious, and stunningly attractive. She was the object of his secret crush, and he couldn't imagine her ever feeling so down that she would take her own life. But as Angela's words sank in, he couldn't shake off the feeling that the woman who had died, was in fact, Vera.

Suddenly everything was turning, and I could feel the ground beneath my feet shaking. My mind went into a tailspin. I felt my stomach twisting inside my belly. I stumbled towards the bathroom, feeling my breakfast rise to my throat. I bent over the sink, puking uncontrollably. My cheeks were getting wet, as tears streamed down my face. Was I crying? Why am I crying?

The days that followed were a huge gray haze. Everything passed me by. The news of Vera's suicide spread across the country, and the citizens of Utrecht were going crazy. Everyone was on the edge of going insane. There was a tension in the air that I had never felt before. It was as if everyone was waiting for something to happen, a movement, a flicker, anything.

Over the weekend, I made the decision to pay a visit to Vera's parents. Even though I had never met them before, I wanted to express my support and offer any information that might be helpful for them, given my involvement in Vera's final weeks.

As I drove my car towards their street, my anger started to boil as I noticed the swarm of reporters stationed in front of their house. Their blatant disregard for the family's privacy infuriated me, and I slammed my car door shut before storming towards them. "Get out of there, you vultures!" I shouted, causing a few of the reporters to hastily retreat to their cars. Despite my outburst, the rest of them still eagerly awaited my reaction. "Hey, isn't that the civil servant who worked together with Vera?" I heard one of them say to his cameraman. The attention only made me more agitated and nervous.

Determined to move past the chaos, I walked up to the doorstep and rang the bell. I was greeted by an older woman. She had grey hair and was likely in her

60s, but you could see immediately that Vera was a resemblance of her. "Hello, you must be Jonathan, aren't you?" She asked friendly. "Yes, I am, do you mind if I could come in?" I asked. "Of course, my name is Isabel, I am Vera's mother" "Or I was..." she said, correcting herself.

I walked inside the house and noticed the beautiful crafted wooden beams. It was a lovely old family house. The hall filled with pictures of children and older family vacation trips. The scent of wood filled my nostrils as I walked towards the living room, the bright and airy space gave me a sense of comfort.

Sitting on a chair in the living room, I saw what I assumed to be, Vera's father. His big blue eyes and silver hair spoke of a life well-lived. However, you could see in his eyes a sense of hopelessness and sadness. "Hello, who are you?" he asked, looking up at me. "I'm Jonathan, I worked closely together with Vera on the highway expansion project until..." I trailed off, hesitant to bring up the painful elephant in the room. "Nice to meet you, I'm Marcel, Vera's dad" he said, his friendly tone putting me at ease. "Please, do sit down. Would you like a cup of tea?" I nodded, grateful for the opportunity to relax for a moment. As we waited for the tea to be served, an awkward silence filled the room. I started to second-guess my decision to visit, wondering if I should leave before causing any further discomfort.

Thankfully, Isabel entered the room with a plate of cookies and three tea mugs, breaking the silence. "So, how do you know Vera?" she asked kindly. I took a deep breath before answering, my voice trembling slightly with emotion. "Vera and I have been working together on the highway expansion project in The Hague for the last couple of weeks." "Ah, her dream project...she was always so enthusiastic about the idea that she could take the lead in this expansion, but even though she loved the job, it has always been very tough," Marcel said. "She always had people surrounding her, who didn't believe in her and her project, she had to move mountains to get people convinced and hooked. But she always managed to engage with people," Isabel followed. "Until that stupid interview..." Marcel said. "Interview?" I asked.

"Vera had been battling depression for a while, feeling overwhelmed by the relentless negativity

surrounding her project, including death threats and protests. Despite always appearing determined and confident on the outside, she was struggling internally. The recent interview with Utrechtop1 seemed like an opportunity to share her perspective with the right people, but her words were twisted by the reporter to serve her own agenda, reigniting activists protesting the road widening project. The resulting backlash from the interview, included death threats and hate mail, it was another devastating blow for Vera. She was unable to cope with this yet again..." said Isabel with a tremble in her voice.

After visiting Vera's parents, I sat in my car, my mind racing. It was a good conversation, Isabel and Marcel were grateful to talk to someone who had worked closely with Vera in her final weeks. But as I sat there, I couldn't help but feel like a fool. How had I not realized how much pain Vera was in? I could have helped her, prevented this tragedy. She was too young, too talented, and too beautiful. This should have never happened. I was disappointed in myself for not doing more, disappointed at the reporter of Utrechtop1, and disappointed in the government for not being inclusive enough at the beginning of the project. In my despair, I pounded my fists on the steering wheel, attracting the attention of an old woman who passed by with her dog, who quickly hurried away when I looked up at her angrily. I started the car's engine and drove home, feeling lost and overwhelmed.

At work, I was interrogated by all my superiors. What was my relationship with Vera like? What was our collaboration about? Had she mentioned anything about her personal struggles? Did I have an influence on any of these?

It was driving me crazy. Because I knew that all they wanted was to cover up the National Government's ass in the lawsuit. The Province of Utrecht sued the government for rejecting and violating their rights, and for not pursuing their ideals. Well good for them. Vera's incident was the final straw the province needed to make their point clear and most likely win the claim. They want me to testify for the National Government. Of course, I'll be surrounded by hundreds of lawyers who will help me minimize the damage and give me a script to play by the government's hands.

The days turned into weeks and the weeks into months, and before I knew it, we were called up to court. I had been reading my scripted testimony over and over again. At my work everyone was talking about this scandal. My bosses and their lawyers, gave me strict guidelines for this day, and I had to follow them otherwise...

As I stepped onto the stage to give my testimony, a sense of numbness washed over me. I knew I had to push through this moment, to suppress my emotions and personal opinions, and focus on representing the thing I resent so much now, my work. In this moment I realized; this was not who I truly was, and it was time to stop ignoring my own needs and desires. Then and there I decided that I shouldn't be playing the cards for someone else.

Somewhere along the way, I had lost sight of myself. But Vera had helped me rediscover who I truly was. She showed me that anything was possible, and that I had the power of my own life. But now she is dead, and I didn't even realize that she was depressed. I could've helped her, but who was I kidding, I couldn't even help myself. Her death taught me that life is scary, and people are often not who they appear to be on the surface.

But from now on, I am determined to live my life according to my own beliefs, and follow my dreams, wherever it will bring me. I am going to testify in the way I want it, the people should know what I think. I need to always remain true to myself. It will be difficult at times to stand up, but I know it is necessary for my own happiness.

I am ready to embrace the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, and to make the most of every precious moment in life. Inhale.

Eleonora

Adriana Eling

Most people had warned against going to Vera's funeral. It was a stupid idea. And what connection did she have with the deceased anyway, apart from having been a possible indirect cause for her death. Very bad idea really. Don't go, you won't gain anything from this. Sanne's friends' and family's words rang in her head as she stood as far away from the rest of the group as possible, desperately trying to attract as little attention as needed and avoid too many more insults and unwanted comments.

Indirect cause for suicide; it's not like she had outwardly bullied Vera until her soul had broken down. It was more of an unfortunate trigger button which had been accidentally pushed precisely at the wrong moment in time in Vera's life. How could she have known that Vera had been standing at the edge for the past few years, drowning under the pressure that such a project could effectively cause for a human being? How could she have known that Vera had stopped taking her medication from fear that it was blurring her vision in these final days of carrying out the project through the last hurdle of missing documentation? How could she have known that Vera had come to a point in her life where she'd felt more alone and helpless than even in the worst of her teenage years combined?

It was exhausting to think about. And certainly those in Vera's circle, work colleagues perhaps, had noticed something was off. Surely they had. Undoubtedly they would then have a reason to want to blame her. Most likely they now pictured her as the careless bully in the situation. Made money from creating a wreck out of people's lives.

Let them think what they wanted, there was nothing to stop them. And rumours played a big part in this. Sanne knew this only too well. The reason for suicide hadn't even ever been confirmed. You couldn't stop someone like that from taking what

they deemed the only viable path to getting to a more peaceful "state of mind", if you could call it that. Once you started down that road, it was nearly impossible to turn back. Perhaps was this only possible when you had a strong enough support system, people, things or goals to drive you out of the seemingly ever-thickening fog. Evidently this hadn't been the case for Vera. No, it evidently hadn't. A waste of a life really. Vera had appeared to Sanne as being one of those extremely intelligent and hard-working, driven individuals. There had been a certain comfort to the woman's way of speaking, especially before the tension had started to settle in and the interview had had to come to a screeching halt. The minister's voice and body language had instilled immediate trust, and despite her cool and at-first calm exterior, Sanne had detected a familiar warmth and perhaps even on a certain level, slight insecurity in the occasional diversion of eye contact from the interviewer.

The walk back to the church was even more silent than on the way there. Sanne hung to the back of the considerable mass of black suits, hoping that by lagging behind people would forget she existed, something more tough to do if she'd sped up ahead in full view of everyone. Her slick black pointed pumps were getting their second layer of mud, the low heels barely enough to protect her cold ankles from getting a good dose. As usual she hadn't thought of the practical details, too worried about not making too bad of an impression on the people who already hated her.

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"Sanne, you're early! How was it? We just finished having lunch. Have you had anything to eat yet?" Sanne barely had enough time to take off her shoes before her mother was sprinting to the door to greet her. Eleonora had never fully let go of that motherly worry she'd consistently demonstrated as Sanne had alternated between her years of complacency and long hours of studying to learn every assigned poem perfectly by heart, and periods of attempted rebelliousness by purposefully forgetting about the

weekly dictation and stuffing an extra change of clothes in her bag before leaving for school. The excitement Sanne had initially felt on that morning when she'd left for the interview had quickly shifted to being a bitter taste at the back of her throat day in day out, a memory she'd rather not have to face for the next few decades. It wasn't that she'd go back in time and not ask for the interview, she didn't have the slightest idea that on that rather sunny-looking day she would effectively sign someone's death sentence. She would mostly rather not have to deal with what was the unfortunate current reality of things, a reality that saw her receiving numerous daily threats from random email addresses with no sender info.

A reality that forced her every day to wake up and, despite feeling the corners of her mouth twist slightly downwards and her entire body wanting to break down the minute she got onto her feet, put on a composed face for her daughter and try to cheer her up when she complained about going to school. And then there was everyone on the outside, those who didn't know her, but who had managed to come to hate her in a matter of seconds when reading the news about Vera's death; it mattered that they not see her struggling, that they see that she was strong, that she was not going to give up her job, give up her life because of what had happened. It mattered that she push away the images of Vera's face which popped up in her mind every night before she fell asleep and every morning before she'd opened her eyes. The images of Vera, tired as she was, trying hard to keep somewhat of a smile on her face as the interviewer bit by bit discredited every aspect of a project she'd held to heart for 20 years.

The article had come out three days later, both in the Interview Specials section of the regional magazine, and on the front page of one of the online national newspapers. It was not pretty. The activists had unsurprisingly got very agitated when they realised the project was to go ahead earlier than expected. Blockades were to take place over the entirety of the following weekend. Chaos really. Couldn't say the article hadn't sold well. Even if it did mean going a

little against the previous pieces she'd written.

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Eleonora had evidently started asking questions when a handwritten note managed to make its way into the family letterbox. "I knew this would happen. How many more did you receive at your place?" Sanne had come across a half dozen of them waiting on her doorstep Tuesday afternoon. "None." "Right, well please find a way of making sure no more end up here. I think you'd rather not have Sofie try to read one when she's got nothing to do." No, rather not.

Sanne didn't know what the situation at school was like. Sofie never talked much about it. She was considerably quieter than the other children in her year. This worried Sanne to great extents; she'd often questioned whether Sofie had an issue she wasn't talking about, something Sanne wouldn't be able to notice even if she tried hard enough to extricate any amount of information from her daughter. She'd gone so far as to talk to her paediatrician, asking whether she thought this was normal or not. Yes, quite normal. "As long as she still more or less interacts when you are talking to her, there shouldn't be any cause for worry. We can speak again if she suddenly becomes mute."

When the negative publicity had started appearing following the news of Vera's death, Eleonora had suggested she bring her granddaughter to school to ensure there wouldn't be too many negative encounters with other parents. "Well that's a terrible example for Sofie. What, so now she thinks she has to shy away from society if they don't like her?"

"She's six! It's not like she knows what's going on, is it?"

"Believe it or not, children absorb what they see around them."

“Well then why on earth would it be you taking her to school? You want her to see what’s going on?”

“I want her to understand that she should stand up for herself if she’s being tossed around.”

“Right, well good luck with that. Again, she’s six; the only thing she’s going to notice are the hundreds of faces looking at her strangely.”

That was the end of it. Sanne knew what she was doing, one thing she wouldn’t allow for was her daughter getting bullied and not knowing how to respond to it. She’d made that mistake once, wasn’t going to allow the same thing to happen to Sofie.

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Sanne straitened up as much as possible in her chair as she looked ahead to the all-too-calm-looking project manager.

“So what exactly is your main aim, or say...the main thing you’d like to achieve with this project?”
Don’t answer. “Well, mainly what we’d hope to achieve when, and if, the project is carried out, comprises of, on the one hand, a congestion-reduced time of travel across that stretch of highway, letting people arrive at their destination on time, and secondly, well, that this reduced congestion limits the emissions which are a current problem as I am sure you are aware of.”

“Yes, well it’s interesting, indeed, that you mention this reduction in emissions because there have been studies carried out that prove that your project is rather inefficient in this regard, as it would account for a mere 7 second improvement on the highway, not to mention at the cost of cutting down a large part of the local forest. How can you explain this, and how can you explain that other options with this kind of budget were not looked into?”

Don’t answer. “Seven seconds is, unfortunately, not the accurate statistic. Expanding the highway to fourteen lanes would in fact reduce the travel time

by much more than 7 seconds. If it really were only for such a small gain, we wouldn’t be building it.”

“Indeed, that is interesting. Again, I’m going to return to my previous question: what exactly makes you believe that an expansion of the A27 was the best way to use such large funds. Funds which, if I remember correctly, had accumulated from the gas earnings since nearly 20 years ago.”

Don’t answer, please don’t answer. If Sanne’s future self were ever to travel back in time, she’d shove cotton balls into Vera’s mouth to stop her from fuelling her interrogator’s carefully constructed profile of an evil highway-building villain.

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“You should make use of your time, you know. You’re still young, your daughter even more so; how do you think building highways within a few blocks from our house is going to impact her health?”
Eleonora was starting to get on her daughter’s nerves.

“Yes, well, protesting is not going to pay my bills, unless you’d rather do that for me?”

“I’m not saying you should stop working, but can you not make use of your position to be a little more helpful?”

“Again, writing love letters to the activists is not going help me sustain my job.”

“Ok, ok, I was just wondering. But you know what’s best for you. I myself could never do what you’re doing, so I’ll keep my mouth shut from now on.”

“Thank you, you do that.”

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The air loomed a dark grey over Sanne’s head as she left the house, Sofie quietly skipping ahead towards the main road that led to the Amelisweerd. It was nice to know that even in this weather her daughter still found some joy in going out for their afternoon

walk. It was frequent with Sofie to be reminded of the easy ways of early childhood, the innocence and the seeming wonder at the world around. She remembered once seeing things through that same lens; the so-called good times. It still happened occasionally for Sanne to feel that exaltation, the brand-new “breath of fresh air”, the realisation that there was so much beyond the simple everyday routine and familiar surroundings, and that even within these close surroundings there was a whole realm of new possibilities, a kind of dimension beyond those one could directly witness. Mostly, at 27, it was easy to fall into the self-inflicted gloominess of perceived repetition of daily activities. As they entered the forest, the greenish-brown surroundings reflecting the dull atmosphere of early spring, Sanne watched her daughter alternately try to get close to a lost-looking robin while tentatively trying not to scare it away, balance her way on the out-growing tree roots, and back up and grasp the hem of her mother’s sleeve before hiding behind her as a seemingly agitated golden retriever started jogging around the six-year old.

Up ahead to their right a field of faded yellow-green grassland spread out, bordered by the dark trunks of oaks worn bare by the harshness of a winter only now beginning to fade out. Sanne had grown up trotting along on the same exact paths, past the same fields of grassland enclosed, mostly, by these same oak trees which still remained standing here twenty years later. Not for much longer would this be the case, if indeed the highway expansion was to go through. Why go through with it, even after countless research that proved it would not be of any more benefit to society than an improved rail network. Most of them had never even lived in Utrecht. It didn’t make much sense really. Not that she herself made much sense either.

“The blockades are escalating, you know.” Eleonora was reading the morning paper at the kitchen table. “Hundreds were arrested yesterday afternoon. You should at least make some sort of coverage of it...”
“I will, thanks for reminding me. I was actually hoping you’d read it quickly before I send it in

tonight, if you have time?”

“Huh, well I’m flattered! Of course I’ll read it.”
When Sanne finished reading and re-reading over her article that afternoon, she felt a sense of purpose. She’d finally managed to express her views on the matter at hand without thinking about the logistics of how popular or unpopular the article had the potential to be when she’d submit it to her agent.

After sending a copy to her mother’s email address, Sanne proceeded to take a break by the street-facing window of her single-sized studio. As she observed the occasional car passing by three stories below, she wondered at what the Amelisweerd area would look like once they’d start to build the highway. How long it would take for them to cut down the hundreds of cumbersome trees before beginning to drill into the ground for what could be the next ten years to come, what exact kind of damage would ensue, what it would feel like to walk through the same forest which had just been stripped of an entire chunk of land from one moment to the next. Hopefully the state would eventually get the message, probably not.



Organic(0)30

Stories by
Nyah Franken
Maartje Rijnja
José Vindas van der Wielen
Oliver Wijnmaalen

The press conference

Nyah Franken, Maartje Rijnja, José Vindas van der Wielen, Oliver Wijnmaalen

This Monday the mayor announced a big event, she said it would be one of the biggest events ever held in Utrecht! The event will celebrate the 3-year anniversary of the Organic(0)30 policy! The city will be transformed into a festive place where everyone can share their stories and experiences concerning Organic(0)30 and even the mayor herself will be giving a speech to not only all the citizens of Utrecht but to the whole country. In which she will tell her experiences of the policy. She has also promised to open the floor to the citizens to share their opinions. This is surprising, as she hasn't really done this since the policy was implemented.

The press conference will be held in the heart of Utrecht; under the Domtower. There's no better place than that to celebrate Utrecht, right? It will be in two weeks' time, on the 20th of October. The whole day will be full of activities and celebrations all around the center, but at 5 pm the mayor will come up the stage and give her speech. Something we, as Utrecht Green, are looking forward to. She hasn't gotten into the specifics as to what she's going to say yet.

In this special edition of Utrecht Green, we will give an explanation of what Organic(0)30 means and we will look further into what this policy has meant for the city of Utrecht in the last few years. Our name is 'Utrecht Green', and therefore we strive for the most sustainable future, but we've also not been ignorant. The complaints about this policy have gotten stronger and stronger and therefore this edition will highlight the different sides of the story. We will go into more detail about who plays a role in the system and what their power relations actually are.

What is Organic(0)30?

The Organic (0)30 policy, which has been in place for three full years now, is headed off with the ambitious goal of reducing the sale of non-organic products within the city limits of Utrecht to zero. This, along with additions to the initiative has had a great effect on the outlook and future of the city,

diets are changing, and even the environment is changing.

It is not uncommon to walk around and see people planting food in raised beds on every corner, even some old flower beds have been replaced to grow food now. Buildings are now greener than ever, with live plants hanging off the sides of buildings and old construction being removed for the newer, greener buildings. It is not crazy to say that the changes in the city have been drastic. Some people like the changes and some others are not so sure but nevertheless, it seems like the changes have made a lasting impact on the city, so the city is green now and that's the way it will stay.

These modifications in the buildings have been helpful for everyone, with increasing temperatures, the shade provided by the plants as well as their cooling effects are welcome in the city. A new place to be is a new opportunity for change, and change indeed happened in Utrecht for the last 3 years. Back in time, gardening was seen as a practice that was either done at a commercial scale or as a hobby, whereas now it has become a key part of every household, and everyone has the same hobby now.

Investing in a green future

Oliver Wijnmaale

6 am, my alarm starts ringing. Set earlier than usual so I can have a quick 15 minutes in the sauna after my workout. Especially today I want to start the day with a clear mind. Why you might ask, I'll tell you later. First, I'm going to hit the gym, all chest no legs, like my favorite rapper Kanye West used to say. Bummer he got canceled tho. I pad past my wife so I don't wake her. Although my friends always say, that because I already have a wife I shouldn't go to the gym so often. I still go. First of all, they are all set up with some boring women in their 40s, so I don't take advice from them. As Ye would've said: I don't take advice from people less successful than me. Secondly, the gym isn't a place where only the body is built, it's also a place where the mind gets sorted. That's why I customized the basement of my house to a fully operational gym. Oh yeah, I almost forget the most important part, the discipline you build in the gym can be used in every part of life. The gym gets you the discipline and work ethic not a lot of people have, but lots of people do desire. Oke first things first, let's go.

