

As a child

But, how can I possibly skip from the date of my birth to the date of my rebirth without sharing the years of my childhood? They were thirteen years in a country on the other side of the ocean yet with memories as clear as yesterday. The canals, medieval city streets, meadows carpeted in dandelions (the Dutch call them *paardebloemen* literally translated as “horse flowers”), and the aroma of a herring stand or Dutch pipe tobacco, I cannot forget. I consulted that venerable of historical accuracies, Google. It claimed the distance between my homeland and the destination of my present sojourn is 7,457 km. However, I prefer miles, all 4,633 of them from Zwolle to Vancouver Island. Somehow, I have yet to accept the abstract mathematical metric system as superior to the romantic language of our Imperial system. I don’t walk a million kilometres for one of your smiles, nor do I pursue a goal with every gram of strength, or keep undesirables at metre’s length. I do not surrender an inch of my convictions, not two-and-a-half centimetres. What? Change the name of 100 Mile House to 100 Kilometre House? Unthinkable! The two thousand plus citizens of that bucolic community in the South Cariboo Region of Central British Columbia will be up in arms, or keep at arms-length any recommendation of metrics. Once upon a time, when measurements were in lengths of barley-corn, poles, furlongs, links and chains, nails and quarters, they were visible to the naked eye as a tangible way to determine length.¹ But what does a metre look like? The metric system is like gum without flavour. It’s the Imperial system that gives language its inherent richness of colour and fragrance, rhyme and metre, the sound of poetry, and the beauty of prose and narrative. Grams, milligrams, litres, metres and kilometres, simply don’t cut it, when trying to convey the essence of a story or paint a picture with words.

From 1945 to 1958 were my childhood years. Zwolle was my childhood home. For the most, my childhood was a happy one and memories from those years are content and pleasant. If there was strife in our family home I cannot remember. To the best of my knowledge, my father and mother loved each other very much. Despite tight finances and a growing number of children, there was always food on the table, clothes on our backs, and a roof over our head. I spent most of my formative years as a child living on *Abel Tasman Straat* where I experienced the coziness and warmth usually associated with large families.

However, before *Abel Tasman Straat* we lived for a short time in a rowhouse on *Enkstraat 62*, in a much older section of the city, close to the central canal that surrounded the old city’s battlements. Our home was squeezed between another house and the *Queen Wilhelmina School*, the elementary school I attended. We shared common walls between our house and the school. It made for some unique childhood fantasies as I dreamt of creating a small hole in the livingroom wall to peek into classrooms, perhaps spy on students and teachers alike. For most of the time I played in the street, content to draw chalk pictures on the sidewalk, play with marbles, and occasionally engage in a shouting match with so-called enemies on the other side of the street. Our home on *Enkstraat* was just around the corner of a large Roman Catholic church and monastery. The large wall that enclosed the monastery’s compound butted right up to the sidewalk on *Assendorperstraat*. We lived just steps from the church. As children we were too small to climb on top of the wall, but with some persistence we managed to locate small peep holes in the brick enclosure. Carefully, using an old nail, we made the holes a bit larger in order to have an unobstructed view of that “secret place behind the wall.” It was another world where

¹ Barnard Smith, Archibald McMurphy, “*Advanced Arithmetic for Canadian Schools*,” Canadian Series of School Books, Authorized by the Council of Public Education of Ontario. Copp, Clark & Co., Toronto, 1871.

we watched monks in long dark robes walk silently through the gardens. Theirs was a strange world to me, the direct result of old rivalries between Catholics and Protestants, a rivalry that meant we avoided each other. After all, they were Catholic and I was a Protestant. Fortunately, my father and mother were not hard-nosed, died-in-the-wool, doctrinal Protestants aka Calvinists. For as long as I have known them, they never did have strong denominational ties. My father was genuinely proud of his Catholic connections. In his collection of favourite books, my father always kept a copy of the Catholic Prayer Book, often reading extensive passages from its many pages. The family business, owned by my grandfather, Beert Verstraete, was a school supply company and bookbindery in downtown Zwolle, with offices and warehouse located in the old *Herenhuis* (Parsonage) on *Rozemarinstraat*. My father did most of the traveling for the company to drum up sales among the various schools throughout the city, throughout the province, and even to the furthest corners of the Netherlands. Most trips were day trips and after a week of such trips he would stay in Zwolle to fill the orders. Lambert, my dad's younger brother, also worked in the Verstraete family business. They sold art supplies as well. It was the sale of artist materials that brought me right into the inner sanctuary of that old Roman Catholic monastery on *Assendorperstraat*.

