‘You have read already The Times?’

‘I just did so.’

‘For my lateness I am deeply sorry, but there was the parking. So much of traffic in this town now. I think it is the Germans and their campings. It is fantastic.’

‘I hate the campings. And the Germans are a shame. You see? There are some at that table. Listen to them. Such a language.’

‘I much prefer the English.’

‘Indeed. Quite so.’

‘Why are you drinking genever at this hour?’

‘For The Times. I had the tea and finished it. But there was still more of The Times. I could not have more tea, so I took some genever. And so I finished The Times, but I still have the genever.’

‘Henriet! You will be drunk for Janwillem!’

‘It is easier to speak English if one is drunk, and tonight is Janwillem’s church.’

‘A lousy night for Janwillem.’

‘He likes the church, Marianne. Last week he has missed the church and he has been so ashamed.’

‘I mean that. Happy as a louse on a dirty head. We say “a lousy time” for a happy time.’

‘We say a jolly time.’

‘A jolly time, thank you. Did you learn this in The Times?’

‘I learned this in England.’

‘Have you had a jolly time in England?’

‘A lousy time.’

‘Henriet! You are drunk already. So I will have the tea. Last week, I had the tea, but no English. I said to the boy, “One pot of tea and two cakes, if you please.” But he did not reply in English. It was so insulting to me. I think he did it to be wicked. When he brought the tea I said, “Please,” but he only smiled at me. I was so deeply sorry you were not here. You would have said more.’

‘The young boy?’

‘The old boy.’

‘I would have said more.’

‘I have been thinking last week of you in England. Proper tea, proper English. I know you already for ten years, but since we are starting this English I know you better. “Lucky Henriet,” I have been thinking last week, “in London with the plays and the shows, and speaking English to all the people. And I have nothing but this news and this wicked boy.” You buy that shoot in London?’

‘I have bought this suit in London.’

‘Please. And the weather, it was nice?’

‘London weather. London rain.’

‘It is fantastic. And the hotel, it was good?’

‘We will not speak of the hotel.’

‘Janwillem, he enjoyed?’

‘Janwillem is Janwillem. Here he is Janwillem, and in another place we go – how much money, tickets, taxis, rain, different people – he is still Janwillem. In London, at the hotel, we are in the room and I am sitting in the chair. I look out the window – a small square, with grass, very nice, and some flowers, very nice, and the wet street, so different. I turn again and I am happy until I see Janwillem is still Janwillem.’

‘You are not going to speak of the hotel you say!’

‘I was mentioning my husband.’

‘He is a good man.’

‘Quite so, a good man. I love him. But even if he had a few faults I would love him. I would love him more and wish him to understand. The faults make the love stronger. I want him to be a bit faulty, so I can show him my love. But he is a good man. It is so hard to love a good man.’

‘Your English is fantastic. It is London. Last week I am here with this tea and this old boy. I am learning nothing. You are learning more English. It is London.’

‘It is this genever. And my sadness.’

‘We will then speak of the news. You have read already?’

‘And the hotel and Janwillem. So many times I ask of him to understand this thing. “No,” he says. “Do not speak of it.” And he goes to his church. Even in London – the church, he is missing the church. And the children and the house. He is a good father, such a good one. But at the church, I have seen him three weeks ago, a festival, he is dancing with the other ladies, hugging them. He is so happy. Kissing them and holding hands. What is wrong with that? A man can do such things and it means nothing, but a woman cannot. No hugging – this is the fault. For a man it means nothing. He is going home in the car laughing, so happy while I am so very sad.’

‘I have read the front page, Henriet. And some letters. Have you seen “appalling lack of taste”? We can discuss.’

‘I have seen “appalling lack of taste” and I have seen the program on television to which it is referring.’

‘Fantastic.’

‘But I cannot discuss. I will have another genever. See? He knows I want it and I have not even asked. Such a pleasant boy.’

‘He is the boy who insulted me.’

‘It is only natural, Marianne. You speak in English. He is wishing to be friendly.’