The sauna always gets me thinking: the warmth is so calming, yet the heat is so pressing. As the moist vapors into the air, my thoughts also do. I always leave the sauna empty-headed. When leaving the sauna in my backyard. I see the morning sun, I feel it. Although it's not quite as hot as the sauna it sure is soothing. I feel its warmth, I feel the pump, today's gonna be a good day Andrew, I tell myself. You might be wondering, am I some kind of spiritual guru doing nothing but feeling his senses? No not at all. I describe myself as a self-made man, assertive, quick-witted, and of course my sixth sense; creating money. I head upstairs again for my shower. It's 7:00. As I get dressed in my tight trousers and fitted shirt, I Hear my lovely wife waking up. Hi Andrew, had a good sleep? Yes honey, how 'bout you? Great, those new supplements seem to work perfectly!

While I put on my Armani cologne she headed down in her pajamas. Oh, she looked so good in those pajamas. The thin blue striped trousers and blouse matched perfectly with her light blond hair and blue eyes. I got it for her last year on her 24th birthday in Dubai, when I was there for business. Anyway, it's time for my breakfast, and vitamins, the most important things to look young and fresh. Although I'm 42 I would say I look in my mid-30s. I thank this of course to my morning routine but also for my diet. Around my 30s I started experimenting with eating organic food. It opened a world for me. I felt more energetic. So on my 31st birthday, I decided to eat organic foods only. When I turned organic, I just knew this was going to be the future, So I invested all the money which I got from trading NFTs, in the Dutch organic food market. Little did I know that organic food was on Utrecht's political agenda. When the organic 35 plan was announced my stocks went through the roof, it was multiplied by 20. Although the judge decided I wasn't guilty, I still got called out for trading with inside info. I guess I was just lucky.

Anyway, I walked down in my fresh clothes, my feet touched the polished marble floor. I looked around halfway and looked at my shoe rack. I think I'll go for Alexander McQueen today. As I entered the living area, or should I say the tv area because we also had an eating area and an area for drinks and a good chat. I didn't see my wife. I guess she already went to the backyard and got busy in the kitchen garden. I can't stress this enough but she's really the best. I met her at a food truck. The guy behind the counter said, one falafel without yogurt dressing and extra pomegranate seeds. We both walked up to the counter, but she indeed ordered first. From that moment on I knew she was a foodie too. Such beautiful eyes and such good taste, the rest is history. Her name: Estelle. Estelle nowadays spends most hours in our kitchen garden and she

helps people in the local community farm in front of our house, in Wilhelmina Park. Ever since Organic 030 started, Wilhelmina Park has been converted into a local community farm. As a kid I couldn't even imagine what the houses on the Koningslaan would look like from the inside, I grew up in a small apartment in Zuilen. My parents didn't have too much. They said the system didn't want them to win, my father worked in the garbage processing industry but got quickly replaced by robots. Then he tried the Mc drive but again got replaced by robots. The system was against him, he said.

I could never live like that. I always thought there was a way to beat the system, so I started watching youtube and came across NFTs. An easy way to make money and you only needed an internet connection. I remember the day I told my mom and pops I wanted to borrow 20 euros to start this business. They were strictly against it. They wouldn't let me spend time and money on digital things," we live in the real world. "So you have to do real work". Little did they know. Eventually, I saved up some money and started NFT'ing. I wasn't allowed to work at home because, well you know why; robots this, robots that. I didn't care and started NFT-ing from local cafes, I only came home to sleep. In my late teens, I never talked to them. They weren't interested in me, and I wasn't interested in them.

Eventually, I started to earn more money, while they were relying on safety nets. I tried to explain 'm so many times a digital era was coming but it usually ended up in a fight. While my business was growing, I kind of neglected school. I was in my last year of high school but my business was also growing rapidly that year. At parent-teacher night, they said I had little chance of graduating. I remember the night my parents got back so vividly: "Andrew, I've had enough!" said my father while he stormed into my room. "From now on you're only focusing on school. NO MORE DIGITAL DISTRACTIONS. NO MORE "WORKING" FOR YOU PAL. YOU SHOW ME YOUR HOMEWORK EVERY DAY." Scared but filled with anger I said to him: You just don't get it huh? There is no future in school

dad, there is no money in school. You're too old-fashioned, too narrow-minded, and honestly, you're just a lazy and selfish father. You won't even ask me how my work is doing. All you care about is getting money and spending it on a night with your stupid friends. I am much better without you as a dad.

My dad looked at me like I wasn't his son anymore and said very softly, like the calm before a storm: "It's very simple son, you obey my rules, in MY GODDAMN HOUSE" he yelled at me, or you can kick it. Got it?

I had heard enough, I was making more money than this sunken household made all year. I had made up my mind, rented a little apartment near Utrecht. Dropped out of school and was eager to work my ass off just to show them. And look at me now.

Woah...uh...sorry..got a little carried away
What time is it, hun?
"7:32" I heard from the garden

Alright, it's almost time. Oh, right I didn't tell you why it's a special day. Today it's the 5-year anniversary of the organic 030 plan. The major is giving a speech about how good it's all been going. And I got an invitation. She asked me to give a little speech about organic 030 but I didn't think that was such a good idea. As an investor, talking about your own investments doesn't sound very honest. I would just talk about all the health benefits, all greenery, and all that good stuff. not very sincere coming from an investor in the organic food industry, right? I don't want it to backfire. Keeping quiet can't backfire anyways.

8 clock. I do some work on my computer till 14:00 and then I'll run some errands. I had to get some very specific supplements my wife had asked for, so she could stay fit. She already is of course, but she's a perfectionist. I love that about her. I had to get to the other side of Utrecht, I usually don't go there.

— 14:30 —

Zuilen was the neighborhood I grew up in. I haven't been there for ages, I wondered if my parents still lived in that little apartment of theirs. I hope I run into them and can show off my expensive outfit and talk about all my achievements, and prove them wrong. As I walked by Juliana Park, which has been turned into a community garden since Organic 030, I noticed that the park didn't look and feel the same as the garden in front of my house. It was mostly unused land and I only saw children working on the land. I stared at them trying to figure out if it really were children. Suddenly they turned their heads, I started walking as if I wasn't looking. Suddenly I could feel the tension of Zuilen. It felt like every car was rushing and every person walking by was in a hurry. Everything looked suspicious, although nothing was really happening.

I arrived at Frederick Food Sup's. The store my wife had sent me to. I nicely waited in line and looked around. Usually, I have some sort of priority pass to skip lines to save time and time is money. But I guess in this little store they didn't care. The store was a bit odd, it was filled with plants and it was welcoming, but at the same time, it only sold pills out of plastic bottles. I looked around and saw not only vitamins but also pills that make you feel like you're stuffed but didn't contain any calories. These must be the so-called saturation pills I had to get for my wife. This healthy lifestyle is really catching on I thought, even in Zuilen.

The woman in front of me was maybe a bit too skinny if you ask me. And she had this real messy brown hair. She asks the man at the counter, Frederick, I suppose if she could get one batch of the saturation pills.

No!

"But Frederick" she goes, "my kids are getting angry with me for not giving them enough food." Frederic says: I get it, but this isn't the right way, moreover you still owe me 28 euros for the last batch I gave you, now get out!

She walked out defeated.

UHHH.. one batch of saturation pills?? I asked as if nothing happened.

"Sure 28 Euros," Frederick said very politely.

I received my batch and walked out of the store. I turned around and saw the whole line behind me filled with, no offense, dirty people. Was everyone buying those pills, because they couldn't afford food? No way it can't be, there are community gardens, right? And those looked empty to me. They just need to work harder! I said to myself. To ease myself more I added that the organic 030 had only increased health and as the mayor said: Is the future of farming.

— 16:00 —

Honey! I got your pills!!

No response, she probably was out in the community garden. I went to look for her. As I walked through the garden looking for my wife, I couldn't stop thinking about the garden in Zuilen. Why was it all deprived? Why were there children working on their own, shouldn't they be supervised or something?

There she was, as beautiful as ever although her hands were dirty. I waved at her, like I hadn't seen her in ages, and walked towards her to hand over the pills.

Thank you drew, she said.

No thanks.

I just wanted to say bye before I go to the town meeting.

"Sure you don't just wanna stay here, I mean if you're not going to speech why should you even go" Estelle said

Sorry hun, I have to. You know I'd rather stay here with you but it's an important meeting for my investments. I have to go. See you later, at dinner tonight?

Yes, looking forward to it! These beets turned out

amazing and I can't wait to cook them for you. See you later, good luck!

— 17:00 —

I arrived at the meeting. Right in front of the Dom Tower. Iconic for Utrecht, just as iconic as this policy. I was nervous, the meeting could influence my stocks. The mayor walked up to her stage. I wasn't even listening to her, I only focused on things that could go wrong.

The mayor said her visionary words, all those wishy washy, vague, political language. "A better future" "prosperous lifestyle" you get it. It did seem to go well, everyone looked alright with it. Andrew you did again I said to myself, you made a great investment. Then the mayor opened up questions for the public.

A farmer started questioning his ability to adapt to this new way of producing. The mayor answered politically correct and; emphasizes the ways farmers could access organic farming technique training. Nicely done.

Then a woman started saying to the mayor how she isn't able to provide for her children, she was scared. She looked like a woman who would do anything for her children. 3 children to feed, and couldn't get any due to high food prices.

My trip to Zuilen immediately came to mind once again, was this woman really not able to make some time to grow some food and feed her children? Is that why the gardens were empty? Is it because she doesn't have time, her kids need to work on the farm? It can't be. What does this mean for my stocks?

The Mayor responded to her: with the option of community gardens and again some wishy washy terms, and ended the meeting.

I wasn't satisfied with my thoughts or with how the meeting went. I felt uncomfortable, didn't speak to

anyone, and left. Headed home to eat my freshly cooked meal.

— 19:30 —

"What's wrong Drew, usually you love my beets, What's going on in that smart mind of yours?"

"Nothing I said"

"Drew..." she said while looking me cute but serious in my eyes.

It's just, this whole organic 030 plan, hun?

Great, right? I love it so much, the garden is right in front of our house

Yes.. of course.. But when I went to Zuilen today it felt different. It didn't feel good.

"What do you mean"

You see hun, we're off great over here. Beautiful house, plenty of time, and plenty of resources. But what about those who can't afford this? What about them?

"Work harder and smarter" right? Estelle said, as if she was quoting me. "There's no such thing as a faulty system, there's always a way out. Come on Drew, look at yourself! You build your own wealth, this doesn't sound like you at all!

"Yeah, yeah I know you're right, but this woman, I saw it in her eyes she looked scared, hopeless, she wasn't able to feed her children". But yeah, I guess you're right, they're probably not working smart enough I guess.

Alright, good talk.

I'm sorry hun, it's not your beets but I'm gonna lay down for a little while. This day was exhausting

As I laid down those thoughts from earlier crept up on me again. Was this really the future of farming? Was it accessible to everyone? Should I even invest in this if it may ruin livelihoods? Or will just someone else do it? Or are these just some evening thoughts, my morning routine will take care off

Anyways. Good night.

The mayor

Nyah Franken

— 5:52 —

It was nearly six in the morning when hostile thoughts and a racing heart rudely tugged the Mayor of Utrecht from her sleep. A few seconds passed before she regained memory of her life and, unfortunately, the day ahead, which she quickly realized was at the root of the anxiety currently surging through her body. Upon this recollection, she immediately fell into a new state of panic, as waking up on her own has never once meant good news. Anxiously, the Mayor reached for her alarm clock, but she was relieved to find out that she had still three more hours before she was supposed to wake up.

Her relief, however, appeared to be of a fleeting nature, as it was quickly washed away by yet another wave of panic. How was she ever going to succeed, or even survive, today with barely five hours of sleep? She debated trying to go back to sleep, but with her body feeling like she just shot a quadruple espresso, she decided against it. This was truly not the day to start with the tedious sensation of failure. No, today she needed all the encouragement she could get. She turned over to her right, where she found her Partner still peacefully asleep, her face covered in a serene, almost joyful expression. The Mayor felt the corners of her mouth slightly lift. In whatever part of the subconsciousness her Partner was, she wanted to be there.

Having finally made the decision to make herself useful in these hours, the Mayor rose from her bed and walked over to the window on the other side of the room. Carefully, she lifted the curtain and reached to open the window. However, the old window didn't budge immediately, requiring the Mayor to significantly increase her force. Being suddenly no longer able to resist the Mayor's efforts, the window abruptly opened, but not without causing an unexpectedly loud noise. The Mayor swiftly looked over her shoulder, but to her relief, her Partner was still vast asleep. This gave her enough reason to count her fight with the window as her first victory of the day, and she quickly prayed

that it wouldn't be the last. The Mayor stuck her head out of the window and bravely greeted the day. Despite her rising levels of distress, she was still able to appreciate this charming October morning. The familiar chestnuts outside her window stood majestically alongside the slow canal, their leaves turning into various shades of orange and red. Some of them sailed peacefully through the crisp morning air, obediently following the rhythm of the gentle fall breeze. The Mayor looked up at the sky. The sun had not yet risen, but the sky was already flawlessly blue, granting the promise of an unseasonably warm, sunlit day. She liked to think of this as Summer's last hurrah, before Winter would maliciously creep in and make all of her work irreversibly fall.

Considering this, the Mayor wondered if there was ever a limit to the Universe's irony. After all, the celebration taking place today, in honour of the three-year anniversary of Agri (0)30, was intended as a sort of hurrah, although it was unclear on whose behalf. Certainly not hers, she knew that much. The current reality couldn't be further from her initial vision of the policy. She wasn't even really profiting from the current situation, though, admittedly, she also wasn't personally harmed by it. Not in the way she knew some of her citizens were, in any case. Nevertheless, the current tensions made it far from unthinkable that a fall of some kind was lurking around somewhere, hiding in the fickle voids of an uncertain future. Then, considering that she herself, as the Mayor, had become the face of the policy, it was painfully likely that this fall was going to be primarily hers.

Continuously adding to the Mayor's displeasure regarding her own circumstances, it was also her who was meant to give a speech today, supposedly celebrating and promoting the policy to an audience that had largely grown to despise her. Her heart sank multiple miles at the mere thought of herself standing up there, alone and vulnerable, pointlessly searching for the right words, while she looked down on an unforgiving sea of hate. She let out a long, weary sigh. How did she end up in this position?

Needing a break from her endless supply of self-pity, the Mayor decided that it was time for another victory. Since her favourite types of victories were

the ones that involved making her Partner happy, and her Partner's happiness was invariably sparked with food, the Mayor was set on making her the best organic breakfast she has ever had. With newfound determination, she walked over to the closet, slipped into her wool slippers and wrapped herself in her fluffy dressing gown. She was ready to harvest some produce.

— 7:07 —

The Mayor stood outside on the veranda behind her house, holding an empty fruit basket in one hand and a pair of kitchen scissors in the other. The sun had mercifully begun its daily journey across the sky, its light nourishing the garden before her. The rectangular plot was largely occupied by the twelve middle sized beds on which, respectively, twelve different vegetable species resided: carrots. Along the left sides of the plot, stood several perennial fruit plants and a small tree orchard. In the back of the garden stood a small green house, accompanied with the spacious hen house that was inhabited by four fluffy, brown chickens, whose cheerful cackles indicated a successful lay of eggs. An encouraging feeling of pride submerged as she regarded her perfect kitchen garden. Now this is what the Mayor had envisioned for the policy.

How she got introduced to the 'prophecy' vision on agriculture

A loud cackle interrupted the sudden wave of nostalgia the Mayor found herself lost in. She looked over at the hen house, where the chickens were restlessly picking at an empty ground, reminding her of the current task at hand: breakfast. Spinach omelette on toast with a side of freshly picked blackberries, the Mayor decided as she walked over to the hen house to feed the chickens and collect the eggs.

With four middle sized eggs in her basket, she went over to one of the beds on which spinach resided and started to carefully cut the young leaves one by one. The mundane character of the task left enough room for her mind to wander again.

The beginning of her career, how she became mayor then, her nickname 'minority mayor' being a woman, queer, immigrant

Back in the house, she decided that she probably needed a coffee before she could successfully make breakfast. She took the coffee jar from the cupboard and ran a scoop of beans through the manual coffee grinder. After pressing the beans flatly into the piston, she clicked it into the coffee machine and pushed the espresso button. She paused for a moment to appreciate the smell of the liquid gold slowly pouring into her mug, before she went on to add a splash of oat milk into her milk frother.

Coffee was one of the many products that had become a luxury product due to the policy. It had become possible to grow coffee in green houses, but this was still a small-scale and costly process. Of course, she knew that she really shouldn't keep buying it, but her coffee addiction held a stronger power over her than her principles. And maybe, she thought, with the current rate of developments, coffee could soon be produced at higher quantities and lower costs, and everyone could buy coffee again. Maybe it wasn't all that bad. Maybe the investors and innovators were right, and she had been naïve to think otherwise. Had she truly been so naïve, or arrogant even, to expect everyone to just give up their convenient lifestyles and thank her for it? What had she been thinking? How on earth could she have been so delusional? She felt her chest tightening again and her heart beating faster and faster.

The sudden absence of noise from the espresso machine startled her out of her spiral. Maybe her Partner was better served by a coffee than herself, she thought, as she took the mug from the machine and poured the frothed oat milk into it.

Conversation with Partner about contingency plan, moving US to renovate Partner's old family farm and sell their produce to farmer markets.

— 10:47 —

The Mayor was brushing her teeth in the bathroom. After a while, she spat out the toothpaste and wiped her mouth clean with a towel. She looked at herself in the mirror, and the mirror looked back with tired eyes, surrounded by dark circles and pale, lustreless skin. A few streaks of grey hair ran through her otherwise thick, black hair. Her face was wiped of any emotion or expression, which presented a

sharp contrast to the vibrant panic that was soaring underneath.

For once, her Asian genes weren't washed up against what she encountered in the mirror. She truly looked forty-two. Maybe even older. Why couldn't even her face pull itself together on this given day? A large sigh started to build up in her chest again, but then she remembered having once heard that less beautiful people are generally taken more seriously. Ah, she thought to herself, another victory!

The Mayor had walked over to her room and now stood in front of her wardrobe full of suits. She contemplated wearing her cobalt blue one, which she usually reserved for celebratory events or parties. While today's anniversary was supposed to be exactly that, she was aware that weren't many people going to be celebrating. So, it would really not help her case to wear her most extravagant suit, while talking to the people who struggled to put food on their table about the very reason they struggled. Not to mention that she was also the person who they deemed responsible for it all.

Upon further consideration, the Mayor decided that her navy suit would be most appropriate. It was simple, yet firm. She got dressed and observed herself in the mirror next to her closet. In just a minute she had transformed from an anxious, tired woman to a confident mayor. At least she could always rely on her suit, she thought. Whenever she wore it, she could handle whatever was coming her way, because she knew that it was all aimed at the suit, and what it represented, but not so much the person that was underneath. Their critiques could never truly hurt her; only the role she took on when she wore the suit. Or that was what she actively convinced herself of each day. What she also convinced herself of every day was that, while she would of course rather be a widely loved mayor than a unanimously hated one, her citizens were at least united in their hate, and unity is a wonderful thing, regardless of its cause.

Still, she could never fully rob herself of the small hope that maybe one day everyone would understand that she truly had their best interests. Maybe they would even praise her courage for intentionally being the scapegoat. Or maybe she just fooled herself into having even that tiny bit of

agency, but was she actually no more than a clueless puppet who was being moved in whatever direction seemed convenient. Or maybe she wasn't even that clueless, but she just told herself all kinds of stories, because she sleeps so much better believing that she is doing everything she can, but that she as well had become a powerless victim in the system.

But occasionally the doubts would creep back in and keep her tossing and turning at night, because was she honestly doing everything she could? Or had she just given up upon the realization that the policy was heading in a direction far from her own ideals? Was she just closing her eyes to all that was wrong and justifying it to herself, because what could she do about it?

This internal debate occupied her mind at least once or twice a day. But whatever the truth turned out to be wouldn't change the fact that she had to give this speech later today, and she could spend her time far more useful by preparing for it. In fact, it was almost time for her meeting with her Advisor. Maybe I'll figure it out tomorrow, the Mayor thought as she exited the bedroom and headed in the direction of her office.

— 16:37 —

The Mayor sat on a stool in the Dom tower as her makeup was being done by her Makeup artist. As she took in her surroundings, she realized that she, the Mayor of Utrecht, had in fact never been inside of the city's most iconic landmark. She chose to attribute this to the fact that the tower had been under construction during the first five years that she lived here, and after that, well, she had of course been quite busy becoming Utrecht's most controversial mayor.