"Come with me," my father said one day. "I need to go and deliver some art supplies down the street."

He did not say where, just "down the street."

The year was somewhere in the early nineteen-fifties when I began to show a taste for art, specifically drawing. I suppose to encourage me in the first steps of my creative journey, my father thought it wise to expose me to something special. Hand in hand we walked up the street. To my horror, we turned into *Assendorperstraat* and right up the long stone steps of the monastery. My father was of course completely unaware of my childhood pranks and he did not know that I had engaged in some rather dishonorable practices even as a young boy. Not only had a whole group of us spied on the very monks I was about to meet, we had on occasion entered the Catholic Church to look for pennies under the pews. Once we splashed holy water out of a ceremonial basin on to the floor. We consoled ourselves with the fact that Catholics were to be hated, as seemed fitting for a proper Protestant. Somehow as I walked up the steps with my father, the guilt of those activities rose as fear in my heart. To my surprise, however, there was no *Inquisition* waiting for me and no one put me on a martyr's medieval torture rack. The monks were very friendly. I was awestruck when my dad and I finally reached our destination, a large room in which a number of monks were working on giant paintings on the wall. My father delivered the art supplies while I stood and stared in wonder of those works of art. The experience also ended my childhood pranks at the monastery. Perhaps my father knew after all.

Parents have a way of knowing things when children least expect it.

As the years passed, major family events were limited to outings to the *Philipsberg*, a place where my grandfather and grandmother rented a cottage during the summer. Located just south of the IJssel River near a small town called Hattem, the cottage offered everything I wanted as a child. There were mysterious forests, a large sand pit in which I spent hours jumping from heights above, and long pathways through endless fields of purple heather. There is where I encountered my first *Kabouter* (Gnome) a relative of J.R.R.Tolkien's fabled Hobbits. During one of many long walks with my grandparents through the deep dark forest, they pointed to large mushrooms with white stems and bright red, umbrella-like caps with white spots. They said that under these "umbrellas" I could find *Kabouters* resting from their daily labours - if I was quiet enough. I never did see one, but in my fertile imagination I saw hundreds. My grandfather and

grandmother also said that if I remained quiet enough I could hear them singing, and occasionally if I was really lucky, the *Kabouters* might cross my path herding a group of deer through the forest.

One summer at the Philipsberg, I volunteered to chop firewood. Somehow the image of swinging a mighty axe appealed to me. However, one small log proved to be rather stubborn. With a mighty cry of bravado I announced to anyone who would listen that this log was no match for the mighty Gerrit. I planted my feet firmly on the ground and held the handle of the axe in my hands. With all the energy I could manage I swung the big axe upwards, high into the air, only to land the blunt part of the axe head right on my head. With a thud I collapsed on the ground. My father rushed to my side. I was out cold with blood gushing from my head. Fortunately we had a car and with my head wrapped in towels we made it to the home of a doctor in nearby Hattem. The doctor examined the wound and pronounced it only a "surface" wound. He grabbed a rather formidable looking stapling device and without hesitation pinched my shin and stapled the wound together. It was painful, but the bleeding stopped. I went back to the cottage that night a much humbler child

One other memorable event that stands out in my early childhood was the first *taste* I ever had of fine arts, whereas the encounter with the monks in the monastery had only been a brief *exposure*. The event was my brief introduction to the Dutch painter Stien Eelsingh (1903-1964) and her student classes at the *Hopmanshuis* in Zwolle. The year was 1950. I was five years old.

My journey through visual arts began at a very young age. It was, however, a very humble beginning. No discovery of great genius or child prodigy, but for a simple desire and compulsion to draw. I drew pictures on every blank page I could find and along every border of endless pages in my school textbooks. I was fortunate in that my father sold school supplies, bookbinding equipment, books, and reams of paper. There was always a healthy supply of leftover paper to satisfy a young boy's desire to draw. The extent to which I amused myself with drawing was confined to illustrations of people during the cold winter months as they skated on the canal outside our home. Bucolic winter images of my childhood homeland. Knights, castles, and the heroics of Holland's medieval past also were favourite subjects to draw. I cannot remember how many shields I made from cardboard, complete with elaborately painted heraldic designs of nobility and valour, but they were many. No child was exempt from Europe's rich medieval past, complete with its myths, legends, lore, and colourful history.