‘I do not wish to be friendly.’

‘He is not the old boy. He is the young.’

‘I am drinking tea. He is the old.’

‘Perhaps he would enjoy an adventure. It means nothing to them.’

‘We shall speak of the news instead.’

‘It is the thing Janwillem does not understand at all and he will never understand. “Do not speak of it!” But if he has an adventure I can understand. I can love him more. But he has no adventure. I have told you about Martin?’

‘The librarian. He gives you books.’

‘He gives me pinches.’

‘We shall talk of the books.’

‘And he tells me how easy it is. It means nothing to him. He wants me to spend the night with him. I tell him impossible. An afternoon, he says. After the lunch period he puts the library in the hands of his assistant and we leave. To my house. Four hours or five. Before Janwillem comes home, before Theo breaks from school. How does he know it is so easy? But he knows too much about this. How does he know? I ask him. He has three girl friends, or two – anyway, more than one. He boasts about them, and of course I cannot have an adventure with Martin. He would boast of me.’

‘Maybe he would boast of you.’

‘Or talk about me. Men talk.’

‘Janwillem would be so sad.’

‘Janwillem would kill me. He could not stand it. I wonder if I can stand it? One day I am home with my throat – one afternoon. I am walking around the house. Strolling around the house. Not in our bedroom. Janwillem’s clothes are there. He is so neat. In Theo’s room. Yes, I think, that is where we would have our adventure. I go into Theo’s room. Stamp collection, maps, Action-Man.’

‘Fantastic.’

‘I cannot have an adventure in my son’s room with Martin. Action-Man. It would make me sad.’

‘I am glad I am older than you, even if my English is not good. But we will go to Croydon in April.’

‘In London it is wonderful even in the rain. The people are different, and so polite. If you speak to them they speak. If you don’t speak they are still polite.’

‘The Times – it is very cheap in Croydon. It is cheap in London?’

‘I never read the newspaper, not once. Janwillem read it. I saw him reading it and I did not want to. I can read it here, but not there. There, I can read novels, only novels. In the hotel room, having some gin, with the rain outside, and Janwillem in his offices. No Theo, no Action-Man. There I am different, too. No headaches. I was so worried about Martin I began the migraines. Always on my day off – the migraines. And we did nothing! He only boasted and pinched, and I said, “Yes, it is a good idea, an adventure, but not here.”’

‘This talk is a bit silly and it is shaming me. Shall we discuss the news? I still have some tea left. Or books? I have seen that there is a new novel by Mister Dursday.’

‘Tom Thursday. Extremely violent. He shows an appalling lack of taste. I wish to speak of thumsing else.’

‘I have read all his books. Tom’s.’

‘Do you remember that young American fellow – Jewish fellow – he spoke of the American novel to the Society?’

‘He was fantastic.’

‘He asked me to meet him. That young fellow. How could I meet him? I have my family to think of, I have Janwillem. I cannot simply go off because this young Jewish fellow wishes to have an adventure. He writes me letters: “Come! Come!” I think he is like Martin.’

‘Martin is not Jewish. You never said so.’

‘Martin and his boasting and his girl friends.’

‘Do not think of him, Henriet. He will give you migraines.’

‘Martin is gone, but I still have the migraines. I have to scream sometimes because of the migraines. Do you ever scream, Marianne?’

‘I like this. This is better. Yes, one day I was making some soup. Some carrot, some potato, and chicken broth. I am looking for the, yes, the barley. The soup was in an enormous pot. The soup was boiling furiously. It was a very hot day. And then I reached for the barley. The barley was on a high shelf. I reached for it. I hit with my elbow the pot of soup and it splashed upon my arm. And then I screamed.’

‘I scream at Janwillem because he is so good. He mentions the church and I scream. I scream when I think of Martin, and Martin is bad.’

‘As you say, Martin is wicked.’

‘Martin is not wicked, but I cannot trust him. Always his girl friends. I would prefer to have an adventure with another man.’