'Are those grey hairs new? I don't think I have seen those before,' the makeup artist asked while he blended the very generous layer of concealer under her eyes. 'Yes, unfortunately. I discovered them this morning.' He smiled empathetically at her. 'No worries, I have something for that. Are you nervous for your grand speech?' 'Well, I have practiced it about 46 times, so what happens further lies beyond my control.' The Mayor tried to sound casual, but her trembling voice held very little persuasive power.

She did practice a bunch, though, after her meeting. But what difference was that going to make with a speech that insensible? If people weren't already planning riots, then they sure would now. Revolutions even. She had tried to bring this up, but her Advisor told her not to worry. 'Act confident, and no one will question you,' were his exact words, if she remembered correctly. 'Besides, a few people have been asked very nicely to share their warm experiences with Organic (0)30 after your speech. This will undoubtedly help the rest to remember their own.' She wasn't too sure what he meant by this, but she chose to not ask further questions. Instead, she focused her energy on mastering the one thing in her control; acting confident.

— 16:59 —

The Mayor cautiously climbed up the stairs leading to the stage. As she walked towards the centre of the stage, she looked straight ahead, with her chin slightly tilted upwards and her shoulders pressed back. Act confident, act confident, act confident. She kept repeating, nearly screaming, the words in her head, eradicating any room for other thoughts to wriggle between. Positive affirmative mantra meditation was the name of the method. She had once heard about it from one of the investors, Andrew she believed, at an Invest Organic event.

After what felt like a small eternity, she reached the tall press conference thingy in the middle of the stage. A copy of the speech was already waiting for her on the desk. She let her eyes linger on it a little too long, before finally finding the courage to face the crowd.

Looking around the audience, the Mayor couldn't help but wonder if this is what Marie Antoinette felt like on the day of her trial. Though of course she preferred to self-indulge and think of herself as Jeanne d'Arc, a tragic hero rather than an ignorant thief. Maybe one day, if the policy ever proves to be a success, she would also be declared as holy, she jokingly thought to herself. Nevertheless, remaining realistic as always, she knew that Marie Antoinette's story was much more fitting, what with her last words being "Pardon me, Sir, I meant not to do it," after she accidentally stepped on the toes of her executioner.

She took a couple of deep breaths. Then she started to speak. She had learned the whole thing by heart, but she still looked down at the paper each time she felt her confidence slip away at the sight of a disapproving citizen.

A few minutes later, she was relieved to find that she had made it to the last sentence. 'Now, I would like to invite you, the citizens of Utrecht, to share some of your heart-warming experiences with Organic (0)30.'

— 22:18 —

The Mayor had just taken a long bath and was now on her way to bed, though her mind was still trying to process what had happened today.

After she had run from the stage, her Partner drove her home. They both weren't talking, but her Partner would occasionally look over with a worried eyes.

When they got home, the Mayor had gone straight into the garden and sat down in the chicken run. She cuddled the chickens, and the chickens kindly cuddled her back, because of course they didn't care that she was Utrecht's most horrific mayor ever.

After some time, her Partner came out with fresh mint tea and a plate of her home made cinnamon cookies. She settled down next to the Mayor and they sat together in silence for many hours after that, while the Mayor replayed what had happened over and over and over again.

According to her Advisor's plan, she had opened the floor for citizens to share their experiences after her speech. She prayed that these would indeed be kind hearted, since her advisor had apparently asked them nicely, but she did realize that those expectations were naïve. Nevertheless, she wasn't prepared for what occurred after. A mother, a farmer, and a sick person had each in turn spit their awful experiences out in front of the crowd. Never before had she felt hatred being so physically aimed at her, while more and more heads turned in her direction, their judging eyes shooting right through the otherwise protective layer of her suit. She was no longer able to look away or around the pain that the policy had inflicted on so many of her citizens; it confronted her all at once. She was left speechless,

because what could she ever say or do to solve their agony?

She helplessly looked to the left, where her Advisor stood next to the stage, but he just motioned for her to speak on. So she did. She heard words leaving her mouth, forming sentences that were sometimes mean, but mostly meaningless. She doesn't remember what exactly she had said, only that they were surely not compromising any damage.

By the time the third person finished her statement, she had forgotten how to breath. She couldn't even recall her own name, or why she had been standing on this stage, talking to this audience. She only knew that she had to get off as fast as she could. Accordingly, she came up with a stupid excuse, wished everyone well and ran of the stage.

She had spent the rest of the day processing and reflecting and trying to make sense of it all, but in a way that was still protecting her own ego, her view of herself. But as she stepped into her bed, where her Partner was already kindly waiting for her, she found herself ready to face the truth that she had been storing somewhere in her body for the past years.

Ever since the policy appeared to go in a different direction than the one she personally had envisioned, her passion and purpose had slowly seeped out of her. Unwilling to take ownership for it, she had let herself become a voiceless, powerless pion. She told herself that she wasn't responsible for what the policy had turned out to be, and that she had other things to focus on.

But having heard what she heard today, she finally came realize that she wasn't just a mayor of a policy, she was a mayor of citizens. Her values were still her own. What had she been doing? She wasn't the victim here, not even close. She was the mayor, and she had the responsibility to protect her citizens in whatever way she could. There were countless possibilities within the scope of the policy that still took some of the burden of the citizens, but nothing was going to happen if she didn't step up and do her part. She was the only one with power whose interests laid with society as a whole, rather than herself. At least that is how it should be. She turned her head towards her partner. 'I think we

need a new contingency plan. Our current one won't do at all.' The Partner looked at her with surprised eyes. Then her face broke into an encouraging smile. 'I am glad to hear it,' she said. 'Now, what will our new plan look like?' 'We stay and we fight.'

The organic experiment

José Vindas van der Wielen

The sun began to peek over the horizon of a warm morning, a warm glow was cast over the morning dew. It had been a long time since there had been a cold January morning, the new warmer climate made winter more desirable than the summer. The sound of the birds woke Jamie up, as he slowly lifted himself off his lumpy mattress in his friend's farm. His friend did not live too far away from the city, he lived by the municipality of Woerden, where conventional farming was still allowed. Utrecht had severe changes in its policy of farming, organic was the one and only way to produce food for the city, supermarkets could only sell organic as well.

The farmer and his friend sat down at the wooden table of his friend's cozy farmhouse; the open wooden windows allowed the fresh breeze to blow through. They had their hearty breakfast, some eggs and bacon as a good start of the day. Whilst his friend read the newspaper, Jamie was occupied reading the letter from the mayor's office he received the day prior. This letter came from the mayor, kindly requesting his attendance at the press conference to talk about the wonders organic farming had done to the city of Utrecht. He ironically chuckled as he sipped his black coffee:

"Talk about the wonders of organic farming? The very policies that have led my family's farm into ruins huh?" he said.

His long-time farmer friend gave him a look of understanding, which reminded him of where he came from. He did not just represent a single farmer, he represented generations of his family farm, working to feed the bustling city as proud citizens of the place they called home.

He scoffed again, as he took down his last sip of coffee, reminiscing about the last years and all his struggles. Ever since the policy, he has been struggling to keep his farm afloat. He did his best,

his father taught him that one bad crop or season is not the end of the world, and that we'll just come out stronger next year, but how many bad seasons can you take for this mentality to become unsustainable? He had gone from taking large amounts of food by truck to the center to sell and now, the truck had become the money for this year's bills, food transport will have to be done by bike. Hard times come and go, his grandfather used to say, but this one was lasting too long and had no end in sight. Now, he had to go to present the positive things of a system that was ruining his family's farming legacy.

For a farmer in his thirties, he was very wise, age did not treat him too well, the stress and frustration of having to sell his belongings to keep the farm afloat burnt him out during the last couple of years. Looking at himself in the mirror, he took a deep breath as he prepared himself to go into the city with a big grin on his face. On the outside he looked calm, a bad representation of what his mind was running through. His mind was racing, conflicting thoughts ran through his head all day. What should he do? Shall he oblige and throw flowers at the mayor? Shall he take the opportunity and use the platform to share his actual thoughts? After all, it did push the farm nearly to bankruptcy and left him no choice to sell his belongings to keep the farm afloat.

He had been well educated by his father, he did not want to seem ungrateful, and seemed as unappreciative of the mayor's effort to make the city more sustainable and green. He loved his hometown of Utrecht, but he could not deny the reality that he might have to sell, pack his bags and go away with a heavy heart.

He wanted to be compassionate and understanding of everyone, the way he was raised. But this was becoming more and more difficult as he moved on,

his resilient nature kept being pushed and he did not know how long he could take it.

One last time before leaving, Jamie sits down at the small wooden table, nestled in his friend's house as he takes the last coffee in preparation for his commute to the city. He approached the window and saw the fields filled with brightly colored crops, the weather is helping them grow very well and not to mention, agricultural products were still allowed in these areas of the province.

He looked at himself in the mirror of his wardrobe, he saw his father and grandfather in his own eyes, the light green hue his eyes had and the same one his predecessors had. He was not doing too well, remembering his people and how disillusioned they would be, but regardless, he gathered his composure and got all ready to get going.

He left the house and mounted his bike to prepare for his long trip into the city. Somewhat unusual, the quiet morning was very peaceful, it was all very quiet as he was preparing for the day and made him decide against listening to music on his ride there and enjoy the time of peace. He began his trip through the country paths, with his mind buzzing, still deciding on what to do. The dew on the fields and the cows eating away, the chirping of birds made all together a beautiful bike ride to enjoy, had it not been for the unease that had settled on his chest.

The farmer was remembering all the hardships he had endured as a farmer to this day as he was biking to the city, how difficult everything became since the policy had been implemented. The once fertile grounds in the city had become barren, as he could not give the plants what he knew they needed because the policy makers knew better than the man that was growing the crops. He remembered his bright green veggies losing their color, withering away under the pressure of all the new regulations. The profit margins he has experienced narrowing down to nearly nothing. Approaching the city, what would have been a nice bike ride became the sight

of a poor, weakened farmer with no money and a broken legacy. He could not help but feel powerless having his voice silenced all of these years by these politicians in their thrones thinking they knew what was best for the industry.

The countryside slowly disappeared and let way to his hustling hometown, where he slowly made his way deeper and deeper into the city. Utrecht was in a weird combination of a seemingly fake happiness and tension in the air, approaching the time of the conference. As he rode towards the city, he took a detour to his farm. He could not help but feel pity as he went across the city and remembered all the times, he was vilified for being the one that feeds the population and daring to use the products that are essential for healthy plant growth. He adapted his operation to accommodate the regulations put in place, and though he was not as vilified as before, he was sometimes seen as the enemy, especially by environmental enthusiasts who filled the city, taking up the places of all the people who had left in despair. Arriving at his new organic fields, he felt pity seeing all his wilted plants, a shadow of what his family had once built. The more expensive, sad-looking plants were being sent away to the markets, only worsening the vicious cycle of lessening food supplies and increasing prices, slowly but surely, no one could afford the prices of the produce being sent into the supermarkets. He felt powerless, he felt saddened that regulations prevented him from having any power in rescuing his plants or his livelihood, feeling as if he had failed all the mouths, he once fed.

After some moments of reflection and some suppressed watery eyes, he put himself together and started heading to the Dom tower, where the conference was to be held. He made his decision, the unease kept eating away at him as he contemplated what he was about to do. He knew he had no power now and all the years prior, even if he felt like the farmers were the ones who cared the most, but this was an opportunity he could not miss. The powerless farmer had been given a bit of a voice and maybe if he said the reality in front of the politicians

and the people, maybe they would finally listen. He was broken, he was desperate, his patience had come to an end, this was his last resort and he needed to try.

The mayor's podium and the new, green Dom tower looked beautiful and ornate, prepared for the conference. The seats were neatly lined up directed towards the stage, his heart was racing as he sat down in the front row, knowing what was coming. A joyous description of the great nature of organics was given by the mayor and when his time came to speak up, the farmer did.

He stood up with a tightness in his chest, a feeling of anxiety and determination flowed through his system.

"My family has been farming in Utrecht for generations" he began as some of the crowd heckled him for 'ruining the environment', but nevertheless he continued: "I remember being a young boy, my father worked the land, and my grandfather took me to the fields and taught me about the land. These wise farmers taught me everything, they taught me to respect the earth and learn how to cultivate it."

He proceeded to look at everyone in the room, the happy mayor, the uneasy faces of some and the joyous faces of others as he continued:

"But now, everything has changed. The policy that the mayor has implemented has caused the food supplies to dwindle and the prices to skyrocket. Families can't afford food and I can't afford to grow it anymore. The livelihoods of farmers have been destroyed and continue to do so, many of them have been forced to leave their farms, their homes, and their way of life behind."

His nervous voice cracked:

"And now I say, I am no exception. I have poured my heart and soul into my grandfather's creation, and I have been left powerless by the powers that be and I have failed to keep you all fed, there is nothing I can change. I will be forced to leave; I have no

choice so I wish you all the best."

Everyone was silent, you could hear a pin drop as the farmer looked in the direction of the mayor and locked his gaze on him.

"So, I ask you, was this the intention of the policies you implemented? Has your idea of a green sustainable Utrecht come to fruition? Do the ends really justify the means? Are you willing to continue to sacrifice the livelihoods of your farmers and citizens for the sake of an ideology? Before I leave, I implore you to reconsider, to adjust paths and listen to all of those affected, and to those who have the ability and knowledge to change for the better, before it is too late."

Murmuring was going around left, right, and center, the mayor did not know what to do. With a worrisome look, the mayor glanced at the farmer on the podium, looking at him but not saying a word. Words that were not necessary for the message could be seen in the mayor's face, a look of disbelief and shock, yet the farmer stood his ground, in his eyes, he just addressed the elephant in the room, what everyone wanted to question, but did not. After a few short words to everyone in the conference, the event was called off earlier than planned and a communication was delivered to the press: "We will continue our current trajectory as a city, though some regulations will change in the near future once input from the community is used to make sure it is what works best for everyone."

It was not all his doing, some more testimonies of other people equally struggling resonated with the general public and in a sudden change of the balances, the people with the least influence managed to have their voices heard, and have actions taken. Jamie knew he was simply a small gear in this big system, he knew the change was not the best but in a good direction, and though he is just a grain of sand in a big pile, he did what he felt was necessary to help himself and the people around him.

An exclusive future

Maartje Rijnja

Like every morning, I wake up to the sound of James screaming and crying in the other room. James is always the first to wake up and he's gotten really good at being our personal alarm clock as well. However, in a house like this, that doesn't take too long. The boys share a room, and when three boys are up, it doesn't take much to also wake me up. I rub my eyes and look at the alarm clock, it's already 7:13 and that means I need to hurry! I rush to the boys' room and lift the twins out of their beds, Rick is already 12 and can get out of his bed by himself. I tell Rick to hurry up in the shower while I get breakfast ready. Tom sees me making the breakfast and lets out some of his complaints, I nod at him, too tired to go into discussion. I continue making their breakfast, margarine on toast, the same as every morning. It's not much, but it's one of the only organic foods I can afford. I wish I could offer them more, I wish I could give them fresh fruit or, I don't know, a fried egg every once in a while, but sadly it's bread with margarine, every morning. Whilst making the breakfast I can't stop thinking about the event later today, I've been looking forward to this day for so long. I hardly got any sleep because of it last night. It's the day of the press conference, the day I stand before a big decision.

A couple of weeks ago, I received a letter on my doorstep. It was from the municipality of Utrecht, saying that there will be a press conference on the 20th of October 2033. I've been invited to talk about the 'Organic (0)30' policy. I was shocked when I saw this letter, why would they want me to say something? They've never cared about what people like me have to say about this matter. Why do they want to hear our voices now? But then I read the fine print;

'We want the citizens of Utrecht to share their amazing stories about Organic(0)30 on this special day in which we celebrate the 3-year existence of

Organic(0)30. If you don't feel fit to say anything about this or you have experiences that you wouldn't qualify as 'amazing', please contact the municipality first.'

I remember looking at this text with disbelief. Experiences that aren't qualified as amazing? I can't even think of one story that does qualify as that. At first I thought why should I even bother to try? But as I kept thinking about it, I decided that I should at least reach out to the government, to hear what they have to say. I still can't believe what they told me then. They said I was obliged to talk about my 'positive experiences' and that if I didn't, I would risk getting kicked out of my house! I couldn't believe the words that came out of his mouth. It sounds absurd, I knew the mayor was capable of a lot of things, but I didn't know she would go this far.

After receiving this letter, my mind has been consumed by the message. What should I do? I've hated Organic(0)30 since the day we heard of it and now I've been allowed to stand up. But I don't know if this risk is worth it, is it even going to affect anything if I stand up? Over the years I've burned out and I've lost my anger. I have three boys to think of now, and the risk might just be too big. Maybe it's just not my responsibility anymore? Thinking about it, I don't even know what kind of change I would want at this point. When I first heard of the policy, all I wanted was for it not to happen, but now, three years later, I don't think it's even possible to go back anymore. Thinking about what kind of change I would wish for, is something I stopped doing a long time ago. It wouldn't make a difference anyways, so why waste my energy on this?

The kids are all dressed and ready to go, so we walk downstairs and get our bikes. It's half past seven and school doesn't start until another hour, but luckily I've arranged with their teachers that they

can already be in the class a little early. It allows me to be at work by 8. Every day, I put on my happy face when I tell the twins that it's an honor that we get to do this and that they are so cool for being the first in class! But sadly, Rick doesn't fall for it anymore and is often mad at me for it. I kiss them goodbye, tell them to have a good day, and proceed to bike to work. I log in to my computer and I start my daily tasks. I hate my job, it's tiring and boring, but it's full-time and it pays okay, considering that I don't have a degree. Don't get me wrong, I wanted to get a degree, in medical school even! But when I got pregnant with Rick, I had no other choice but to drop out at the age of 21. My boyfriend at the time left me the moment he found out I was pregnant. While thinking about him, I hold on to my necklace, the one I got from him on Valentines Day in 2020. I have no idea why I still hold on to it, but I guess it just reminds me of easier and happier times. Sometimes, I wish I still saw him, especially on days like these. He always knew the right thing to do. If he would've received that same letter I did, he would've immediately known what to do.

At work, I can't concentrate at all. The press conference is at the forefront of my mind, and I keep checking the clock to see if it's time to leave. During my lunch break, I take a walk around the canals to try and clear my head. Utrecht hasn't looked this festive in years, there are banners and people everywhere and the whole city looks like one big festival. I walk past the Dom and I can't even walk through anymore, there are too many people and everyone is busy setting up for 5 o'clock. I take a detour and end up at Jans Kerkhof. Years ago, this used to be a fun square where there would be restaurants and markets, but now it has turned into something futuristic and almost machine-like. Where every square meter is being used for farming. I continue my walk and all I see are big houses, the city isn't built for students or lower incomes anymore. We've been driven away, outside of the center, and only the rich can still afford to live here. 'They must love it here' I think, ignorant to everything and everyone outside of these canals.

I continue my walk back to work, but I can't help feeling a little annoyed, it's driving me mad to see all the festivities. The mayor has been acting as if Utrecht has been flourishing for the last few years under Organic(0)30, but that's just not true. I'll never forget the newspaper on January 1 in 2025. 'ORGANIC FOOD IS THE NEW FUTURE' it said, in all caps and bold letters. James was just 2 at the time and we could still live in my parents' home. From that day on, the whole city was turned upside down. They told us their plans, of turning Utrecht into a fully organic city by the year 2030 and it scared me immediately. In the grocery store, I always stayed far away from the organic items, as they were far more expensive than the regular options. I remember looking at James, and all I could think was 'How am I going to take care of you?' I tried to fight the policy at first, but after numerous attempts being ignored time and time again, I eventually gave up. I had to accept the fact that Organic(0)30 was going to happen.

So, in the years leading up to 2030, I tried to prepare myself the best I could. I found a house for me and Rick to live in and I started working at my current job. I also started taking cover shifts as a cleaning lady, just to earn a little extra money. I was determined to stay in Utrecht, I didn't want to leave this city I've been calling my home for the past 25 years and I wanted my son to grow up here too. Maybe I shouldn't have been this stubborn. Maybe I should've just moved out here while I still could. I think about this almost every day. In 2027 it was too late, I got pregnant again.

Since I had Rick, I never went out anymore, I simply had no time or money for it. But one night, my best friend dragged me out of the house to go out. I hadn't gotten that drunk in years and I got to forget about all my worries for a second. There was this rich businessman, who stunned me with his looks and charm. I was stupid enough to go home with him, and 2 months later, I found out I was pregnant. I never saw him again, but I will never forget his face. Finding out I was pregnant was one thing, finding out I was pregnant with twins terrified me.

From that point on, I had no money to invest in moving into a different house, I had to make do with the house I already had (which was meant for only me and James) and save all my money for my kids. I tried calling their father once, I told him I was pregnant with his kids and that I needed his help. He started laughing at me in disbelief, he couldn't grasp what I was saying and he got angry at me.