As I said, my earliest memories of drawing date back to the fifties when I attended Stien Eelsingh's drawing school located in an old seventeenth-century warehouse along Zwolle's many canals. Along with fellow artist Piet Zwiers, she founded *Het Palet*, a modest group to encourage and promote group exhibitions of drawings and paintings. For one year, my older brother Beert and I, attended Stien's classes for children where I learned to handle large sheets of paper, charcoal and paint. Although such beginnings at the age of five would perhaps appear to be of great notoriety, being of European artistic and cultural origins that is, especially in the *Hopmanshuis* of Zwolle, they were in fact nothing to boast about. I was more interested in playing outside with my friends. My youth was spent enjoying childhood, yet I loved to draw. I filled many sketchbooks with drawings depicting a young child's Dutch life. Regrettably, all those sketchbooks have been lost. Fine arts simply did not belong in the home of Calvinists. Even though my parents were members of the *Gereformeerde Kerk* (Christian Reformed Church, a Calvinist church), they were not ultra-religious. Nevertheless, the church only permitted

modest Bible illustrations. Naked people and other worldly images were just about as close as an artist could get to committing the "unforgiveable sin."

Despite such stifling traditions, one work of art remains to this day as a special milestone in my journey as a young artist. It is the first-ever major piece of art I worked on. Stien Eelsingh masterminded a group project for her young students, including my brother and I. The students' collaborative work was titled "*De koningin en the koning*" (The Queen and King). A photograph of that piece of art, my only surviving work of those early years, is printed in Stien Eelsingh's official biography by Roel H.Smit-Muller (Waanders Publishers, Zwolle, Netherlands, 1998).

There is yet another incident that also stands out from so many childhood memories. A number of us were engaged in a common practice of hurdling insults at other children on the street, kind-of-like verbal warfare. We were not accustomed to fist-fights or other forms of street violence. Instead we just yelled at each other from across the street. Actual fights that resulted in an exchange of blows were rare. One day one such verbal battle erupted on Enkstraat. A small group of about ten children, five on either side of the narrow brick street, began the verbal name-calling. Somehow it turned into boasting. Suddenly I was challenged by my "enemies" to demonstrate I could actually draw. As part of the verbal barrage that filled the street, I had no doubt boasted of my artistic abilities, but the challenge caught me off guard. What I did next I have never been proud of. My father, who had on occasion made some rather excellent drawings, had recently completed a colour pastel drawing of lilies in a pond (Oh, how wished I still had it. But somehow the drawing was lost probably in the process of immigrating to Canada). He was out on family business, so I grabbed the drawing from a drawer in his bedroom dresser. I took some white pastel chalk and ever so carefully changed the signature of CV (Chris Verstraete) to GV (Gerrit Verstraete) with a simple small horizontal stroke on the C. No one could tell the difference. Moments later I appeared on the sidewalk and proudly displayed "my" drawing. The kids on the street were amazed. What a fabulous drawing. The issue was settled, the battle won by my side of the street, and the challenge met. I returned the drawing to my dad's files, making sure to gently erase the small horizontal stroke and change the G back to a C.

As I said, I am not proud of what I did and never did it again. Every piece of art I have ever produced from that day on has been one hundred percent original. Therefore the incident did not really qualify as "exposure" to fine art, perhaps more like exposure to forgery, which has never been my trade.

Nevertheless, my exposure to classical arts, especially drawing, was minimal, although as children we all knew Rembrandt, Vermeer, Frans Hals and others of the world-famous Dutch Schools of Art of the seventeenth century. However, I did become very familiar with the incredible drawings of a more contemporary Dutch artist. It happened during my school years when I discovered the fabulous drawings of Cornelis Jetses (1873-1955), especially his Bible illustrations. Many years later, my father gave me a valuable book of Jetses' artistic contributions. During the fifties, however, art in the Verstraete family was not a priority. Survival was. We were a large, post-war family, striving like so many others to forget the war and rebuild shattered lives. Keeping the family clothed and fed was a formidable task even when we had financial help from a Canadian soldier's mother who had moved to Santa Rosa, California. Leonard Clampitt was his name. I was named after him and another Canadian Soldier, Vincent Southrow (see "*Honourary War Baby*" in my Memoirs).