‘I am too old for adventures, Henriet. And this is not the place.’

‘Those Germans – they drive twenty kilometers and have their adventures here. Look at them. You’re not looking.’

‘I have seen Germans.’

‘The English people hate them as much as we do. But some do not even remember.’

‘How can they not remember the Germans? If once you see them you remember!’

‘The young ones. They do not remember.’

‘Even the young ones remember!’

‘In England.’

‘The young ones in England? I do not know the young ones in England. This tea is cold. How do you know?’

‘I have asked.’

‘What do they say?’

‘They do not know. They do not care now. It is old history.’

‘Where do you meet these young ones?’

‘I meet them in England. In London.’

‘In the hotel.’

‘Yes, in there.’

‘I have not met them in Croydon.’

‘Do you know young ones in Croydon?’

‘Henriet, everyone I meet is younger than me. So I do not notice.’

‘I notice. The young ones remind me.’

‘That they are young?’

‘That I am old.’

‘But you are not old. What? Forty-five? Very slim and smart. Nice shoot.’

‘Forty-three.’

‘It’s not old.’

‘If you are twenty, forty-three is old.’

‘This is good English conversation. Question-answer. Those Germans must think we are two English ladies, having our tea.’

‘I am not having tea.’

‘You know what I am saying.’

‘I did not have tea in London. In London, Janwillem has tea, he reads The Times, he takes his umbrella. People think he is a schoolmaster. In London, I sit by the window and read my novel and watch the rain fall. And I wait – what for? For the young to knock on my door and say, “Madam, your adventure.”’

‘You are being silly.’

‘In a uniform. A dark jacket and a small black tie and a tray. My adventure is on the tray. “Just one moment,” I say. And I get up from my chair and pull the curtains so that he won’t notice my age. I am very nervous, but he is more nervous, so it does not matter. I go very close to him. If you go close and he does not draw away, you know he is saying yes.’

‘Henriet, you have had too much to drink. Please, the news.’

‘I am telling you the news.’

‘This is not a discussion. We must discuss.’

‘There is nothing to discuss. I need my adventure. I have gone to London with Janwillem for my English, but what is English if you cannot use it except to say, “Please close the door” and “Where is the post office?” and “How much?” Or if you only speak it once a week at a hotel restaurant in a terrible town as this one is.’

‘I enjoy it. It is good enough for me. I am happy.’

‘I am not happy. English is not enough, Marianne. Books are very enjoyable, and lectures. But always there is Martin in the library, and that American fellow at the lectures. I ask myself: “Am I here because of English, or do I want an adventure?”’

‘What is the answer?’

‘There is no answer. But English is not enough, I know that. If that could be so I could sit in the chair in the hotel and talk with the boy and be happy.’

‘There was a boy?’

‘I have told you of the boy. With the tray and the tie. Twenty. English. Thin face. Very nervous.’

‘You talked with him in English?’

‘Very little.’

‘You are smiling. No more English!’

‘I can only tell you in English.’

‘You have said you talked very little.’

‘He took his clothes off, I took my clothes off. We were naked. After that, there is very little to say. “We were naked.” It is so easy to say, “We were naked,” if you say it in another language. It would be harder to tell Janwillem – I could say it to him in English. But he would not understand, would he? No, he would shout at me. “Do not speak of it!” and then he would go to his church and hug and kiss those women. And formerly, I had the migraine and I have thought all those years of shooicide. Instead, I have the lessons – we have them here. But in London I know why I have the lessons. It is clear to me there. The boy. We say very little because we both can speak. So we don’t need to speak. It is a small thing. As for Janwillem, it means nothing. Now we are here and it is gone, but it is not gone. There is only the English.’

‘A good lesson today, Henriet.’

‘Yes, Marianne.’

‘Some new words. A jolly time.’

‘We will say no more about my adventure.’

‘Next week we will read The Times.’

‘I will drink tea.’

‘You are fantastic.’

‘Yost so. That is the most faluable ting.’