'You planned this, didn't you?! It was your plan all along to get pregnant, and then try and get to my money!! How do we even know the kid is mine for god sake you whore!!'

He hung up and after that, I'd never heard from him again.

The moment I found out I was pregnant, I lost all confidence in Organic(0)30. Being a single mom of three is hard enough, but doing it in an all-organic environment is nearly impossible. Believe me, I've tried, I've tried growing some vegetables on my balcony, but as you can imagine, the harvest is not nearly enough to feed my family. I've already expressed my complaints a couple of years ago, but the government had no other solution for me other than to 'then just buy my food in the grocery store' or 'invest in a farmer that will do the work for me'. Both are insanely expensive options. It's so tiring that people like me don't get taken seriously, it's like we're invisible to the mayor. Her asking me to talk about my 'positive experiences' feels like one of the biggest insults. I'm full of shame when there's yet another night I can't prepare any food for my kids, but the mayor seems to not even care. Now, 3 years into living in this new system, I've been allowed to speak up. This is all I've ever wanted, but is it worth the risk? I can't be selfish, I have three kids to think about, and getting kicked out of our house would be disastrous, to say the least. I don't even have the energy to imagine what that would mean for my family.

Finally, it's 4:30 pm. I quickly get my stuff together and I make sure to get out of there as fast as I can. I rush towards the Domplein, where the event will

take place. There are hundreds of people already standing here. I push myself through the crowd and towards the stage, where there are some seating spots. I find my name on one of the chairs and I sit down. I look around me and I see a division of people. Domplein has never felt this divided. 5 pm and everyone gets silent as the mayor gets on the stage. Some applaud loudly and others look sad or angry even. The mayor starts her story, as expected she sells Organic(0)30 beautifully.

'Utrecht has taken a leap of faith, and we've succeeded!'

I look at her in disbelief.

'This city has never flourished like this before, everybody is happy and gets along with each other!'

I can feel myself getting angrier and angrier.

'Us, the city of Utrecht, have shown that this is the way to go forward and other cities should follow in our footsteps!'

Excuse me?! She's trying to convince the rest of the world to implement this policy too? No way! I try to remain calm but as she keeps talking, I'm starting to feel the same anger again that I felt when I heard of the policy for the first time.

Then, the moment I've been thinking about nonstop for the last few weeks comes. She opens the floor to us, the 'normal citizens', to tell our story. I gather all my courage as I'm the first person to stand up and raise my hand. I look the mayor dead in the eye. Here I go, I can't wait any longer, this has got to end, and I can make a difference.

'You're lying!!! You're trying to paint this picture-perfect world, but it's fake and everyone should know that!' I look around me as the whole square gets quiet. 'I'm a single mom of three, who simply doesn't have the time, money, or space to live in this world! I'm worried and I'm scared! As are a lot of other people like me!'

Everyone looks at me, some in shock, and some with the same anger I have. The mayor hasn't taken her eyes off of me as well. She clears her throat and starts talking.

'There are multiple solutions to your problem' she says, 'maybe you should find a rich husband? Or try working a little harder?'

She silences me and seems to not even be affected by my outburst. I feel like a little kid, who's not been taken seriously. She continues to talk about the system and how great it's been. I look at her, with tears in my eyes. I try to get through to her a couple more times, but it doesn't seem to affect her in any way. I sit down again and I feel defeated. Everyone that looked at me so shocked just minutes ago, has turned their heads towards the mayor again or now looks at me with pity. The others, people like me, look sadly at me, it feels like I've disappointed them too. I cross my eyes with one man, I recognize him immediately from that night in 2027, and I look at him imploringly, hoping for empathy. I see something in his eyes, he must remember me too right? I don't get to look much longer as I feel someone pulling my arm. I look to the right and multiple police officers are standing there, telling me that I need to sit down again or otherwise I'll be escorted off the square. I nod and slowly sit down again, I've never felt this empty in my entire life and I'm scared of the consequences this might have.

After me, two others try to share their complaints with the mayor, a farmer, and a sick person, but neither of them seems to affect the mayor.

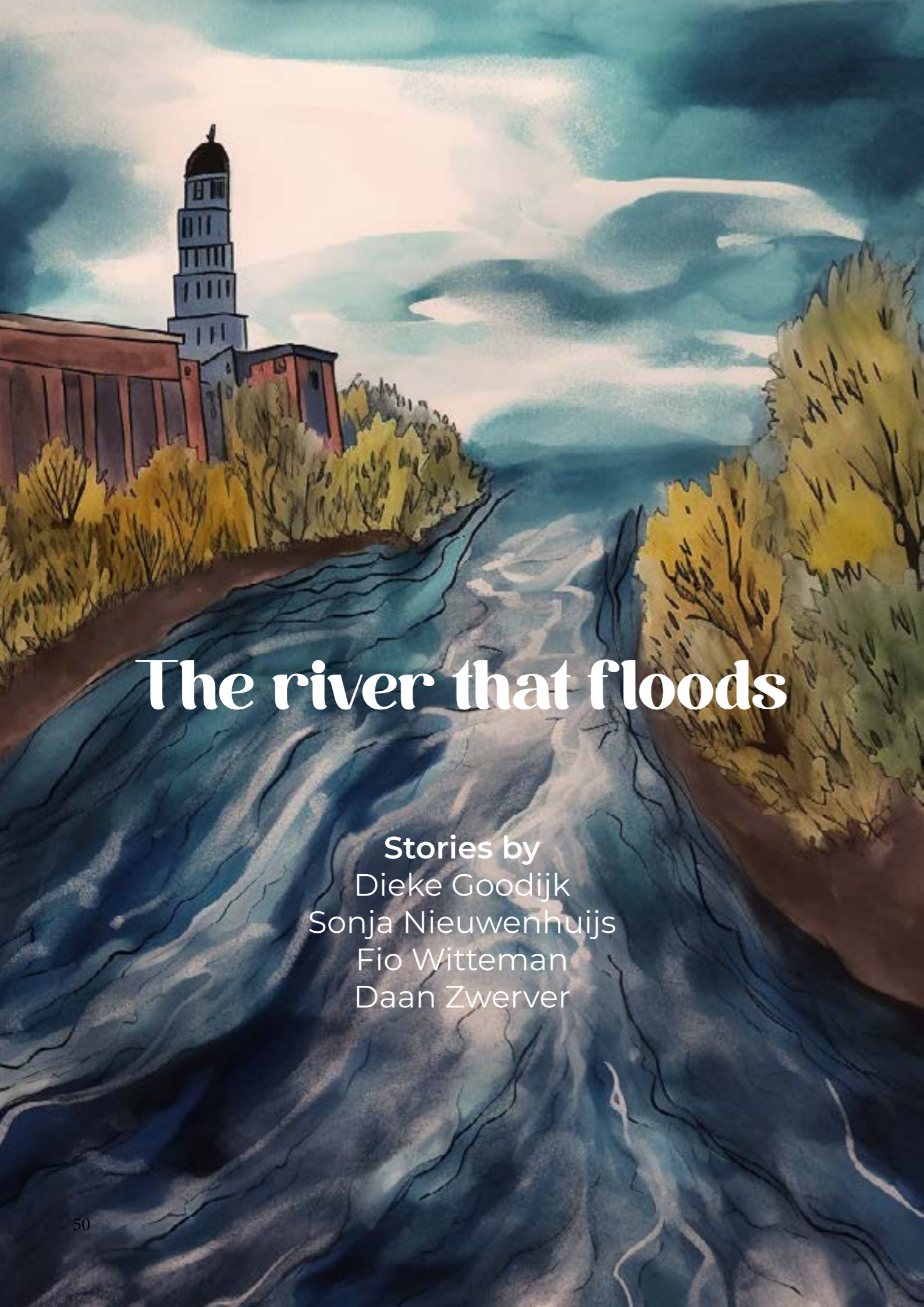
'Families can't afford food and I can't afford to grow it anymore!'

I hear the farmer say. I feel numb looking at her. People are sharing their horror stories left and right, but she remains ice cold and nothing seems to affect her. By the end of her story, I get up and go to my bike. I feel like I'm in a trance and I can't quite grasp what just happened yet. Tears stream down my face as I bike towards the school to pick my kids up. I've

been so conflicted about what to do today, and now it feels like I've made the wrong decision. I've looked forward to this day for so long, but it didn't seem to change anything. I wipe my tears away as I see my kids running towards me. I'm happy to see them again, but I feel a knot in my stomach when I think about their futures. We bike home and for dinner, I prepare the same as most days, potatoes. I call Rick to help me set the table, 'not this again Mom!' he says whilst looking at the potatoes. I nod at him, speechless and unable to explain that in a few days, potatoes might even be a luxury.

As I put my kids to bed at night, I can't help but think about everything that has led up to this point. Getting pregnant, dropping out of medical school, working full-time, moving out of my parent's house, getting pregnant again, and raising my kids on my own. My number one priority has always been for my kids to not have to struggle the way that I do. In bed, James asks me why I look so tired, and I try to sound normal when I tell him it must've been because I slept a little badly. I kiss my kids goodnight and walk downstairs to open the door for my mom, who has agreed to watch the kids while I go to my night shift. When I get back at 2 am, I quickly get ready for bed. As I lay there, I'm scared for tomorrow morning. Will I be woken up by police officers or will it be James again, the same as every morning?

I fall asleep, scared for what's to come.



The river that floods

Stories by
Dieke Goodijk
Sonja Nieuwenhuijs
Fio Witteman
Daan Zwerver

The news anchor

Dieke Goodijk, Sonja Nieuwenhuijs, Fio Witteman, Daan Zwerver

“Cameras are rolling. And we’re live in 1, 2, ...”

Tom puts his hand with three extended fingers in the air. The red light turned on.

“Good morning, we start this day early with a special report about the terrible events in parts of Limburg and Gelderland,” I read aloud from the teleprompter.

“This Sunday morning, April 1st at around 3:30 in the morning, Rijkswaterstaat[1] reported a detection of an enormous increase in the amount of run-off in the river Rhine. Normally, a height of 3.5 meters above sea-level is reported this time of year. But at 4:50 am, these levels were reported to have already reached three times as high in flat areas and even higher in urban environments. At around 5:15 am, the first reports of water overflowing streets and fields started coming in. Rijkswaterstaat confirmed this, as this was the time that the water levels exceeded thresholds, beyond which instruments could not accurately measure statistics anymore. As we speak, the water is still rising, disrupting the lives of thousands across the region.”

I took a deep breath. It’s not always easy to remain stoic in these situations. I looked at Tom’s face behind the cameras, in the shade of the spotlight. Signaling with a hurried rotating movement of his right arm, he desperately tried to make clear that I needed to move on. How can you be so unmoved by something like this? Then again, he never seemed like the type to give much more than a shit about the people around him. So why change now?

I continued: “Currently, numbers are still coming in, but official reports state already thousands are left without a home, more than 900 people missing and a death count of 241, with many of them still needing official identification. Rijkswaterstaat stated

that the true death count is estimated to be much higher.” I noticed my voice started to shake.

“Already hours after the first alarming reports, it’s becoming clear that the inland flood is the worst water related disaster our country has witnessed since the events of the Watersnoodramp in 1953.” Mid-sentence I saw the watery eyes of some of the production crew members while they were looking down at the blue light coming from their phones. Some of them had family and friends living in the affected area. It appeared they were calling and texting, but none of them were talking, none of them seemed to be getting any kind of reply. I also saw Tom looking angrily at me, I knew why. Anyways, I misread the word ‘this’, and said ‘the’. Not like anyone noticed. But Tom’s face said it all. He didn’t have to say anything to let me know he wasn’t happy about it. I was used to it. He’d get mad at me for making the smallest mistakes. “It’s to keep up our high standards,” he always says. But this was not the moment to contemplate his tyrannical existence as a news director.

[1] The Dutch name for the executive organization of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management in the Netherlands. Its aim is to ensure a safe, liveable and accessible Netherlands. Monitoring of rivers and other water related issues on a national scale is one of its functions.

[2] The Little Tower (Dutch: het Torentje) is a building near the Binnenhof in The Hague. It is located in the Hofvijver, next to the Mauritshuis. It’s office of the Prime Minister of the Netherlands is located in the Little Tower, in which high profile meetings and speeches are being held.

“The government has declared a national state of emergency and the deployment of rescue workers and medical professionals are already in action,” I

continued. “People on the ground and on the water are doing everything they can to help those in need. Furthermore, prime-minister Stephanie Lambert has just announced she will be holding a press-conference at 9 o’clock from the Little Tower [2].”

“We as a country have always been one of the strongest in the world when it comes to managing and living with water. But this morning, even our dikes, locks and other delta infrastructure were no match for this never seen before water level rise. Reports coming in from Switzerland, Germany and North-western France have also indicated significant problems with the Rhine’s high water levels and floods, but no clear numbers have yet been given,” I read.

“Meanwhile, researchers are still investigating the cause of the flood. As no significant increase in rainfall has occurred this year, it is still not clear what exactly caused this never seen before water level rise of the Rhine,” I mentioned.

“Nonetheless, social media is flooding with photos and videos made by victims who are giving us a glimpse of the horror that has terrorized their lives since this morning.”

Flooding, seriously? Who wrote this text? I know it’s April fools, but this is just bad.

I read on: “Parents are advised to closely monitor their children as not all posts survive. This is sometimes gruesomely and explicitly made visible. Warning: these next images can be experienced as traumatic.”

As the cameras cut away to the video compilation, I took a sip out of my glass of water before almost spitting it out upon the sight of the actual footage. The cameras in the studio were temporarily off, so I stepped up to Tom. “What are you thinking, showing videos like this on a morning news broadcast? You know little kids are watching, right?!” I said while pointing at the display showing the horrendous videos of flooded ruins and dead

people.

“People need to know the truth,” Tom replied. He was full of shit, he didn’t even look at me. He knew he had to make this look as gruesome as possible, as if it wasn’t gruesome enough to begin with. Like people weren’t already shocked enough by the fact that, possibly, their friends and family, houses, businesses, dogs, cats, plants, cars, bikes, supermarkets, clothing stores, bars, sport clubs, forests, meadows and roads might have drowned before the rays of the first light of day even got a chance to set on them.

“People need to be informed, not traumatized!” I told him, knowing it would antagonize him.

“20 SECONDS!” a crewmember shouted over the set.

“Look now, Lizzy,” he said belittlingly. “I’m not asking you to do much. I just want you to get your pretty face in front of that camera and just read out loud what is on that big blue screen in front of you. You know, the one with the white letters? Or else I can push a few buttons and there will be 10 other women standing right outside this door, with a cup size at least a letter further in the alphabet than yours, who will gladly replace you within the blink of an eye.” He smiled, I said nothing.

“Now shut up and do what I pay you to do.” He stated.

“You don’t pay me, we are government funded,” I replied sarcastically. What a stupid thing to say. Tom held up his right hand and slowly moved his index finger closer towards his thumb. “This close, Lianne. You are this close!”

“Everybody ready?! We’re live in 1, 2, ...” Tom shouted. No one looked at him. Just at the red light turning on.

I read from the teleprompter: “Before moving on to our prime-minister’s press conference, we have

managed to make contact with our correspondent on site, Floris van de Beek. Hello Floris, how are you doing? Did you manage to find a dry spot?”

“Hi Lianne. Well, I’m currently standing on a boat with the owner of Burgers’ Zoo, the local zoo that is located in Arnhem, here in Gelderland,” Floris said.

“The news has just come in that not only a lot of houses have been destroyed by the flood, but local shops, public facilities and bigger businesses have also been heavily affected. This includes Burgers’ Zoo, where a more complicated issue has arisen,” Floris reported

“We received an update from Hendrik-Jan de Vries, the owner of Burgers’ Zoo, with some alarming aspects,” Floris said

“Welcome Hendrik-Jan, it’s very good to have you here with us in good health.”

“Hi Floris, thank you for having me.”

“Please give us an update on how your zoo has been affected by the flood,” Floris asked

“Well, where do I begin? There’s of course a lot going on so I don’t want to take up too much of your valuable time, but I’ll give it a try. When we first got note of how serious this flood was, me and my colleagues were completely shocked. We didn’t have an emergency plan for such a calamity. We tried as hard as we could to get as many animals out as possible, but our efforts fell short. In horror we watched, as our beloved zoo and animals were getting washed away. But our mood swiftly changed from sadness to extreme stress, since we were seeing how animals were getting out of their cages alive. Somehow we didn’t think of the possibility of them getting out alive, so we’ve now got a much bigger issue on our hands. We’ve documented how many animals have passed away so far and we’re documenting which animals were seen getting out alive. There’s been some cages that have been found empty or ones where the body of its resident was

found. We’re presuming that the residents of the empty cages have made their way out, but we’re not sure where they’ve gone. In a few cases we’ve seen animals get out, for instance, an alligator was seen on top of a roof of one of our smaller buildings but has now disappeared again. We’ve sent our primary caretaker of him on an expedition to find him. There’s also a tiger missing and some exotic birds and the numbers are still rising. Unfortunately we’ve also lost a few people from our loyal staff, which will be remembered forever and honored when the time is right.”

“That’s some terrible news you’ve brought us Hendrik-Jan, it must be such a tremendous loss and awful feeling you’re experiencing right now,” Floris added.

“Yes, I think it’s going to take a long time to recover from this, I’m speaking on behalf of my zoo of course and I’m also with everyone else that is affected.”

“Do you think there’s a possibility for your team to find some of the missing animals?” Floris asked.

“Well, we firstly would need to know which way they went, since the way of transportation differs between all of the animals,” Hendrik-Jan explained.

“There’s unfortunately no way to know which way they all went I suppose, or am I wrong?” Floris asked.

“Luckily that’s not true!” Hendrik-Jan added.

“We had recently installed the new wireless security camera system that uploads the footage in real time to an external server in the Cloud. I would only need to log-in to the system to check what the last uploaded footage is.”

“Maybe it’s worth a shot to see what’s been uploaded!” Floris added.

“Meanwhile I’ve just received word that the

caretaker of the alligator is here to give us a small update from the events that took place in her section of the zoo,” Floris said.

“Welcome Mathilda, glad you’ve also made it in good health to give us this message.”

“Thank you, Floris! And yes, I’ve halted my search for the missing alligator to give a small update on the whereabouts of this dangerous animal,” Mathilda stated.

“That’s really good to hear, the last thing one would want is to be randomly attacked while they’re also fleeing to safety,” Floris said nervously.

“Yes you’re absolutely right. The last sight we had of him was when he was on top of a roof in the zoo, how he managed to get up there remains a mystery to all of us. But we had some witnesses tell us that they’ve seen him getting into the water. He likes to be in the water so that’s how we’re going to tackle our search. For now we believe he’s getting to a more quiet place to maybe settle down, but we do want to emphasize that it’s a very dangerous animal that you absolutely steer clear of. That goes for all the animals that made it out, we’ve got a good team that’s going to do everything they can to bring them all back, so there’s no need to approach these animals on your own,” Mathilda said firmly.

“Thank you so much Mathilda for this insightful update and we want to wish you the best of luck and safety in your search!”

“Thank you for having me!”

“Now, let’s get back to Hendrik-Jan, I just heard he was able to retrieve some footage from moments before the flood arrived,” Floris said.

“Welcome back Hendrik-Jan, what footage were you able to collect?”

“I’ve found some footage of the alligator’s cage, since Mathilda already told something about them it

thought it suited well.”

“While we’re showing this footage, are you able to give us an explanation Hendrik-Jan?”

“Yes of course. You can see how the young alligator is trying to break open the cage with his mouth while his mother is lying lifelessly in the corner of the habitat. The alligator eventually climbs over the fence and jumps down, which is quite impressive if I say so myself. He does injure his head, seen as he fell the last few meters into the water and a chunk of concrete hits his head.”

“Well Hendrik-Jan, that was quite the footage you showed us and thank you so much for your experiences the last few hours. I want to wish you the best of luck and strength in these hard times. Stay safe,” Floris

“Thank you so much for having me today Floris, stay safe out there,” Hendrik-Jan said gratefully. “Well what an interesting story. We hope to hear more from you soon, Floris. Stay safe and keep us up-to-date!” I said. Smile the teleprompter wrote. So I did.

“Thank you, Lisanne, and will do!” Floris replied politely.

I read on: “It is almost 9:00 o’clock, so it’s time to listen to the official statement on the governments’ behalf. We now move to a live stream in the Little Tower, where Prime-minister Stephanie Lambert will enlighten the nation.”

“And.. Cut!” Tom shouted enthusiastically, while the big screen switched to Lambert’s speech. “Great work, everybody! You’re now all allowed to take some time to contact your friends and relatives to see if they’re okay. Just make sure you’re back in about 4 minutes when Lambert finishes up her speech!”