From pretending to be an accomplished artist and amusing myself with verbal street fighting, living on the *Enkstraat* also had very serious moments. Such was the case one afternoon when the quiet of the day was shattered by the sound of a screaming airplane engine. A

deafening roar filled our small house. Driven by impulsive, no doubt still a remnant of a post-war condition-reflex to air-raids, my father pushed the children under the wooden diningroom table. I could see fear in his eyes. Memories of high altitude bombing missions over Zwolle to Germany were still fresh. Many Allied bombers were shot from the night skies during the war years. They all made their bombing runs over the roofs of Zwolle and other Dutch towns and cities to Germany. With engines screaming these wounded aircraft fell to earth. Many a prayer hoped the impact would be outside the city. Not all prayers were answered. Lancaster Bombers crashed in thundering clouds that exploded on houses and churches, with hot metal and twisted steel scattering amidst the death of unexploded bombs. My father yelled at us to keep down. He scurried into our small back yard and looked up. The skies were clear, but the screaming engines were so loud he had to plug his ears. It turned out the sound came from the gymnasium in the school which backed on our yard and to which our family home was attached on the street. As quickly as the screaming started, the sound stopped. Then it was silent. We were all shaking. My mother was crying. My dad was furious. Some careless group of mechanics had been testing an airplane engine in the gym of the school. No one had been consulted; no neighbour was notified. It took quite a few hours to calm my father down. The scars and memories of World War II would remain as wounds for decades to come.

However, I would rather end my *Enkstraat* adventures on a lighter note. That note is a young boy named Flippie Friskorn. He lived just behind our house. Our backyards touched but we did not have a gate to connect the two properties. Flippie was my friend. We spend hours wandering the streets and digging up shells and debris at a neighbouring reclamation project where giant machines sucked mud from wet fields hoping to create dry land for city development. Every day after school I played with Flippie. My younger brother Baldwin was too lazy to get his own friends (or so I accused him when we were young), so he conjured up tactics to tag along with me and Flippie. I always protested but my mother ordered me to take Baldwin along. I hated her decision to make our twosome a threesome. One day while I walked around the block to visit Flippie, I heard Baldwin running up the street behind me, shouting.

"Mom said you *have* to take me along."

My anger got the better of me that day. In a rare instance of sibling rivalry I beat him up and forced him to go back. I remember the "wounds" of that beating as being more verbal than physical. He might contest that to this day, but I never hurt him. Needless to say it was his pride that was hurt more than his body. I never really hit him very hard. Yet, he did go back home.

My reasons for not wanting him along were rather peculiar. The Friskorns always fed me and I didn't think they would feed me if I brought my brother. Like all boys who were growing faster and fatter, I had a big appetite. Our family ate supper early, somewhere around five or five-thirty in the afternoon. My mother cooked plenty of basic food, but I always felt hungry afterwards. The Friskorns ate supper late, somewhere between six and six-thirty. I soon developed a foolproof strategy for satisfying my appetite. As soon as we had finished our supper, a meal that usually consisted of boiled potatoes and vegetables with maybe a sausage twice per week, and then I excused myself to play with Flippie for an hour or so before bedtime. I quickly walked the short distance around the block. Their door had the usual mail slot at ground level, so I got on my knees and shouted through the opening.

"*Flippie, kom je buiten spelen?* Hey Flippie, are you coming outside to play?"

The desired answer was guaranteed.

"It's Gerrit!" shouted Flippie's mother as she stood at the top of the stairs.

"C'mon up Gerrit, Flippie is still having supper."

With a quick wrist motion she tugged a long rope that ran along the bannister to a big lock on the front door. The lock clicked and the door swung open. I closed it behind me and ran up the stairs. The Friskorns always greeted me with a big smile. The whole family sat around the dinner table, a table often boasting sauerkraut mashed through potatoes, pork chops or steaming sausages. Flippie moved his chair over.