What a psychopathic megalomaniac tyrant asshole. It’s like a dictatorship over here. If you ask me,

this self-entitled behavior and disregard for other people’s well-being, while ‘granting’ his own staff the basic right of checking up on their loved ones during an emergency situation is an outright symptom of madness.

I didn’t have a lot of people to check up on. Most friendships have either faded away to the background years ago and the family members I had over there moved away from there last October. So I just sat and looked at the screen.

“Fellow citizens of the Netherlands,

Today, we have all witnessed a tragedy unfold before our eyes. The flooding of the Rhine has caused immense damage and loss of life, and my heart goes out to all those affected by this disaster.

As your Prime Minister, it is my duty to ensure that we respond to this crisis with the utmost urgency and compassion. Our first priority is to provide emergency relief and support to those affected. We are working tirelessly to coordinate rescue efforts and provide shelter, food, and medical assistance to those in need.

But we must also look to the future. We must take decisive action to address the root causes of this disaster and prevent it from happening again. Climate change is real, and it is already causing devastating impacts around the world. We cannot afford to ignore this reality any longer. My government is committed to taking bold steps to tackle issues regarding climate change by supporting innovations that could lead us to a better tomorrow, and working with other countries to find global solutions to these problems, not just in The Netherlands.

But we must also acknowledge that these solutions are not without risk. We must proceed with caution and take every possible measure to ensure that we do not cause unintended harm like this again. We must also hold companies and stakeholders accountable for their actions and ensure that they act in the best

interests of society and the environment.

I assure you that my government is fully investigating these concerns, and we will hold those responsible accountable for their actions. But I also want to emphasize that we must avoid jumping to conclusions and engage in baseless speculation and...

“Alright, everybody in place?! Almost go-time again!” Tom shouted with a cracking voice. I laughed until he gave me a death stare that would’ve given Satan himself the creeps.

He continued: “Okay, we established a video call connection with Dr. Vermeijden. Screen test please Laurens!!” A few seconds went by. “Can I get that test today Laurens?!” Tom screamed angrily at his assistant.

“Got it boss, it works!” Laurens obediently replied.

Meanwhile Lambert’s speech neared its ending:

“In times like these, we must come together as a nation and support one another. We must show compassion and empathy for those affected by this disaster, and we must work together to find long-term solutions to the challenges we face. I want to express my gratitude to all the emergency responders, volunteers, and organizations that are currently working tirelessly to help those in need. Your efforts are making a real difference, and we are all in your debt.

*We **will** get through this crisis together. We **will** rebuild and recover, and we **will** emerge stronger than ever before. Thank you.”*

What a joke she is. I thought to myself. She’s in moral debt with everybody in this country. Implementing budget cuts for the Ministry of Infrastructure and Watermanagement, while decreasing taxes for the rich and giving companies a free pass on anything they want to do as long as they’ll fund her next election campaign with a bit of extra dough for her on the side.

“Okay guys let’s finish this up nicely! And... we’re live in 1, 2, ...” Tom put three fingers in the air to signal the third count. The red light went on.

“Thank you all for bearing with us as we inform you about the disaster unfolding in the middle of our country,” I said to the camera.

“To give us an expert analysis on today’s events, we are joined by an expert climatologist, researcher and professor at Utrecht University’s Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, and geo-engineer at TerraSolve Incorporated: Dr. Peter Vermeijden. Welcome, Peter!” she said. Meanwhile Dr. Vermeijden appeared on a big screen next to the camera. He looked kind of like a rodent, a skinny looking middle aged man with a very sharp nose, red hair and crooked coffee coloured teeth, almost pointing forward like the knife on a bayonet.

“Well thank you, also for that generous introduction,” Peter slithered.

“So, could you give me your thoughts on the events that have taken place in the last couple of hours?” I asked.

“Yes, of course.” Peter proudly started. “First I want to say that my thoughts and prayers are with everyone who is affected by this tragic natural disaster, and I hope that everyone is getting the help they need.”

I didn’t believe him, but who cares. This morning, while I was scrolling through social media, I came across some rumors and conspiracy theories, claiming that geo-engineering attempts by shady billion dollar corporations probably caused this disaster. Complete bogus of course. Nonetheless, I thought it might make for an interesting subject of discussion. Especially when not long after having read those stories online, Dr. Vermeijden was announced to participate in an interview on our show.

“Can you explain a bit more to the viewers at home about your field of expertise? Like, what is a climatologist and what is geo-engineering?” I asked him.

“Well, as a climatologist, I have dedicated my career to studying the behavior of the Earth’s climate, which is an immensely complex system, the dynamics of which are still far beyond our understanding. I have studied temperature and precipitation patterns, extreme weather events, and long-term climate cycles such as ice ages. This also includes research into the causes and effects of climate change.”

A small pause and hint of hesitation appeared in his otherwise fluent and proud explanation of his professional career. He continued: “Geo-engineering technology refers to the large-scale manipulation of the Earth’s environment to mitigate the effects of climate change. This can include for instance: carbon capture technology, solar radiation management, and weather modification,” he concluded his answer.

“Can you explain what has caused the flooding of the Rhine?” I decided to fire my questions quickly after his answer, hoping to generate an impulsive answer out of an otherwise calculated mind.

“Well...based on the data we’ve collected so far, a hypothesis could be that the flooding is caused by rapid melting of ice and snow in the Alps, causing the water levels in the Rhine to rise drastically. Climate change is likely a contributing factor to these conditions. However, we are still investigating the full extent of the damage and the factors that contributed to the flooding. At this point, we cannot rule out the possibility of other major factors playing a role,” he replied.

I knew I had him now. I asked him: “That brings me to my next question: Some people have already been making certain suggestions and speculations about the role of companies like TerraSolve in this disaster. Can you comment on that?”

“Yes, first of all I want to make clear that TerraSolve Inc. is a company dedicated to helping combat climate change, by developing several technologies. These can be used to reduce the amount of greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere and to cool down the planet. We actually hope to use our technology to prevent disasters like this in the future,” the agitation seemed to arise in his facial expression. I enjoyed the sight of it.

“Furthermore, I can assure you that TerraSolve Incorporated is not responsible for the flooding of the Rhine River. We are committed to using our technology to mitigate the effects of climate change, not provoke them,” he added.

“We have been working on some test projects for several years and have done thorough investigations to ensure a profitable outcome. The European Commission has even given us green light for the testing phases of some projects. But none of these could have possibly led to the disaster that we’re witnessing today. The events of today are what we call a natural disaster, because it only involves the forces of nature,” Peter concluded.

“Okay, so you’re saying test phases that were executed, but is it not possible for a project like that to turn into a disaster? Isn’t it possible that something could have gone wrong, and by doing so have left hundreds of thousands of people without a home?” I knew in this moment I was just as bad as Tom, but it felt good to spark some anger in this naive, privileged and arrogant looking scientist. “It’s hard to tell if something went wrong. It just happened. And, according to our data, our calculations, and just the tiny scale of our test projects, nothing we have done could have caused a flood like this. And I don’t know if this is one of your media tricks, but it looks like you just invited me here to make me into a scapegoat,” he agitatedly replied.

He continued: “If something artificial could have caused a natural disaster of this scale, it is beyond my imagination. Especially in a country like The

Netherlands where...”

“So you are admitting that something could have gone wrong, beyond your knowledge? Is there a way you or your team could confirm that statement?” I interrupted.

“You are twisting my words again. I think this interview is over. Just to be clear to the viewers at home, as mentioned before: TerraSolve Inc. is not responsible for this disaster! I would now like to discuss with my colleagues how to deal with it, rather than getting taken away by these misleading claims and accusations. Thank you, and goodbye!” He hangs up.

“Alright, thank you Peter for joining us today...” I proudly said to the camera. This time I smiled on my own, no teleprompter needed.

“Moving on to our next story regarding the flood,” I gladly continued, weirdly enough. “Thousands of people have been made homeless by the devastating flood that has begun raging through the middle of our country this morning. Local governments, together with rescue workers are doing everything they can to relocate people to places where the water can’t reach them. One of those instances is a camp located just north of Arnhem.”

The screen next to the camera went on again. People at home could see me on the left half of their TV-screen, whilst seeing Floris on the left.

“On site is one our live correspondent of the flood Floris van de Beek. Good morning again Floris, I see you still have kept dry feet. How is the situation there at the refugee camp?” I asked him.

“Hi Lisanne, it is good to see you again. I’m standing here at the refugee camp north of Arnhem, made for people who have lost their house and cannot live anywhere else during this awful catastrophe. People of all ages and different circumstances are here, including children and pregnant women. Standing next to me is this little girl who just arrived here a

few hours ago. Can you tell the people at home your name and how old you are?” Floris asked.

“I am Vlinder, and I am 8 years old,” Vlinder said, a bit scared.

“And Vlinder, it must be difficult to live here right? How are you feeling?” Floris asked.

“Uhm, yeah a lot is happening right now. I really miss my friends and my life. Every morning I used to eat cereal with little chocolates in it and I cannot eat that right now, also I thought I did not like school but I really miss it right now. I just hope my teacher Els is alright you know... I just want to know where everybody is and hope they are okay.” Vlinder said.

“Wow, that must be really difficult for you... How did you end up here?” Floris asked.

“Well, my house was drowned in water, so we can not live there anymore. Then my parents and I were sent here... I just think it is weird that I heard that some people who had a lot of money just rented houses with no water... Why am I here in the mud, and are some people in big houses without the mud? Just seems unfair.” Vlinder asked the people at home..

“That does seem unfair, Vlinder. Thank you so much for your time.” Floris ended the interview.

“Well here you have it, folks. People in the refugee camps feel injustice. Why must they live in the mud and other people in their comfortable houses?”

“Thank you Floris, for your brave reporting efforts and best wishes to everyone over there, enduring this hardship,” I said.

“And that concludes this special broadcast on the flooding of the Rhine. If you at home want to stay up-to-date with the newest reports and interviews, check our app or tune in again this afternoon at 1 o'clock for a new broadcast about the inland flood.” I

concluded.

“After the break: a new episode of Surviving Marriage, with Claire Roosevelt. So stay tuned!” I almost sighed. The red light turned off.

“And that’s a wrap, people! Good work! See you again in one and a half hours for a feedback session and preparation for the afternoon broadcast. Go do whatever you want, but leave me alone, please,” Tom announced while everyone was already individually dispersing with the prospect of despair and remorse in their minds.

Spiralling down

Dieke Goodijk

My life is a mess right now! You may have noticed that people didn’t quite like me before, well I can tell you, that changed, but unfortunately for me not for the best. I can start my story in the now, 5 days since the flooding started, but I don’t think you would understand anything of how my life turned into this. So, I will begin my story a few weeks ago when my life was still normal. Well, I mean normal to me, probably everything but normal for most people. I was preparing for the third debate on stopping the massive influx of refugees. That was one of my main focusses since I became minister president, and even before while I was in the opposition it was one of my main differences with the coalition at that time. Unfortunately, after the second debate it looked like we were still outnumbered by a few to make a full immigration stop to the Netherlands happen. I was thinking about arguments to convince them that letting in immigrants is a crime against our own citizens:

‘There is simply no room for them, we cannot even provide houses for our own people’

‘They are only coming in, and never going out of our country again’

‘We need to help our own people first’

While I was trying to come up with an amazingly convincing statement to persuade the last few I needed to make it happen I heard a muffled sound. I immediately felt a shock to my body. Where was this coming from? Did it come from outside? Or did I just imagine it, I was quite jumpy at the time so maybe it was nothing? I kept in my seat for a few minutes till I had found the nerves to go around the house to investigate what happened.

I didn’t really know where it was coming from until I got to the kitchen window. Although I decided to work from home that day, they still found a way to disrupt my work. Until that day I really thought my home was still a mystery for everyone. I really hoped

that was the only well-kept secret, but unfortunately not anymore. I started cleaning up the mess they left behind.

I knew for a long time already that my opinion was not really appreciated, you can call it hated I guess. Of course, I got a lot of votes, otherwise I would have never gotten in this position, but that doesn’t mean that you are likeable to everyone. Unfortunately, all the others were trying everything they could to stop me. Blocking my way towards my office (the so-called little tower), stalking me on the streets, coming up with the most inaccurate stories on my daily life and more of that stuff. But never did they get to my house, it made me feel more vulnerable than ever. Normally I was able to ignore it, or at least I didn’t take it personal, but now they were really infiltrating my personal space. As you may imagine, I wasn’t feeling great before this happened, and that definitely didn’t improve because of these stupid infiltrators. But ‘never let them know how you feel’ were the words my dad once told me going through my head.

That day I called to police, made a statement that they wouldn’t get me down and acted to the world that I was feeling fine. Although, was I? I guess it was already the beginning of emotional downfall. Two weeks later. There was still no conclusion on the immigration stop. Also, still no convincing argument to make that happen. But most importantly some unexpected news. Some experts from the water authorities and geoengineers, or how they are called, were warning for a flooding. It sounded like a joke, how could our country, the Netherlands, the boss over all the water, get hit by a flooding. Little did I know, but at the time I was busy with other things, like trying to save my career. I thought it wouldn’t be as bad as they were expecting it to be. Warnings are always a bit exaggerated right? And actually, they were just speculations. ‘No, we don’t really have empirical evidence, but...’ Is what they told me. As a politician you cannot act on everything, so I didn’t really act on the first warnings.

I continued with my daily life and ignored all the fuss around it coming from the left-wing parties, I was the boss, so I decided what the priority of our country was. I didn't care about making friends, why would I need them when I still have the most votes on my side.

I didn't show it, but of course these speculations also made me a bit nervous.

'What if they were right?'

'What if we aren't that well protected to all the water may coming as I expected?'

'What if we have wet feet in a few weeks?'

But it were all 'what ifs', and I needed to have priorities. If I would act on all the 'what ifs' thrown at me every time, our country would be bankrupt in a week. So, I prayed it wouldn't get as far as the water authorities thought it would. But in the background I did put some of my colleagues to work on the flooding plans we already had. Just in case, just in case...

I let the water authorities do their job, and focussed again on stopping that damn inflow of refugees that were coming and coming and coming. I really didn't understand why so many other parties were just okay with that. What if they were those that were not able to get a house because of the refugees that need to get one. We cannot place them above our own right? At least that is my opinion.

When I was just a child my parents weren't as wealthy as I am now. My mum struggled to get me and my two brothers a nutritious meal every day. We lived with my grandparents for a long time and I remember my dad yelling at my mum about the damn refugees stealing his houses. That time was so traumatic for our family, having no own place to be and isolate yourself for some time if you needed that. I don't want anyone else to go through that. We should first help our own before we are able to help others.

A few days later I was brutally faced by the facts. I woke up, made a cup of coffee, looked outside

at the peaceful street I was living at, watched my neighbour on his daily walk to the bakery. That took him always like an hour, using his cane to drag his left foot over the street, going so extremely slow, but why would he care he had all the time. So, the day started off as a pretty normal day, until I decided to turn on the tv. Already at the first second that the screen showed the chaos came directly at me.

Over the days before I heard the speculations getting stronger. But actually, I didn't want to hear it and almost ignored it. My head was all over the place, but definitely not at the increasingly stronger speculation about the flooding coming our way. I didn't want to think about it, didn't want to think about the consequences and the risks.

But that day, when the chaos came at me through the tv, I was filled with regret. Streets that looked like rivers. Destruction of houses. Families hanging on to a piece of wood, trying to stay above water. Washed away bridges flowing with the water. Luckily not yet in our country, but coming closer and closer while I was watching the tv. Why didn't I see this coming? Well, I knew, I was aware of the fact that I ignored it. Did that consciously. Was that a good idea, well that day I realised definitely not.

Because my morning routine was already brutally disrupted, I got my phone from the drawer of my nightstand. It actually was one of my new habits that I wouldn't touch it till after breakfast when the workday begins. Well, I should have added the tv to that habit, because my peaceful morning wasn't peaceful at all anymore. 20 missed calls. One from my mum probably calling again to ask when I finally come by again. I hadn't called her back in weeks, so that day I wasn't even thinking about calling her back, did I want to visit her? She always just yelled at me about how I should think of myself, was working too hard, and didn't think of my mental and physical health. That was definitely not what I wanted to hear that day, I had other things on my mind, as you might imagine.

The other 19 calls were from different colleagues,

the water authorities, journalists and others that wanted to hear my first reaction. I knew they were expecting me to call them back, but first things first, more coffee, otherwise I would not survive the day. I grabbed another coffee for on the go, and drove straight to the office without getting any breakfast or even brushing my teeth, that still grosses me out. I already saw the crowd of journalist in front of the entrance when I drove my car to the parking lot. I hated that people. Why did they always need to bother us before we had even the chance to think about the issue. They were firing questions to me and my colleagues every time that something unexpected happened and were then expecting that we already discussed everything and had full answers for them. Well, it sucked for them, but that day again I had nothing to tell them.

'Stefanie, any comments on the news today?'

'Do you have any idea on how you are going to prevent such a disaster for us?'

'Miss Lambert, how is it possible that we all didn't see this coming?'

'Or did you and you just didn't tell us?'

All I answered was: 'no comment, no comment, NO COMMENT!', 'we will let you know as soon as we can' and all the phrases I knew by hard from all the times I needed them. I manoeuvred myself through the clouds, trying to get to the door as fast as I could, while microphones hit me in the face and people tried to drag me to their camera. When I finally reached the door, I realised that while I escaped from the journalists, at least for that time, the firing of questions was far from over. That day was a misery for me. Of course, everyone was stressed out trying to contribute to prevent the disaster from hitting us as well. However, we all knew it was coming whatever we did, but no one dared to say that out loud.

It lived that day in a daze, didn't really capture what was going on I was primarily thinking about how stupid I had been.

'How was I able to ignore it all the time?'

'How didn't I realise any sooner that climate change was real and I was wrong?'

Well, that was because I hated it to be wrong and could never admit it when I knew I actually had to. But at that time, while I actually should have given all my attention to making plans for when the disaster came, my mistakes from the past were the only thing on my mind. In the following days we revised all the plans in case of flooding and already moved resources so we could react as soon as possible when the flooding hit our country. Putting all my attention to work again was actually a coping mechanism, I think. I hated myself for being in the wrong and drowning myself in work was my way of dealing with it. At least then I had the idea that I tried to better the situation that I was partly responsible for.

So those days at work hid myself behind my work. I always had been a workaholic, but now I managed to leave all my emotions at home and just focus on work while I was at the office. Unfortunately, every day when I got home again, my emotions were still there waiting for me to get back to reality. I never was an emotional person, but all these chaos and problems almost forced me to be one after all. Words going through my head every night while I was trying to sleep.

'You liar'

'You ignorant egoist'

'You should never have become the prime minister'

'You were wrong all along; how couldn't you have seen this coming!'

'So now you realise, climate change is real, well little late or not?'

My thoughts were talking me down all the time and it started to get too much for me. I didn't know how I was supposed to solve the problems we were facing and not letting the country down. How were they going to trust me if I always said climate change was a joke and now I totally turned around. The only thing I knew at the time is that I needed to do everything in my power to help the potential

victims. So that is what I did, the days before the flooding I kept working as hard as I could on the little sleep my mind allowed me to have.

I gave a press conference to clearly once explain what was coming our way and what we our doing to prepare ourself for that disaster. Trying to reassure the citizens of the vulnerable areas that we were doing everything we could to help them. However, reassuring was definitely not something I was doing. Instead, I was fired with questions again, on how they could ever trust someone like me to guide them to an environmental disaster. Me, the one that always ignored it, said climate change was fake, I now pretending to be the saviour in all this. Although, that was really not what I was trying to say, I got their mistrust in me. However, the more I was trying to explain where I was coming from and that it was really in my best interest to help, it seemed like they were believing me less and less.

So, I responded diplomatically, was dragged from the stage by my assistant when the press became to pressing, drove home, and cried all night. 'How was I ever supposed to lead this country if no one was going to trust me again?' I did really understand where they were coming from, but felt like they did no effort at all to understand me. It wasn't easy for me as well, realising that what I thought before was all wrong and I was partly responsible for this to happen. At the end, I gave permission to TerraSolve to do what they did, while I actually had no idea what they were doing. And when specialist were warning me about it, I just dismissed it on the ground that there was no empirical evidence. I should have listened to the ounce that knew way more about what was happening than I, I should have educated myself on what TerraSolve was doing and how that was going, I should have taken my responsibility, but I didn't, I didn't.

Four days after the moment that the chaos came at me from the tv and changed everything I thought I knew, made me question my own opinion, it was inevitable. The water reached the border of our country and was coming in with hundreds

of litres every second. Water we always thought we had under control was know controlling us. Everything that scared me while I was watching the tv four days before was now hitting Gelderland. The whole country was devastated. Of course, we all knew it was coming, but seeing the lives of your fellow Dutch people being destroyed is a feeling you cannot prepare yourself for. Although we tried our best to prepare ourself, we did not have enough time and thousands died that day. Among them were children, elderly, animals and way more. But actually, it didn't hit me as hard as I expected, I was emotionally drained, working on autopilot.

Although I was literally putting everything I got into saving as many people as I could and trying to come up with the best plans to help the victims, trust in me was still nowhere to be found. I had to justify myself for all the actions I took. I lost everyone. My voters were disappointed in me, because, for good reasons I believe, I changed my opinions. However, also the left winged, who actually agree with my current point of view had no trust in me at all. It was like I couldn't do anything right. Everyone was against me. I had no one to talk to, well no one I wanted to talk to anyway.

Three days in, struggling to replace all the victims who were in refugee camps for now, with no where near the facilities for that many refugees we had a meeting with organizations involved. Among them were some representatives of the water authorities, a geoengineer from TerraSolve, rescue workers, local council members of the affected areas and me and some of my colleagues. It felt like they were all there to burden me with all the guilt. It was like I was the centre of attention, but not in a good way. Like I was in the middle of the boxing ring receiving all the punches.

While the geoengineer was explaining exactly how the practices of TerraSolve had caused this disaster to happen and blaming me for approving their work, pushing all the blame towards me, I could only think about how this meeting was never going to help us in the actions we needed to take. Of course,

it is important to investigate how this could have happened, I of course I was also partly responsible for that, but I wanted to take action.

'Can we please end the way too detailed description of what caused this disaster for now? This is not going to help right? These endless discussions on who exactly is too blame are not for now! We need to focus on helping first and later, when we finally get our country under control again we can evaluate the causes. But we need to give priority to the victims for now!'

It wasn't my goal to avoid the blame putted on me, but didn't they realise we had bigger problems for now? The victims still stuck under the debris or without a place to stay have way more important needs than us deciding on who was guilty. The next day I tried to get into contact with Germany. The population of our country had only grown in the past years and therefore there actually was no place right no to relocate the people from Gelderland that lost their houses. Although I gave it my all the convince them to let some of the refugees into Germany to provide them with a good place to stay, it didn't really work out as planned. I knew that they did not agree with my previous standpoints on taking in refugees, and maybe I was changing my mind as well, or let's say I was definitely changing my mind. However, as with everything in my life at that moment, trust in me did not exist. They refused to help us out, saying things like: 'As if you would have ever helped if we needed it?!'. Maybe they were right about my past self, but I was changing right? 'How was I supposed to explain this to the others working on relocating the refugees?'

'How could I ever make up for being the reason that Germany didn't want to help?'

It was so emotionally draining to doing everything you could, but not getting back any appreciation. Why was I still doing all the effort, if it didn't give my anything back. Why was I getting all the blame? Why couldn't I do anything right?

Well and now we are here. Five days after the flooding writing everything down that I went through. Today I decided to leave all the chaos. I had to take a day of, couldn't take it any longer at work. Although I always hated to talk to her, I decided to visit my mum in Groningen. Since my dad died 3 years ago, I actually didn't ever visit her again. But maybe I needed someone that was definitely there for me, despite everything I did wrong. She would never blame me. So, I drove all the way to Groningen, came across a protest against me saying: 'How can we ever trust someone so fickle?!'. I couldn't even disagree with them even more. Maybe they were right, why was I still leading the country? I got to my mum, but had nothing to say to her. Well, actually I had a lot to say, a lot I needed to tell someone, but I kept silent. Wasn't able to speak, but could only look at my mum and cry. She sat next to me, gave me a notebook and a pen and said: 'Just write it down.'

And that is what I did, what I am doing. Writing down everything I want to tell her but I can't say. Emotionally drained, spiralling down, I resign!

Vlinder

Sonja Nieuwenhuijs

The morning of

Vlinder looked around her, but she couldn't see anything. Even though she was in her own house, everything was complicated to recognize. Or was she just too scared to make sense of everything around her? All she could hear was water bumping into everything and flowing around her. Sometimes she saw an object she recognized, but often it drove away again.

“Mom!” she screamed, “Where are you? I feel scared.” There was no answer; why was there no answer? “Mom, I'm not playing hide and seek right now, really! Please come out and let me see you!”

The water kept on rising. Luckily, Vlinder had taken swimming lessons. Her parents were initially not able to pay for it. They applied for a local government grant allowin her to take swimming lessons. Vlinder looked around her and saw something she recognized; her pet toy she sleeps with.

“Cuddles!” she screamed. Vlinder slowly walked through the water to find her best friend, Cuddles. “Cuddles, I missed you so much,” she said as she hugged him. Vlinder felt safer with her best friend there, but still, she feared the unknown. Where should she go? Because of the water, it takes long to get anywhere. And who knows what is in the water? There could be dangerous things there.

Vlinder screamed again: “Dad are you there? I really need you right now. It's not funny, please come out!” Again, she heard nothing back. Vlinder had always been a tough girl. She always played soccer with the boys and she was rarely scared of anything. Her parents always told her that it was best to stand up for she yourself. If you did that, then no one could hurt you. Vlinder had to stand up for herself a lot. “Okay,” Vlinder said to herself, Mom always said

that I was a strong girl and could take care of myself. I can do this. What should I do Cuddles?”

Obviously, Cuddles did not answer. However, when Vlinder looked up from Cuddles, she saw something familiar on the top of the stairs. It looked like her mom's hair. Vlinder's mom had red hair, and Vlinder used to brush her mom's hair and try to braid it. Her parents could never pay for trips and hockey even though her friends' parents would. So she would stay with her parents and play with her mom. Vlinder started feeling hope again; her mom always kept her safe so everything would be fine. But if she was here the whole time, why was she not answering?

“Mom, I see you; why are you not answering? I just told you it is not a game anymore.” Still no answer. Vlinder started to get mad now. In the meant time, the water kept on rising in her house. Vlinder did not see much furniture anymore. Vlinder kept thinking of what would happen if the water kept rising. How would she breath then? What happened to her mom? What should she do next?

“Mom, I'm coming to you!”. Vlinder wanted to get to the stairs, but it was very difficult. The water kept rising slowly and it was flowing in the opposite direction. Luckily, Vlinder was one of the best in her class in her swimming lessons, so she was able to swim against the flow of the water.

“AAHGHH! What is that???” Vlinder screamed. Something had hit her, something with hair on it. As a result, Vlinder accidentally dropped Cuddles. “Please Cuddles, stay with me!” Vlinder screamed. Cuddles did not stay with Vlinder, he just flowed further away from her. Now the one thing that made her less scared went away.

Something touched her again! Vlinder started to swim faster to the stairs, she was crying now. “Mom, something hit me. Please answer, this is not funny!” It hit her again! What was it? Very slowly while Vlinder kept crying she was able to get to the stairs. She was finally safe, for now. She took a few breaths.

While she looked back she saw that the animal that hit her was an otter. What was an otter doing here? Vlinder did not mind however as she had an more important question. Why did her mom not answer? She slowly walked up to the stairs to her mom. She was scared of what she would find.

“Mom!” Vlinder said to her mother which laid on the top of the stairs. Her mother had blood on her head.

“Mom please say something to me” Vlinder cried. “I don't know what to do mom. There is water everywhere, I couldn't find you and dad, some kind of otter hit me and he was really scary, I just lost Cuddles and you always told me he was supposed to keep me safe from monsters. And mom what happened to you? Please be awake mom, please. Please be okay and help.” Still nothing.

Vlinder only felt fear and loneliness. She was to supposed to stand up for herself, but how should she do that? Normally when she stood up for herself, she know her mom and dad still stood behind her. But now her mother was laying on the ground before her, unconscious, and she did not know where her father was. Vlinder did not want it, but she kept crying quietly. Mom did not respond, and what should she do about it?

“Wait...” Vlinder thought. “They always throw water into the faces of people who are not awake” Vlinder quickly found some new hope again, got a bucket from the bathroom and filled it up with the water from downstairs. “Sorry mom” she said, Vlinder knew mom did not like to get her hair wet, because she had curls. Then Vlinder threw the water in her mother's face.

“Jesus Christ, what is happening? Who threw that water on me? I just washed my hair!” Alice said. Alice looked up to Vlinder and she still saw the tears on Vlinders face. “Darling, what happened. Why are you crying? Wait... What am I hearing right now, is that water?” Alice asked.

“Mom I am so happy you are awake. There is water everywhere right now and it is really scary. I was just downstairs eating breakfast, because it always takes you long to stand up. And then the water just kept rising. I tried to warn you and dad, but you did not respond. Then I tried to open the doors to let the water out, but that did not work, because the water came from outside. I'm so sorry mom, I should not have let the water in. Because of me, everything just got way worse. And a lot of scary things happened, an otter even touched me!” Vlinder looked at her mom, she looked confused.

“And are you okay mom why did you now answer? What happened to you?” Alice did not know what to say for a moment. She was in a light shock. “Mom?” Vlinder said, she was confused now. Her mom should do something about the situation.

Vlinder did not know what to do, but her mum should. Right? “Yes darling” Alice said, Alice started to remember what had happened. When she saw that the flood happened, Alice wanted to run to her daughter, but in the hurry she tripped over toys that Vlinder had left behind.

“I'm so sorry that happened to you honey. I think I'm fine, I just have a headache” Alice paused for a long moment. “It seems like I fell and then hit my head and then passed out. It's all okay now darling, give me a hug, I am so glad you are okay.” Finally Vlinder could hug her mother again, from now on everything should be more okay. Her mom always knew what to do in tough situations.

Alice slowly stood up. “What should we do now mom, do you know where dad is?” Vlinder asked. “Please stay here darling, I am going to look for something”. Alice walked to her room, it looked like she was still not quite awake. She came back with a boat that was able to blow up.

“All right Vlinder” Alice said “we are going to blow up this boat and we are going to the hill, it should be very nearby. We don't know what is going to happen in our house and it could become very dangerous

here. Dad went to a friend's earlier, but I don't know where he is right now. I hope he is all right, but I don't know honey... We always talked about how if a flooding ever happened because our government does not care about water management we would meet up at that hill. I just hope he comes to that hill. He should be fine, you know how strong dad is right?"

"Okay mom." Vlinder said, the thought of losing her dad made her scared "Did dad also take swimming lessons mom?" Vlinder asked. "Yes darling, he did" Alice reassured her. "The faster we go, the faster we will see dad again." Alice said.

Alice and Vlinder both blew up the boat. Once it was done, Alice had made a plan. She had looked out of the window and the water flew in the direction to the hill. They would be able to go there. Alice and Vlinder went downstairs, luckily the door was open. They placed the boat in the water and Vlinder got into the boat so Alice would be able to push it. The flow of the water had reduced from before. Because Alice was a lot taller than Alice, she was able to get to the door.

"Be careful of the otter mom! He is mean and had hit me." Vlinder said. "Sure darling, I'm sure he has gotten away. They were able to get outside. Once they got outside they saw what the flood had done to their street, the flow of the water had slowed down so they were able to stand still.

Just when they stood still Vlinder saw something coming towards her, it looked like it was swimming. "Mom, what is that?" Vlinder asked scared "it looks way bigger than the otter I've just seen." It came straight to them. Like they did not already have had enough problems. Alice did not say anything but just reacted, she tried to get them back into the house. Vlinder kept looking at the animal came closer and closer.

"MOM IT THINK IT'S A ALLIGATOR" Vlinder screamed. "Quick mom! They have big teeth" Alice felt a motherlike protections and tried to get them

away as quick as she could, but it was difficult. She was still tired and had a headache from her fell. She was not able to think as quick anymore. She felt an adrenaline rush she had never felt before. "I'm doing everything I can honey, please hold tight!" Alice said to Vlinder. The alligator got its head above the surface, and saw them. Vlinder looked at it and just when she wanted to scream at it, the alligator went the other way. Vlinder felt a huge relief as she saw the alligator swimming away

"Mom it's fine! It went away when it saw me." Vlinder said. Alice looked and felt the adrenaline come down as she saw that the alligator swimming away. Alice still looked to check if it really swam away. She waited a minute. "I think we're fine Vlinder." Alice said relieved. "It's strange that there are alligators here, they do not live in the wild actually." Alice said to herself, confused. She had more important things to do, so she disregarded the thought.

"So, Vlinder, how are you feeling, that was scary right?" Alice said. "I'm just afraid it happens again mom... Scary things keep happening. Just this morning I was really excited for today, I planned with Mary to play outside all day and practice dances we saw on TikTok. And now otters keep running into me and I've seen an alligator! Which are only supposed to be in zoos.... I also really miss dad." Vlinder said. Now that the situation was less intense she had calmed down a bit, but she was still a bit overwhelmed with her feelings.

"I know honey, it's okay to feel scared right now. I also miss dad right now. But let's get to him! Let's just take a few breaths and look around us to check if we see the alligator or any other animals. If we see them we'll just wait at this house, but I worry that if we stay here, it will take a long time for rescuers to come here. The government knew that this would happen and they did nothing about it. I'm quite sure we are not prepared for this and that it will take way too long for the government to do anything. We must take matters into our own hands. And who knows what could happen to us if we stay in

the water." Alice said. "Okay mom, if you say so..." Vlinder felt a hopelessness. She was not quite sure what would happen. Would her dad really be there? Vlinder and Alice stood there for a minute to take a breath and to check for animals. Now they had the time to look around them. Vlinder finally started to really look around her and she was speechless. The flood completely obliterated everything that Vlinder recognized. The neighbor's barn where Vlinder once hid during hide and seek had been torn down. Where once grew Vlinder's favorite flowers, was now just destruction, trash and plastics flowing around. The road where Vlinder learned how to bike, was now a place where two cars were almost stacked upon each other with water flowing around it. In the place Vlinder's bike parking place was which she used daily was now just a tree trunk. The neighbor's swing set was still standing, but the seats drove on the water. The garden where she used to plant vegetables with her father when he was home was not visible anymore.

Everything in her street that was she knew, had become something else entirely.

A few hours later

When Vlinder and Alice got to the hill a few hours earlier, Vlinder's dad, Jeron, was already on the hill. Very soon after that, the rescue authorities saved them and brought them here. When they arrived it was chaos. It looked like no one knew what to do. "Just as I thought, of course the government, and especially Stephane Lambert did nothing to prepare for this." Jeron said. "They knew from miles away that this would happen and did nothing. I've been working for TerraSolve Inc and there were already rumors there, so I don't know why the government did nothing with it. You know this is the problem that I have with this government. They are never focusing on the right things. And now we are here in this goddam refugee camp drowned with water in the rain and Stephanie is holding a press conference is her beautiful tower. How typical... Such a selfish woman." Jeron was mad, but he was more disappointed.

"And I also heard that most people who don't have debts like have rented houses in another area, or went to hotels in another area of the Netherlands. And because we have less money we have to stay here..." Jeron complained. "Come on Jeron, don't be like this. Let's have some hope, at least for Vlinder" Alice told Jeron.

Vlinder did not know what to do with all this information. It did seem wrong that she was in this place when other people could just go to other places. Everyone should be treated the same right? Els, her teacher, always told her this, and Vlinder agreed with her. While they were waiting in line some guy wanted to interview her. Vlinder and her parents agreed with it so he asked her some questions.

"I'm so proud of you honey" Jeron told Vlinder afterwards, you really showed the people what this situation is like and I think you've let them see that it is unfair. After this, they went to their tent. Her parents went away to get them some food. Vlinder really hoped that she would be able to eat her cereal again which she ate every day.

It just kept on raining. Vlinder could hear the droplets falling on the tent over and over again. Vlinder had always loved it when it rain, it gave her more interesting things to play with when she was outside. She used to splash around in the puddles and would get quite dirty with her neighbors, Ellie and Kristen. When she got home, her mom would laugh, and then she would have to shower. But now it felt different. Being dirty used to remind her of playing outside, now Vlinder looked down at her body and now the dirt came reminded her of awful memories of having to be scared of losing her parents, scary animals coming at her and not seeing anything anymore that she recognize.

Vlinder had never been in a refugee camp before, and she didn't know what to expect. The tents were cramped, and the ground was muddy and wet. She missed her bed and Cuddles and all the fun toys she had, but most of all, the people that used to be

around her. At this time of the day Vlinder used to have math class, but now she was waiting in a tent for her mom and dad to come back. Math always seemed so boring, but now she realized being in a tent alone was more boring.

“It’s so stupid that I have to stay here.” Vlinder thought. “I could help, I think, only just a few hours ago I helped my mom wake up when she hit her head. But mom said I should stay here because it was dangerous outside. She suddenly heard a growling sound around her and she froze. Maybe there are still alligators here...”

That thought definitely made sure she stayed in her tent.

After a while, Vlinder got bored, but the more she was alone, the more she started to think and she got more worried. “Where could all my friends be? At least I am now safe, but I just heard on the radio the guy next to me in the line had that people had died. Could my friends also have died? At least they can swim... But wait, my teacher, had a broken leg. Then she cannot swim anymore right? How can she get herself out of the water?” Vlinder thought, she really wanted to know what happened to everyone else. “It just seems so wrong that the government did so little to protect the people right” Vlinder thought. Her dad always said it was the job of the government to protect the people. Vlinder did not feel protected in the last few hours.

“All right honey, we’re here again! We’ve got some food for you.” Alice told Vlinder. Vlinder was really happy that her parents had showed up “Wait what is this?” Vlinder asked. In front of her was the grossest thing she had ever seen, oatmeal porridge. “Is this the only thing that they have?” Vlinder asked. “I’m sorry honey, but yes, this is the only thing they have left” her dad said.

“You know I don’t like this! Why is this happening. I’m so hungry, but now everything I can eat is this stupid oatmeal, it literally looks like snot, look at it mom!” Vlinder was mad, after everything that

happened she now had to eat snot. “This is so unfair!” Vlinder said as she crossed her arms. “It’s not as bad as you think, just eat it Vlinder. At least you will not hungry after. And I’ve got something that will cheer you up! I was able to reach one of your best friends parents on the telephone just then. I called them to make sure they were fine. You could call with Ellen if you want to.” Alice told Vlinder. “I was just worrying about her! Could I call with her, please, please, please!” Vlinder asked. She felt better now that she knew that she was fine. If she made it out alive, other people would have probably made it out too right? “Yes of course honey, but first, you must eat your porridge.” Alice told her. “Really mom???” Alice just looked at here with a straight face. “Yes I am sure honey, it is not that bad, just eat it.” Vlinder looked mad at her... Why did her mom always have to be this way. She just wanted to talk to her friends. But Vlinder knew that her mom never caved, so she ate her stupid snot-looking like porridge. Out of revenge, she made some gross noises to make sure her mom and dad knew that she did not like to eat it.

Vlinder got her mom’s phone and it already called the number of the parents of Ellen. “Hi, this is Jonathan speaking.”

“Hi Jonathan, this is Vlinder, my mom said I could talk to Ellen. Can I talk with her?”

“Hey Vlinder, so glad to hear that you are there! I heard you guys were that god awful refugee camp. Seems terrible really. All that rain, and people just cramped up with each other. And it must be so dirty there... Anyways yes, I will give the phone to Ellen” She heard Jonathan calling Ellen and then she could finally speak to her.

“Vlinder?” Ellen asked. “Yes I’m here!” Vlinder said excitedly. “It is so good to hear your voice again. How are you? What happened to you?”

“I’m fine really” Ellen said. “I heard you are in a camp or something, what is that and what are you doing there?”

“Yes I’m in a camp, it’s so strange here. There are a lot of tents and I hear so many noises. There are just so many people here. Also there is a lot of mud on me, but I don’t know if we have a shower so I can wash it away.” Vlinder told Ellen.

“Wait, so that seems dirty... Why are you there? That doesn’t seem fun?” Ellen asked Vlinder. “Our house was full of water and we could not live there anymore. And somehow an Alligator and an otter were around our house, so it was definitely not safe there anymore... It was so scary Ellen! It seemed like a scary movie, but I was in it! And then after that happened, we went to the hill nearby and were picked up by some guys. Then we were brought to the camp. We also can’t go anywhere else. I heard a lot of people can pay to get away from here to like big houses, but we can’t you know. So now I’m here and I had to eat the grossest, snot-like porridge. But wait what has happened to you, where are you?” Vlinder was so excited that she could finally share her story with someone that she thought would understand.

“Ow that seems awful Vlinder” Ellen said quite unemotionally. “Yeah our parents and me just moved to the other house we have in Amsterdam. My dad has a boat in our backyard which he sometimes takes to lakes. So we just got on it, went somewhere safe and traveled to Amsterdam in our second car my dad had somewhere else. It was very fun, like going on a road trip. Shame that you did not get a road trip, Vlinder.”