"Here, you come and sit beside Flippie, " said his mother.

"There's plenty, so grab a plate and enjoy yourself."

They were generous people. I don't know if they thought I was some hungry orphan, because if they did, my appearance did not confirm their thoughts. I was a hefty young lad, obviously well-fed and lacking nothing. Perhaps they simply loved watching me eat. And eat I did. With two evening meals under my belt I felt satisfied and ready to play with Flippie.

When I was seven, we left *Enkstraat* and moved to the *Abel Tasman Straat*. The street was lined with a series of low-rental townhouses as part of Zwolle's working-class suburbs. With neighbours on either side and neighbours above, our family of eight, including mom, dad, three boys and three girls, carved out a modest existence. It was a bright and sunny place with a view over wide fields and canals. My mother had difficulty keeping me indoors and it took bad weather to dampen my enthusiasm for the outdoors. Just hand me a sandwich at mealtime and off I went, back on the street and in the field across the street. My favourite place was along the quiet canal where we skated in winter and sailed little home-made sailboats in summer.

I look back some seventy-eight plus years later and the memories of that place are still pleasant. The *Abel Tasman Straat* was a place where I lived a happy childhood. Abel Janszoon Tasman was a Dutch explorer and mariner who lived from 1603 to 1659. He was sent by Van Diemen, the governor of the Dutch East Indies, to explore the waters around Australia. He was credited with the discovery of Tasmania (later named Van Diemen's Land), New Zealand, and the Gulf of Carpentaria. Perhaps that explains why so much of my childhood on that street was one big and beautiful adventure.

I dug forts in the field across from our home. I began with digging a big hole with the help of friends. Then we covered the hole with wooden planks and covered the planks with dirt and sod. All that was left to be seen of our invisible fortress was a small hole. Despite many forts that collapsed either from loose dirt or "enemy troops," at the end of a summer there would be as many as a dozen forts in the field, each flying their own version of royal standards.

If I was not digging forts, or waging war with neighbouring empires, I was begging my father to take me for a ride on his motorcycle.

My father made his regular excursions throughout the cities, towns and provinces, to sell school supplies for the family business. He was my hero. He looked so tall and stately in his long black leather, full-length coat, his huge riding gloves and goggles. When he mounted his *Goggomobile*, a large European motorcycle-scooter, I beamed as I watched him drive off over the patterned-brick pavement, only to disappear around the next bend in our street. On special occasions I would accompany my father, a treat I cherished as if I had found a limitless treasure. My place was right behind him on the seat of his *Goggomobile*, where I sat snug between his leather coat and a sturdy backrest. Buried in his shadow and with my thumbs dug deep into the belt of his coat, I got my first taste of distance driving. I was in heaven. As a result, the love of distance driving has always dodged my steps, especially when the cold grip of winter begins to change with the first signs of spring. My father would take me into the schools and introduce me to the principals. I waited until my father was finished with business and then it was on to the next school. For lunch and other short breaks we stopped at one of many roadside cafés that

dotted the landscape. My father brought his own sandwiches, a custom shared by most traveling salesmen. Together we shared lunch and sipped on coffee and *limonade* (lemonade) with its syrupy-sweet and fruity taste lingering for hours in my mouth. I have always fantasized about owning a motorcycle one day (as of late an electric scooter), but as I approach seventy-eight years of age and the weather in British Columbia is motorcycle weather at best for only a few months, I am better left with fantasies of beautiful cars or a large luxury touring van.

Nevertheless, life on *Abel Tasmanstraat* was special.

Those special moments stopped when my mother had a nervous breakdown. She remained bedridden for over a year. To help with family necessities, I assumed the duties of laundry and ironing my father's many white dress-shirts. They were difficult times for my father as he tried to do his best juggling time between work and family. However, looking back, that painful time seems like a momentary dark cloud, especially when I remember the many years we lived there.

How can I forget the puppet shows I produced for the neighbourhood kids, the many forts I built, and bicycle trips along paths lined with chestnut trees. There were skating excursions along frozen canals and endless hikes through lush fields choked with all sorts of wild flowers, and crisscrossed by a network of irrigation ditches. Only a single plank formed the bridge across any number of ditches. Leap-frogging or pole-vaulting over ditches was another favourite sport, often leaving us with soaked boots and socks as we missed the jump.