The Alligator

Fio Witteman

Freedom, no, fear, no, both! That's what I'm feeling right now, oh my gosh I'm finally free. But what am I going to do? What's happening all around me? I don't understand what's going on, but all I can see is water and rubbish. All I can hear are people yelling, drowning, alongside my fellow zoo inhabitants. I'm sorry for the animals that can't swim, but I feel like the animals that can, or those who can fly are just as happy as I am now. I do feel a sort of aching feeling in my mouth and search with my tongue what's going on. Ah yes, I lost a few of my teeth whilst fighting for my freedom and apparently got overtaken by adrenaline, that's why I did not notice that I was causing myself harm. Well with that being said I can imagine that you're wondering what I'm blabbering on about, so I'll give you an explanation, be prepared, because it's going to be a rough ride.

Let me first introduce myself to you. Hi! My name is Alfie and I'm a 15 year old alligator that is born in The Netherlands. I've spent my whole life in different zoos in The Netherlands, my mom however was brought here on a rescue mission after she was found injured in the rainforest in Argentina. The Dutch rescue workers found her while they were on an expedition to find animals that were in need of help, but also to diversify the animals that were currently in their shelter in The Netherlands. The first place they took her to was a private shelter that was specialised in amphibians, which was portrayed as a genuine place where animals could recover. This, however, was just a façade they put up to collect as many animals as possible and to receive grants for sustainable development, among other things, of their shelter and marketing strategies. This money was often used for different subjects that were on their agenda, such as international trips and personal use. These trips were promoted as rescue trips, but often consisted of luxury hotel visits, sightseeing and expensive tours through the wilderness. They did have to rescue some animals to make sure they were to receive those grants. They

set up meticulous plans to fool people on the outside into believing they ran a genuine cause. So, this shelter was eventually the place that I was born in a few years after my mom was rescued. The owners made sure to captivate male and female animals that could be mated with each other, to enlarge the number of inhabitants. This way my mom got set up with a male alligator and eventually laid several eggs of which I was one. My siblings unfortunately did not make it through the first few years due to health issues, of which our caretakers thought little of in the beginning but eventually caused their deaths. This way I grew closer to my mom, since I was the only one she had left. She also had a strong connection with her male partner, but they were quickly separated after the mating process since the shelter owners did not want to encourage the development of a stronger bond. When I grew a few years older we noticed that a lot of animals in the shelter were getting sick, and rumours told us they were to be transferred to a different zoo but we all knew that meant they were being put to sleep. I was quite jealous sometimes because the caretakers would beat up me and my mom when we did not behave like the caretakers wanted us to. I thought it would be nicer not to be alive than to endure this strange and awful treatment every few days. Due to the rapid change of the inhabitants of the shelter and their status of health, it raised suspicions under the veterinary health inspectors that checked the safety and sustainability of the shelter. After more thorough investigations, these inspectors made the decision, in consultation with other bodies of the local government, to close the shelter. The health restrictions were not being met, since the animals did not receive the care they needed, they were also being abused, and the grants the owners were given were used for personal gain. This news was also released to the public and received quite some feedback, this way all the animals were transferred to public zoos across The Netherlands, after receiving a thorough health check. My mom and I eventually ended up in the zoo called "Burgers' Zoo", which is located in the province of Gelderland.

After a long trip of being locked up in cages and

being inspected by a lot of different people, we finally arrived in Burgers' Zoo. I was amazed to see how much room we had for so little animals, compared to what we had in our past shelter. We, for example, had a larger pool to swim in, since we're animals that like to stay in the water. We also had more ground space with plants scattered around behind which we could stay out of the sun in the summer heat. I immediately felt at home but was really wary of all the people that we were seeing. There were different types of people I could distinguish, this took me of course a few months but I think I got the hang of it. There were these really nice people that gave me food regularly, I would like to call them our caretakers. We received far more food than in our past home, I guess I never noticed how malnourished we were, but the change in my body felt absolutely amazing. Among these caretakers was one woman, I don't know what her name was but let's call her Mathilda, that came back regularly so I think she was the head of the department that took care of me and several other animal groups. She always stayed a bit longer while she was feeding us and talked to us instead of just feeding us and leaving again. I would like to believe she liked me better than the other animals, because she talked in a more sweeter way and sometimes gave me treats. Besides our caretakers there were other people that kept coming back, although they didn't look the same so I guess these were different people that came by every day. I guess these were the visitors of the park, since we were trapped behind fences and they kept taking pictures of us, whilst laughing and pointing stuff out in our appearance. I liked the attention these people gave me because it was way better than being locked up in small cages, whilst undergoing routine abuse. Anyway, it is safe to say we were very happy to be able to settle in our new forever home, although, that's what we thought it was.

Fast forward to me being 15 years old and living a happy life within Burgers' Zoo. I've finally built up a strong bond with Mathilda and the other caretakers, my mom and I are in good health and we've even got some new alligator friends that have joined

us in the park! I mean, I can't complain, I've got every thing I wished for years ago but I still feel like something's missing. I can't quite fathom what it is but I think it has something to do with my living space. It's nice to have safety and all that but I wish there was some more excitement in my life. I would like to see what's out there, in the big open world. If only there were something to happen that could set me free...

Okaaay I didn't mean that too literally but let's catch up on what's happen right now. It feels like I'm drowning, although that doesn't make much sense because I'm in the water for a big part of my life. This water is different though, there's chunks of debris floating around and hitting my body on a lot of places and the water is moving much faster than in my living space. I also taste blood in my mouth and feel that there are teeth missing. Now I remember! All of a sudden there was this enormous surge of water that flooded my part of the zoo and I remember trying to break open the fence with my teeth. That must have been the moment that I lost those teeth. I can't quite remember what happened after that, something must have hit my head in the process of getting out. Ah well, I'm out now, safe and that's all that matters. But wait! Where's mom? I can't seem to locate her but I do remember her yelling to me that I needed to get out as fast as possible. Okay this is making me feel very nervous, why can't I see her. I need to get to a more quiet place to collect my thoughts, but the water is moving so fast I don't now what to do. Maybe there's something I can grab on to. Ah yes a tree! With all of my strength I grab hold of a branch with my teeth, even though it kind of hurts but this is the only way I can get to a safer place. Whilst holding onto the branch I drift towards the roof of a building that I recognize from the zoo and climb onto that. Okay, now that I'm on higher ground, let me have a look if I can spot my mom. Somewhere in the distance I can see my old shelter that is now flooded and filled with debris and when I look closer I can see something that's floating towards me. It's a long object that has similar colours as my mother's skin but I can't figure out what kind of shape it has. Slowly the object drifts towards me

and I'm afraid I know what I'm seeing but my mind won't let me believe it. This can't be real, this is not what I'm seeing right now, I WON'T BELIEVE IT. I'm sobbing and can't believe I'm seeing the body of my mother floating past me while I'm still here, this shouldn't have happened, this should have been me. Then it all starts coming back to me. While she was yelling to me to get to a safe place, a big block of concrete hit her head and knocked her straight out. I must have been so disoriented and unaware of what was happening that I did not notice this. But what am I going to do now? This is too much to bare for me right now and I'm really hungry, I just want to see my mom and want her to tell me it's all going to be okay. This isn't what I wanted, yes I wanted to be free but together with my mom and maybe some friends. This really isn't what I envisioned being free would feel like, and certainly not at what cost. I need to make a plan to get out of here though, to a sheltered place where I can get some rest and maybe find some food.

After a few hours I finally worked up the courage to start my journey. The only problem is, there's a lot of people on the ground that will probably get frightened by my appearance or people that want to catch me and lock me up in a cage again. I need to find a way to sneak past them... Oh wait! Of course! I can just swim below the surface, that way they won't see me. Well look at me, being all smart on my own. I'll just have to hope there's not much stuff underneath the water that can hit me, seeing as the water really is quite cloudy. I started my descent but soon stumble on the problem that there was nothing I could hold onto. Maybe the only way to end up in the water is to jump, but won't everyone see me? Well, I mean, they would only see something fall into the water, they're probably too busy with themselves or people around them to notice me anyway. Okay here I go, and I jumped into the water, immediately losing control over my whereabouts. I was tumbling and hitting stuff as the water was moving me forward. Just keep your head down I was thinking, that's the only thing I need to focus on right now. Slowly I gained control over my body and I started to propel myself forward with my tail, I

gained momentum and vaguely had a vision of what was coming towards me. I dodged things that came my way, such as concrete blocks, road signs, bicycles and cars. These cars were more difficult to avoid, since they blocked a great deal of the sight I had. The water was luckily deep enough for me to swim underneath the cars, even though this was really scary to do. It feels like I've been swimming forever, so let's take a look at where I'm at. I carefully peeked above the surface level of the water, only letting the top layer of my head out of the water. I was passing through an area where I could see almost no people, except for a woman with a little girl. That's good! While I was passing some houses I made slight eye contact with the girl and they quickly hopped back inside their house, I must have scared them, even though I had no intention of doing them harm, but I mean how could they know that. Well alright then, I swam a little further and noticed there weren't any houses anymore, so it looks like I'm entering a nature reserve or something. This might be a good place for me to find food. I swam towards the edge of the water stream and managed to climb onto a bedding of earth, loose lying branches and leaves. I looked around me and only saw trees, this is a type of nature I've never seen before so I don't know what type of animals live here. I actually don't even know what our caretakers always fed us, so what am I supposed to eat? The food we got were meat like substances so I guess I have to look for animals to eat. I'll just start walking around and see if I can spot anything then. I was walking around and tried to acclimatize to my surroundings, accepting the strange feeling beneath my paws of the twigs and leaves and seeing the large trees beside me. At this moment my mind started wandering off, I started to think about my mom. Oh how I miss her, I really wish she was beside me right now. I also miss Mathilda, how she always brought me food and started to talk to me even though I could never understand what she was saying. I really feel like we had a connection, she always stayed much longer than the other caretakers. I think my mom liked her too, she didn't express that to anyone however, but I noticed how her behaviour changed when Mathilda entered our habitat, she always got livelier. My mom

wasn't one that talked about her feelings too much, she was always there for me but didn't let me in as much as I wanted. I think this has to do with her past, how she was captured in the jungle and how she got abused in our past shelter. I feel like she also wanted her life to end at some point, luckily we had each other. I think that's also the reason why I like Mathilda so much, she was the first person to sincerely treat us nicely and give us the attention we deserve. Well I liked that, I don't know how the other 'gators felt.

Whilst I was contemplating my life I spotted something in the corner of my eye, I immediately stopped walking and kept low to the ground. It was a small furry animal on the side of a tree, I think that must be a squirrel, my mom once told me about them. I mean they've got meat on their body so I guess that's something. I slowly crept up on them and got them in my vision. It was sitting low enough on the trunk of the tree for me to grab it, so I was worth a try. They didn't notice me creeping up on them since they were looking another way. Okay just stay really quiet, you've got this. I was getting closer and felt my heart rate increase. Just a little closer and I can eat again! They were still looking another way so I took my chance. With a sudden surge of power I jumped towards the tree, opened my mouth and grabbed the squirrel by its tail. They were struggling with all their might to get free, but I managed to get them in my mouth, crushing them with my teeth. I quickly swallowed the squirrel because I did feel guilty for killing them, but I did what I have to do, otherwise I won't survive. Well this went pretty good! This way it won't be hard for me to survive on my own.

A few days went by and my luck didn't seem to last very long, I hadn't managed to eat much and the area around me didn't change a bit. I had slept quite some time though underneath some bushes, so I felt rested. The strength in my body did seem to decrease, probably because I was so hungry all of the time. I wonder if anyone knows I'm missing, they probably held track of the animals that were living in the zoo and now want to know where we

all are. I would like to see Mathilda again but I don't want to spend my life living locked up anymore. I just need to get to a different part of this country, where there's water so I can swim again. Again a few days went by and I was getting much weaker, I think those were a few days but I actually can't tell anymore. I kind of feels like I'm getting a bit delusional because of starvation and dehydration. Then all of a sudden I spot what seems like a lake, so I fasten my pace and it looks like I was right. I slid myself into the water and felt such relief coming over me. Immediately I felt much better and inhaled as much water as I could. While I was in this moment of ecstasy I heard some voices in the distance. I quickly submerged myself in the water, but did peek who I could see. I couldn't believe my eyes, it was Mathilda I was seeing! She was with other people too who I didn't recognize. They were all wearing the same clothes, so I guess they are together. They were also holding these net like things and other instruments that I didn't recognize. They were discussing stuff with Mathilda while they were looking around, they're probably looking for animals from the zoo and I guess Mathilda is here to find me. It actually sounds pretty tempting to go back to the zoo, I mean, I don't need to find my own food, the shelter is good and maybe they'll bring new friends into my habitat. I decided to swim towards them and show them my whole body, Mathilda spotted me and pointed directly at me. The men in the same clothes grabbed their tools and waited with anticipation what I was going to do. I got closer to them and stumbled onto the dry land when all of a sudden one of the guys stung me with this really powerful lighting object, in a state of mania I jumped up and attacked Mathilda, biting her really hard. I couldn't control what I was doing and kept biting her, the men stopped stinging me and I let go of Mathilda. I fell to the ground and saw Mathilda lying there too, she was bleeding really badly but I also felt extremely weak. All I could hear was these men shouting to each other and bending over Mathilda. I can't believe what I've done, how could I have done this to Mathilda?? She was the only person I trusted, she helped me get over my abusive past and this is the way I thank her? I can

still see her bleeding very badly and I see she's closing her eyes. She looks so powerless, did I just kill her? I can also feel like I'm drifting away when suddenly one of the guys bends over me, grabs something out of his pocket and points it at me. I don't have the power to move or to defend myself, he looks behind him, says something to the other guys turns around and nods his head. The last thing I know is hearing a really loud sound and then everything went black.

Poor Alfie did not make it and died right there on the spot, alongside his favourite human being. This poor alligator just wanted freedom in his life, but when he eventually got it, he noticed how difficult it is to survive on your own. The friendly image he had of himself eventually changed to his true nature, he really is a wild animal, even though he always sought connection with humans and other animals. His pure instinct got the better of him caused not only the death of his beloved caretaker, but also his own demise. It's a sad ending to a story that could have been marvellous for the young alligator, however, life would have caught up sooner or later, since alligators don't belong in countries such as The Netherlands. His life ended in relation to the same forces as how his life began, due to human actions, which is why he eventually never could have been free, he was always under control of human beings and their actions.

The geo-engineer

Daan Zwerver

I enjoy being awake early in summer mornings, before the rays of dawn have set in. When the streets are quiet and the air is crisp. I imagine myself walking through the ruins of a ghost town, where nothing is left to describe but the spirits that thrived here long ago. At times, a strange sense of serenity arises when thinking about something as post-apocalyptic, something this quiet. Occasionally, an observing crow might call for his murder upon the sight of a man like me, a lonely 5 footer strolling about at the pace of a 140 year old tortoise, walking and breathing like his legs could kicked away at any point by the Grim Reaper himself. Once they've gathered, I always wonder whether they want some spare crumbs from my right hand pocket or if it's just my legs they're waiting for. Nice isn't it, early mornings?

Of course, any healthy person in Leiden was already vast asleep. But to sleep at night seems more and more as a luxury I can't afford. I knew I wasn't going to any time soon. Not tonight, not the coming week. Something felt off, without knowing the ins and outs of the actual thing. Maybe it was the smell, maybe it was the overcast, even though my weather app clearly told me there Clear Sunshine All Day with a fucking smiley for a sun. Maybe it was the fact that Geraldine hasn't messaged me in three days. What do I know, it could've also been the crazy stare down with the one-eyed lady at the supermarket while I was buying my croissant and a bottle of Scotch to wash it down with. I don't blame her. I would've tried to scare the shit out of anybody who tries paying for a bottle with a public transport pass at 7:00 in the morning.

After a few tries, I opened my front-door, took off my coat, and sat down on the couch while I checked my phone. Geraldine sent me a message at 5:32 am. "Did you see the news?" it said. Did I see the news? I never follow the news anymore, she knew that. Either an earthquake in Yemen created an abyss,

swallowing a golden retriever and her 5 new-born puppies or Putin hinted in a speech that radioactive juice for breakfast would be an appropriate way for the West to cure it's addiction for consumerism. Nonetheless, I switched on national news app to see if I could guess what she was talking about. There wasn't a lot of guessing left to be done after I did so. The headlines were talking about one thing only: "Rhine floods: more than 200 casualties, tens of thousands left without a home"; "Flooding of the Rhine causes mass suffering and displacement"; "Refugee camps installed while people flee from flooded Rhine". Shit.. SHIT! You've got to be kidding me.

I opened the living room curtains and stared out the window for a while. Trying to empty my mind. Maybe then a solution will come floating up. "Empty your mind, stop thinking," I said. I repeated: "Empty your mind, stop thinking. Empty your mind, stop thinking. Empty your mind, stop thinking..." But by trying I already made it impossible for myself to succeed in doing so. It was like trying to make water still by hitting it with a flat iron. I started to freak out. Nobody would suspect me, right? Or Terra Solve? Look at all those other billion dollar geo-engineering companies these days, trying to make a buck at the worlds prospect of never ending misery.... Right? Fuck me.

Worried as I was I started thinking about all the scenarios that could envelop in the days to come, even weeks. I saw myself sitting in a court room with 7 cameras taping every drop of sweat dripping down my face as I was desperately trying to talk my way out of a 10+ year prison sentence. The whole nation seeing my every wrinkle wrinkling, eye-lid ticking, every goosebump bumping. My mind continued with the sight of Geraldine and Becca sitting in the crowd, their eyes filled and red with tears of shame and remorse. The empty seat for every of Becca's life milestones in the coming decade. Every lesson in music I should have lectured her, every boyfriend I should have giving an angry eye, her graduation, performances and sports games. And the inability to reconnect with her

after my release. Whilst taking a deep breath, I got up from the couch to check whether she was still lying in bed. A narrow beam of light fell on her bed sheets. Below it, the compression and expansion of a small human appeared to lift the linen up and down. A dark coloured ponytail faced me and the sound of a minor snore of an open mouth sleeper vibrated my eardrums. I closed the door quietly and walked towards my room.

I laid down on my bed and phoned Geraldine. “Have you read my text?” she asked. “Of course, why do you think I called?” I answered. “Promise me you had nothing to do with it.” Her voice was cracking. Geraldine grew up close to the city of Nijmegen, located along the banks of the Rhine.

“What is this, a public hearing?” I reacted sarcastically. “Why don’t you ask your parents about the state of affairs there? They probably have front row seats for the show! A better view than any news broadcasting station I bet.” I continued cynically. What an asshole I am. Her parents still lived there, as well as some faded friendships. She hated visiting that old town of hers. There was nothing to do, nothing to buy, no interesting conversations except her mom’s annual gossip report (her words not mine), and the occasional car crash happening on the highway next to the village. A bridge supporting a road that leads straight to the village was mostly utilised as a stand for the villagers once people got notice of an accident happening. Considering that the highway going under the bridge wasn’t too safe piece of infrastructure to begin with, it was a relatively frequent occurrence. Terrible excuses for primates they are. But once the prospect of someone’s whole youth area being obliterated by 10 feet of flood, it won’t just be the thing you love that you’ll miss.

“Excuse me?!” She rightfully prompted. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I’m stressed out. Had a bad couple of days, and couldn’t sleep tonight and yesterd...” “You don’t get to talk to me like that! Who the fuck

do you think you are?! You’re an asshole, that’s who you are. I should’ve left you face down in the gutter last week, you drunken piece of shit. Look at all the shit I’ve done for you. What do you give me in return, huh? A night at a shitty motel downtown to let me suck you off for 30 seconds? Some nerve you got talking to me like that.”

“I’m sorry, Gerry...” She was right, but I couldn’t bear listening to anymore of her complaints. “You know my parents still live there! I haven’t heard from them yet, even though I called them 15 times already even though their house is supposedly under a 6 meter layer of water! I have just about had it with your shitty attitude. I relationships aren’t about checks and balances, but you’re in quite a bit of depth m...” I hung up the phone. She’d call back another time.

I turned on my old TV. Switching to the national news, I was hoping to see some areal footage of the flood. Maybe the damage wasn’t so severe as people said. While I pushed the button I knew it was just wishful thinking. And it was. The death count was still rising.

The news anchor reported: “With these huge generators, Rijkswaterstaat is trying to pump the water away.

“Away to where?” I said to myself. It seemed to be everywhere. It was like looking at a toddler trying to empty an Olympic swimming pool with nothing but a plastic bucket. All these decades this country has been fighting water. Trying to work with it, giving it space, barricading the vulnerable areas, pumping the areas dry. Hell, they even added a whole province to their resume by doing so. But all the hydrological technology in the world still could only pose futile attempt a water replenishment of this size.

Allow me to paint a picture here. Have you ever seen those drone shots of a lonely boat floating in the middle of the ocean? You know, the ones you see during survival or adventure movies? Not a breeze in the air, not a soul in sight, just endless blue water

and a dot floating on top. White sunlight reflecting of the water like a mirror, and waves appearing and disappearing from and into nothingness. There is not a cloud in the sky, no rain, no traffic, not even a fucking fly to annoy you while you’re trying to write a goddamn masterpiece. Now picture that, but with the water brown and the sky grey. Souls were in sight, but not in the way you want them to. In fact, the metonymy might be an overstatement. I always found the concept of a soul to be somewhat abstract, but the sight of its absence revealed something a lot more tangible. Either faces were shown of people in shock, unfathomed and in true disbelief of how their miserable lives could have become even more miserable. Another shot that often occurred was that of other soulless people. But here more so where the soul, defined as “that which giveth a human life”, has left its vessel. The news wasn’t shy about showing any of it.