I was a favourite of the local police as well, but not for reasons one would suspect.

I had devised a plan to make some money. With friends I dug a hole in a field across from our house and set up business, right along the street. My retail venture was the manufacture and sale of homemade pancakes. I built a small fire in the sandy pit my friends and I had dug, and opened up shop, having secured batter and a large frying pan from my mother. I do not remember what I charged for my deliciously-hot pancakes, but I did brisk business. I was, however, not quite sure whether my retail business was legal. Perhaps I needed a business license or vendor's permit. I had neither. I decided, however, to minimize my risk of being shut down. Every day around mid-afternoon a policeman on a bicycle came riding down the street. He could see me in the distance. He always slowed his bicycle to a halt right in front of my humble pancake stand, while smoke from the small fire trailed out of my sandy hole in the ground. He always grinned. The fire was small and safely contained, posing no threat to the surroundings or to the many children who played in the field. The air was filled with the aroma of homemade pancakes. With great ceremony I rolled one of the large flat pancakes into a piece of paper and handed the mouth-watering treat to the policeman. His grin turned into a broad smile as he ate the pan-fried cake. With a widening smile and a cautious "be careful now, you hear," he continued his slow bicycle patrol on *Abel Tasman Straat*. Today, many decades later, my pancake legacy still continues to grow as children and many friends will always remember those special pancakes, made with my "secret" ingredients that were passed from my grandmother to my mother and to me. To the best of my knowledge the recipe has now passed on to the culinary skills of my children and grandchildren. When in 1994, I began making pancakes for the children Gabriola Island, I am affectionately known until this day, as "The Pancake Man."

In school I was a diligent and faithful student who managed good grades, especially in art. I have kept the official records of my grade school accomplishments. The 1953 *Rapportenboekje*, that is the Grade 2 Report of the *Koningin Wilhelmina School*, sports three successive nines for drawing and where grades were marked from 1 to 10. All other grades for a

number of subjects ranged from 6 for singing, to 7 and 8's for academic subjects, and a 7 and 8 for subjects like behaviour and ambition. When we moved to the *Abel Tasman Straat*, I attended the *Elout van Soeterwoude School*. From 1955 to 1957, my grades for drawing were 8 and 9. Not to boast of course, yet proud nevertheless, but academic standings in Dutch schools have always been very high for as long as I remember even to this day. Anything over 7 was hard work.

As a teen I attended highschool at Zwolle's *David Wijnbeek Secondary School* right in the heart of the ancient city and right around the corner of Zwolle's historic *Grote Kerk* (St. Michael's Church) and the famous *Peperbus* (translated "Peppershaker") city clock tower. This medieval tower, with its beautiful carillon of many bells that rang over the city's red-tiled rooftops, was a favourite of young and old. The tower had a winding and narrow, stone stairway that led to a precarious observation platform from which I could look over the entire ancient city of Zwolle as it sprawled towards distant suburbs and the forests and pastures beyond. When I visited the tower on our delayed honeymoon in 1969 (postponed until about 2 years after we were actually married in 1967), I was amazed how steep and narrow the staircase really was and how out-of-breath I was once I reached the top. I still have photographs of my city of birth as seen from high atop the *Peperbus*. However, the church and city tower were not the only downtown attractions. How can I forget *Het Automatiek*, an automatic coin-operated vending machine attached to a bakery and delicatessen? Imagine putting a quarter in a slot and before my eyes a small glass door opened to reveal its hot and delicious contents. Imagine hot beef-croquettes and kidney pastries, French fries and hot sausages, all at the drop of a quarter. No sooner had I pulled the little glass compartment door down and carefully removed the steaming hot delicacy from its little tray, a hand appeared from behind to put another croquette or pastry on the tray. As school friends, we huddled in the small portico that housed the automat, trying to avoid cold and rain, only to share bites of these incredible treats. During the summer, a window next to *Het Automatiek* sold rich ice cream pressed between wafers or in waffle cones. From *Het Automatiek*, I turned right to venture down *Diezerstraat*, the most densely populated street in old Zwolle, where a veritable kaleidoscope of shops, boutiques, ancient apothecaries, eateries, department stores, delicatessen, tobacco shops, and many more venues, were pressed together to cater to every imaginable taste. I could reach *Het Automatiek*, *Diezerstraat*, *Grote Kerk*, and *Peperbus*, on my bicycle in just about half an hour from our family home on *Abel Tasman Straat*.