Before pushing the ON-button on my remote, I expected to be horrified by a streak of semi-censored news broadcasts, politely covering the news. Like the up-tight people that news anchors can be. Then again, I haven’t watched the news since 2029. But it was like the censor-person was out of office today. I guess these days broadcasting channels were battling with other ones for shock and attract more viewers. So I checked the other channels as well. As much misery as I witnessed during two minutes of zapping, I have never experienced in my career as a *[funny nickname for zapper/tv addict]*. It seemed like the media was having a feeding frenzy. As if they got served for free dinner in a 5-star restaurant until the clock strikes midnight. Gorging themselves and stuffing the rest of the population with the misery their fellow citizens endured, just to make sure they had their bit of dough.

There was one shot that will probably be forever be imprinted on my eye-lids. One that didn’t begin too gruesome at all. It started with a curved [low-point] view of a church tower, backed up by a cloudy sky. Seemingly, they used a kind of dark grey tint, which kind of threw me off. After a few seconds,

the camera started to zoom out. I expected to see a larger field of vision, like the church building and some bystanders maybe. But it quickly became clear that this wasn’t possible. For as the zooming out continued, a brownish hazel ring slowly revealed itself around the edges of curved frame of the church tower. This was followed by a shiny but veiny crème-white surface and (what appeared to be) wet eyelashes. As the picture of the church became less and less visible, the picture of a motionless eye appeared gained its shape. It was sitting motionless in the skull of what appeared to be a 10-year old boy, pointing diagonally up into the sky. It didn’t stop there. The zooming out continued, revealing his slightly pointy but crooked nose and the freckles on it. His soaked dark blond hair glistened as the first flies started to gather on his cheek. They showed the collar of his jeans jacket, as well as the red, green and black baseball hat he was wearing. If it wasn’t for a rescue worker to rightfully interfere, I think the view wouldn’t have stopped zooming out. What horrors would lie beyond that?

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” he said shocked, while covering the boy’s face with a piece of clothing.

“We are covering this disaster to inform the nation of the tragedies that have happened here, during and after the flood,” she said swiftly as the camera started to rumble around to adjust its aim for an interview. It’s like if she’s been preparing for someone to say that. Blatantly, she continued her questioning, “Sir, can u explain what the last hours have looked like f...”

I switched back to the state’s news channel. Where prime-minister Lambert was just started speaking to the nation.

“Citizens of the Netherlands,” she said. “Today, we have all witnessed a tragedy unfold before our eyes. The flooding of the Rhine has caused immense damage and loss of life, and my heart goes out to all those affected by this disaster. As your Prime Minister, it is my duty to ensure that

we respond to this crisis with the utmost urgency and compassion. Our first priority is to provide emergency relief and support to those affected. We are working tirelessly to coordinate rescue efforts and provide shelter, food, and medical assistance to those in need.

But we must also look to the future. We must take decisive action to address the root causes of this disaster and prevent it from happening again. Climate change is real, and it is already causing devastating impacts around the world. We cannot afford to ignore this reality any longer.

My government is committed to taking bold action on climate change by supporting innovations that could lead us to a better tomorrow, and working with others.”

What a woman, I thought to myself. It takes some character to formulate such a shitshow in such a hopeful but constructive way. Or maybe was just a team of good speechwriters and a busty blond with clear blue eyes doing the talking, who's to say. I bet the number of viewers for speeches such as this wasn't as high when Rutte was still prime-minister, or any past head of state for that matter. I bet a there is much that Lambert can say that Rutte wouldn't have been able to get away with, and he got away with a lot.

“.that my government is fully investigating these concerns, and we will hold those responsible accountable for their actions. But I also want to emphasize that we must avoid jumping to conclusions and engage in baseless speculation.

In times like these, we must come together as a nation and support one another. We must show compassion and empathy for those affected by this disaster, and we must work together to find long-term solutions to the challenges we face.

I want to express my gratitude to all the emergency responders, volunteers, and organizations that are currently working tirelessly to help those in need.

Your efforts are making a real difference, and we are all in your debt.

We will get through this crisis together. We will rebuild and recover, and we will emerge stronger than ever before. Thank you.”

After some seconds of Lambert staring into the camera like a deer in headlights, the cameras switched back to the studio: “Thank you for still bearing with us as we inform you about the disaster unfolding in the middle of our country,” the news anchor said.

“Hm, pretty face,” I thought to myself.

“To give us an expert analysis on today's events, we are joined now by an expert climatologist, researcher and professor at Utrecht University's Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, and geo-engineer at TerraSolve Incorporated: Dr. Peter Vermeijden. Welcome, Peter!” she said.

“Well thank you, also for that generous introduction,” Peter smiled.

Wait, Peter? Are you kidding me? God? Or universe, or floating spaghetti monster whatever kind of nonsense bullshit. What has that rat done to be on this news broadcast, right after the fucking president?

Peter Vermeijden was the leach of the company. Everybody hated him, at least I did. I worked at TerraSolve for 12 years before they put me on in-active. Peter was almost there from the get go, starting just two months after I did as a fellow researcher. I got to know him quite well, as we worked on the same projects sometimes. But where I strived to be left alone by the big eyed brother that were my bosses, so I could do my research in peace, Peter did nothing but lick the butt of any executive member of the company. If all CEO's jointly puked their lunch on the toilet floor and asked him to lick it up, he would have done it.

I remember one time, about 6 years ago, me and Geraldine attended a party organized by TerraSolve

in my honour. This was when were still officially a couple. The company was celebrating a new breakthrough in my research into sulphur dioxide injection technology. About a week or two earlier, me and my team had managed accurately model, predict and recreate climate circumstances after the injection of a sulphur dioxide based mixture of my own design in a controlled lab setting. Not only did we manage to model and somewhat accurately model the incredibly complex chain of events that would occur with the Earth's atmosphere with reasonable certainty. The injection of our sulphur dioxide mixture, Solvate we named it, also created the much wanted effect: a cooling of the average yearly temperature of the lower atmosphere by 0.76 degrees Celsius. Basically, I succeeded in making a pilot version of the thing TerraSolve strived to execute in the real world, since it was created by Alan and Steven. Even more basically, I made their wet dream become a reality.

When I first told them, they didn't believe me. They asked me to give a presentation, giving a short explanation on the technology, after which I could thank anyone I wanted, like it was the Grammys. So I accepted. About halfway through the party, Alan gathered the roughly 35 attendees and asked: “Henry, are you ready to tell us all about your breakthrough?” Alan prompted.

So I looked Geraldine in the eye, and then back at Alan. I smiled and nodded my head. The rest started clapping and I walked up to the little stage they made for me in the auditorium. During that 15 meter trip I walked past Peter. And as I did he quickly whispered in my ear: “Don't fool yourself by thinking you're better than me.” He then smiled at me as if he just said something incredibly genuine, personal and encouraging. Only the latter was as false as a drunken promise of a drug addict. Fuck him, I thought at the time. He's just jealous.

I was explained some of the theory behind my research and my motivations for my modelling choices, and presented some of my results, your basic scientific poster presentation. Then, as I

thanked my team, Alan, Steven and Geraldine, I saw Peter walking towards the back of the crowd, where Geraldine was standing. I raised my glass to toast on the future of the company and the planet. And as I did, I saw him standing even closer to her, whispering something in her ear, oblivious to the fact that the rest of the group had their glasses raised. No hands of his were. Till this day I don't know what it was exactly that he said to her. But right after she slapped him in the face with a flat right hand. He started to scream like a little girl as his champaign glass fell and broke on the ground. “Asshole!” Geraldine shouted.

Some confused and bewildered reactions followed from the gathered collective, after which I made my way down the stage to see to Geraldine. I was trying to keep the situation from escalating any further. So I looked at her, I knew she wanted to go. So I took her by the hand and we made our way to the wardrobe.

“You bitch!” Peter screamed. “What did you do that for?!” he said as he desperately looked to the crowd for any moral support. None was given. “You know damn well why, you ginger rat!” Geraldine replied.

As I walked with Geraldine towards the exit, Alan shouted: “Where are you going, Henry?! This is a party in your honour!”

“Fuck honour, kind of seems like my wife just got harassed doesn't it?” We weren't married, but I just found it easier to call her that. When we reached the car, I asked her what is was that Peter said to her. “He said my ass looked great in that dress I was wearing,” she replied.

I knew she was lying, she normally got proud of men saying shit like that. Even if they were as ugly as him. And even though she knew it annoyed me, maybe it she liked making me jealous, I don't know. “Yeah, right. Like you mind,” I replied cynically. “Don't you start with me, Henry,” she said. “You didn't even stand up for me!” I could hear the

infusion of adrenaline tone in her trembling voice. “I did! Why did you think I interfered?”

“Wow really, you interfered? You just took me away, that’s all you did. You should’ve hit that rat right in the face!”

“What? He’s my co-worker, we were with all the executives of the company. I can’t do shit like that based on the sight of a close whisper and a slap in the face! A slap you handed out by the way.”

She gave me the silent treatment. I hated that. After that evening, me and her never really got back to the way we were. I still don’t know exactly what I did wrong. And every time I brought it up she got back into defensive mode.

“It’s not important anymore,” she replied mostly before quickly changing the subject to something else. I was too much of a wimp to follow through in those moments. What is it that that little shit could have said that affected her so much?

A few months later, after I came home from work, Geraldine told me she was pregnant with Becca. She stood there in the door opening with three positive tests and tears in her eyes. I thought they were tears of joy. So I shouted, jumped up and down and started celebrating and dancing like around the room like awkward neanderthal stickman that I am. But she didn’t seem to respond as I thought she would. She broke into tears. They were also tears of desperation. All I could do then was hold her. “I didn’t expect this,” she spoke into my t-shirt. “But this is fantastic right?! Can you believe it? A little Henry or Geraldine walking around next year during Christmas?” I said.

“It’s gonna be a girl,” she said ironically offended, while wiping the tears of her face. “You know the sex already?” I asked “No...” she laughed.

We celebrated that night. I called up our favourite restaurant, Donatello’s in the city centre near the

canals. I lifted her up and carried her to the car.

“Put me down!! Stop, put me down!” she desperately screamed and laughed. I always loved the way she said that, I don’t know why.

So we sat down in the front seats and I fired up the engine of the 1999 red Volvo 940 station wagon, and we made our way to the restaurant.

We filled up on some fantastically made lemon-pesto risotto and a few glasses red wine. Well, I did at least. Geraldine got to enjoy some high end craft apple juice. After dinner, I drove by the liquor store to pick up a bottle of non-alcoholic champaign and a 5th of Scotch for me. She didn’t mind for tonight. I amused her when I was drunk, and I enjoyed doing so to say the least.

“As long as after tonight, you won’t until the baby is here,” she hopefully insinuated.

“Of course Gerry, you know I will,” I lied.

I drove to us to the ocean, parked the car on a lot located on a dike, with the rear toward the water. I grabbed the glasses I bought in the liquor store and filled them up with our designated drinks.

“A toast to the most lovely wif-.. uhh woman on the planet. The beauty that is soon to be the mother of my firstborn. The one who’s eyes glister starlight even as she shouts in my face. Who will kick my ass if I ever make fight me, who will still make me nervous in ten years just by looking my in the eyes and who makes me forget the rest of the world exists after spending a day inside with her, and who is just the best damn wetland ecologist in the country!”

“On the planet!” she corrected.

“On the planet!!!” I repeated. Our glasses collided. I looked up at the stars. I spotted Orion’s belt, and the rest of him aiming his bow towards the Pleiades. There was nothing left to say. It was one of those rare moments of shared serenity. All that needed to be done was listening to the repetition of hear her breath and the sound of the waves crashing on the shore. There was peace of mind and peace between us. I kissed her.

“You’re gonna have to drive me home from here,” I said.

“That’s okay,” she replied.

That was years ago. And now here I am at 8:45 in the morning, sitting alone on my bed, watching a breaking news broadcast about a disaster of biblical proportions, plausibly made possible by the technology that I invented. Funny how life always knows a way to bite you in the ass... 8:45 in the morning?! Shit I’ve got to bring Becca to school! I walked to Becca’s room and turn on the lights. She grunted.

“Honey, wake up, get dressed, we’re late. I’m making you some sandwiches. Come on!” I said. Another grunt.

We were waiting for a red light. Becca was in the back seat. It seemed like a normal Monday morning. People walking around with their faces hanging from their skulls, their knees bent and their backs curbed. The chances of seeing someone crack a smile was about as big as the chances of Donald Trump advocating for gun illegalisation during a rally in Alabama. So, normal Monday misery I guess.

“Daddy? Becca asked. “Yes, honey?” I replied. “Why is everybody looking so sad?” she noticed.

“I don’t know. Maybe they have to do some things they don’t really want to do,” I replied, hoping she wouldn’t interrogate me too much. You see, being a 5-year old infant, Becca has reached the age where her brain is starting to develop a sense of self, and with that, the ability to question the nature of every single element or phenomenon in the entirety of her external world. The result comprises of a beautiful but dreadfully exhausting mixture of curiosity and question prompts, with most answers only fuelling her thirst for knowledge. Ironically though, the sentence “Thanks, I get it!” is not yet within reach. So as a parent, you have to be extremely careful not to crush their sense of curiosity or to awaken the sleeping Balrog that is your own and every person’s existential life crisis. Because all she has to do is ask: “Why?”. And of course, she followed up:

“Why do people do things they don’t want to do?” “Cause that’s how some people have to pay for their food and their bills,” I answered like the motivational speaker I am.

“Why?” She replied.

“Well, if you eat nothing and have nowhere to live, you’ll die,” I said.

“Why?” She asked.

“Because that’s how the human body works!” she was getting on my nerves.

“Why?” she started laughing, the little rascal.

“Because whatever made us, made us like that!” I replied.

“But wh..”

“Now that’s all young Padawan! Off to school you go! Give this letter to Ms. de Vries okay? Don’t worry about being late.” I said.

“Okay, thank you Daddy. Bye!” She stepped out of the car.

“And make sure you do your best today young lady!” I shouted after her. She gave me a ‘stop-embarrassing-me-in-front-of-my-peers’ look. In some ways I felt like she already reached puberty.

My phone rang when I was about to take off, an unknown number. I decided to pick up.

“Hello?”

“Henry? It’s Alan. I need you to come to the office,” Alan said with a hint of desperation.

“Alan, hey man! It’s been a while, how have you been?” I ironically replied.

“Were having a meeting and I need you to be present. Can you make it in half an hour?” he asked.

“Guess the meeting is not about a certain flood, is it? You know you also approved of putting me on non-active. No call, no message from you ever since.

What is going on here?” I couldn’t help myself.

“There is no time to explain, Henry. It’s better if you’re there. Can you make it or not?”

“Yeah, yeah sure. I can be there in 20 minutes.”

While I made my way to the office, I thought about the time that has passed since the board of executives put me on inactive. 5 months it has been now. The court has ruled out any possibility for me to conduct my research or anything related to

the subject. Everybody blames me. But I blame the bottle, when I'm drunk. I blame myself when I'm sober. That's why I'd rather be drunk. Booze is just there in my time of need, whenever I decide I need it. It's like Bukowski wrote:

'If something bad happens you drink in an attempt to forget; if something good happens; you drink in order to celebrate; and if nothing happens you drink to make something happen.'

Ever since Geraldine stopped living with me, a 5th of whiskey has been a better friend than any other person so far. Except for Becca of course, she's the light in all this darkness. But I can't put that burden on her. That being said, the alcohol was simultaneously the reason Geraldine didn't want to live with me anymore. She didn't want me taking care of Becca and threatened to apply for full custody in court.

"You're an alcoholic, Henry. You shouldn't be taking care of a kid when you're in a state like this," she said right after announcing she was moving out.

"What would you have me do huh? Never see my only child again?" I replied.

"You can still see her sometimes, but she can't live with you."

"Sometimes, oh, you would like that wouldn't you. But what are you going to do out there alone huh? You won't make it more than two weeks on your salary. You can barely pay a room in a student flat with your pay!" I desperately replied.

"Honestly, yes you're right. But think about Henry, what do you want? You want what is best for her right? I mean come on. Look at yourself. Are we really having this conversation at 11 in the morning while you reek of whiskey? What kind of an example are you setting for Becca? And doesn't it say something that I'm willing to take that insane risk, just to make this happen?! Fuck Hank, come on, think."

"I can't Geraldine, I'm drunk. But I don't have to think to.. to know that I won't be giving you a dime! Goodluck filing for custody on your pay check." Nice move again Henry, well done...

As much as she hated what I said, she knew I was right. She never filed for it. But I knew she was right as well. So I've been trying to not drink most of the time. But sometimes it's just not an option not to. Being put on inactive has actually helped me take care of Becca, aside from the occasional hiccup of depression and moments of infinite guilt of losing the love of my life here and there, things have been going pretty well. But it has also given me time to reach for a drink now and then. I mean, I'm still being paid by TerraSolve, so what's the harm.

As I entered the parking lot my car on the sidewalk in front of the office, I saw a purple Ford K standing in my old parking spot.

"I wonder who's that is," I said to myself. I knew who's that is. If I wasn't in a rush right now I would've taken a piss on the windshield, but there were other matter to attend to apparently. I looked up the building. I contemplated the fact that I already had forgotten how tall it actually was, while sunlight reflecting of the tainted windows hurt my eyes. I walked in and I took the elevator to the 5th floor. As soon as the door opened. I took a right. I put my thumb on the touchpad. A scan behind the display analysed my fingerprint and within 2 seconds a green light flashed.

"Access granted, the AI said."

Guess they still haven't cleared my security code.

"Thanks Alice." I replied.

"Welcome back, Henry," Alice replied.

"Good to be back," I said as I laughed at the wrong side of my mouth. I think she still can't read sarcasm properly. I walked through the corridor, as a relatively tall Indonesian with a buzz cut greeted me.

It was Alan.

"Welcome, Henry! Glad you could make it on such short notice," he said.

"Yeah, no problem," I said while looking around for a skinny ginger rat lurking around a corner somewhere.

"Follow me, we're all eagerly awaiting your arrival."

I followed him toward the general meeting room. It appears they have had made some upgrades too.

The door shifted open towards the left, when Alans was about one meter away. A movement sensor, like they have in Star Wars, but horizontally. At first glance, a large room revealed a mostly black marble interior. It was relatively dark. The windows were so heavily tainted as well, that it was kind of difficult to determine who was sitting at the table. I could see 6 people sitting at the table. Two of which were already facing me. I noticed one of them wearing a dark red beret and having several medals on the left part of his chest. He didn't give any response to me entering the room. Next to him sat Steven, the other executive of TerraSolve Inc.

"Henry, so glad you're here!" he said while waiving his lanky arms. I never really got any notice of him. A very difficult person to predict. While he was waving, I noticed one of the remaining four people, who were sitting with their backs toward me, turned around. It was the ginger rat, Peter. An instant shot of adrenaline shot through my veins. I started waving my arms around in large circular motions. I wanted to get a bit of a warm up before I beat the living crap out of him. Maybe intimidate him a little bit beforehand. But to my surprise he didn't seem scared at all, even though I easily outweigh him by 10 kg's. He even smiled. I didn't like this meeting one bit. And the reason for Peters' confidence became quite clear.

The door closed behind me. Two sets of heavy footsteps approached me. They were pretty difficult to distinguish at first, perfectly synchronized. Then it dawned on me. As I looked over either shoulder, I got the big reveal. Soldiers. Armed heavily with bullet proof Kevlar camo vests and uniforms, helmets, earpieces and an M16 rifle for each. They just stood there, one on each side of me. They did nothing, said nothing.

"You got yourself some G.I. Joe boytoys, Alan?" I stupidly joked and laughed nervously. Why do I always start to joke when I'm nervous?

"Actually, they're mine," a woman with blond hair turned around. Anybody would recognize her.

"Wait, Stephanie Lambert? What the fuck is going

on here? Why did you invite me?" I asked. "You sound worried, Henry," she said while the other faces turned around as well. Was this fucking choreographed? It felt choreographed. I looked at Alan, then at Steven. I didn't know whether I found myself at a corporate advisory meeting on a scientific issue, or whether I just landed in the mansion of a villain of in a classic '80's superhero movie. Nonetheless, the sound of the soldiers loading their guns sent shivers down my spine.

"Just take a seat, Henry. Here's what we need you to do." Lambert said. A holographic map of the Rhine basin appeared above the table. The rest just sat there and smiled.

[To be continued]