There was, however, one store, a *Slagery* or butcher shop, tucked behind ancient stone walls of old Zwolle, far removed from the hustle and bustle of downtown. It was a store with very special memories. My mother had bought her meats from this butcher for years. Moving to the suburbs had not curbed her appetite for this man's great meats, including lean and salty *rookvlees*, which is smoked horsemeat cut in wafer-thin slices. At least once every other week I made the trip on my bicycle to purchase *rookvlees*, *gehakt* or ground beef, and *leverworst* or liverwurst. My reward was a huge piece of sausage cut right from one of many varieties of big and small sausages that hung on hooks from the ceiling. It was a special treat that would last my hungry stomach all the way home.

In addition to many adventures on *Abel Tasmanstraat*, I had also become an excellent swimmer. But I was not as brave about swimming in open waters as I was about swimming in a pool. Brrrr, all those creatures lurking beneath the dark surface of those canals. I had read about them in local legends and folklore.

Nevertheless, at age eleven on January 31, 1956, I passed another childhood milestone. I obtained my first swimming diploma sponsored by the Royal Dutch Aquatic Society and

completed in *Het Stilo-Bad*, an indoor and heated, Olympic-size pool, not far from my home. To complete a swimming diploma I undertook the grueling task of swimming 75 metres of breastbone, 50 meters of backstroke, and the longest one minute of treading water with hands held upright in the air above the surface. My father and mother were proud of me when I showed them the diploma. At least they could rest assured I would be safe the next time I went swimming.

But I would be remiss if I did not make special mention of endless winter hours skating on the canals across the street and elsewhere throughout the countryside. Frozen smooth and snow-free each year, these canals satisfied my passion to make winter an enjoyable time. When I was strong enough to make the journey to neighbouring towns and medieval villages nestled beside our many canals and rivers, I bundled up in woolen scarves, a winter jacket, mittens, a snugly-fitting hat, and a stack of sandwiches in a backpack. Off I went, usually with a group of about five to ten children. With our arms on our backs, we skated with long stately strokes of our wooden runners (with steel blades) along frozen canals, mindful of the occasional open gaps in the ice surface. We skated through a winter wonderland accompanied by a pale yellow sun, sun-dried rushes along the shore, gnarly, bent-over willow trees, and the wintry trunks of poplar trees. In every town we passed, we counted on the ever-present, hot-chocolate stands right on the ice to warm chilled bodies. I left early in the morning often returning frozen and tired after dark. The view from the canals was unique with a wintry horizon partially hidden by dikes along the way, which also served to shelter us from the bitter cold wind. During the summer, we frequently made the same trip on our bicycles along many paths that followed the same dikes or along paved bicycle paths adjacent to highways and so common in the Netherlands. My father and mother had many amorous encounters along those canals while they rode their bicycles between Zwolle where my father lived and *s'Herenbroek* where my mother worked as a teacher. My mother boarded with my grandparents before she married my dad. *s'Herenbroek* is a funny name that literally means "a gentleman's pants". My father, the gentleman and lover he was, faithfully bicycled the few kilometres to *s'Herenbroek*, where he waited patiently for my mother to finish work. For fear of starting ungodly rumours, my dad was asked to wait at the edge of the village so that the young school children's minds would not be corrupted by evil thoughts of love and romance. Such was the religious mindset of the times. However, leaving their bicycles leaning against the dike, my mom and dad spent romantic hours along the Ijssel River, while the sun slowly set in western skies. It was there where my older brother was conceived. Yet, they were never late for supper. My father loved his mother's (my grandmother's) special meatballs, potatoes and gravy.

Memories are a wonderful thing, especially when they are sweet memories, as no doubt will be the sweet memories of my grandchildren. I looked down on them as they snuggled a little deeper into my lap. Outside all was dark and stormy. Only a few coffeetable lamps offered relief from the darkness that surrounded us very cozy like. Of course they have grown older and to curl up in Opa's lap is not the cool thing to do anymore. Except for little Vincent, who was born in December 2019.

I wondered if my memories of yesterday would mean anything to them.