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Sunbirds

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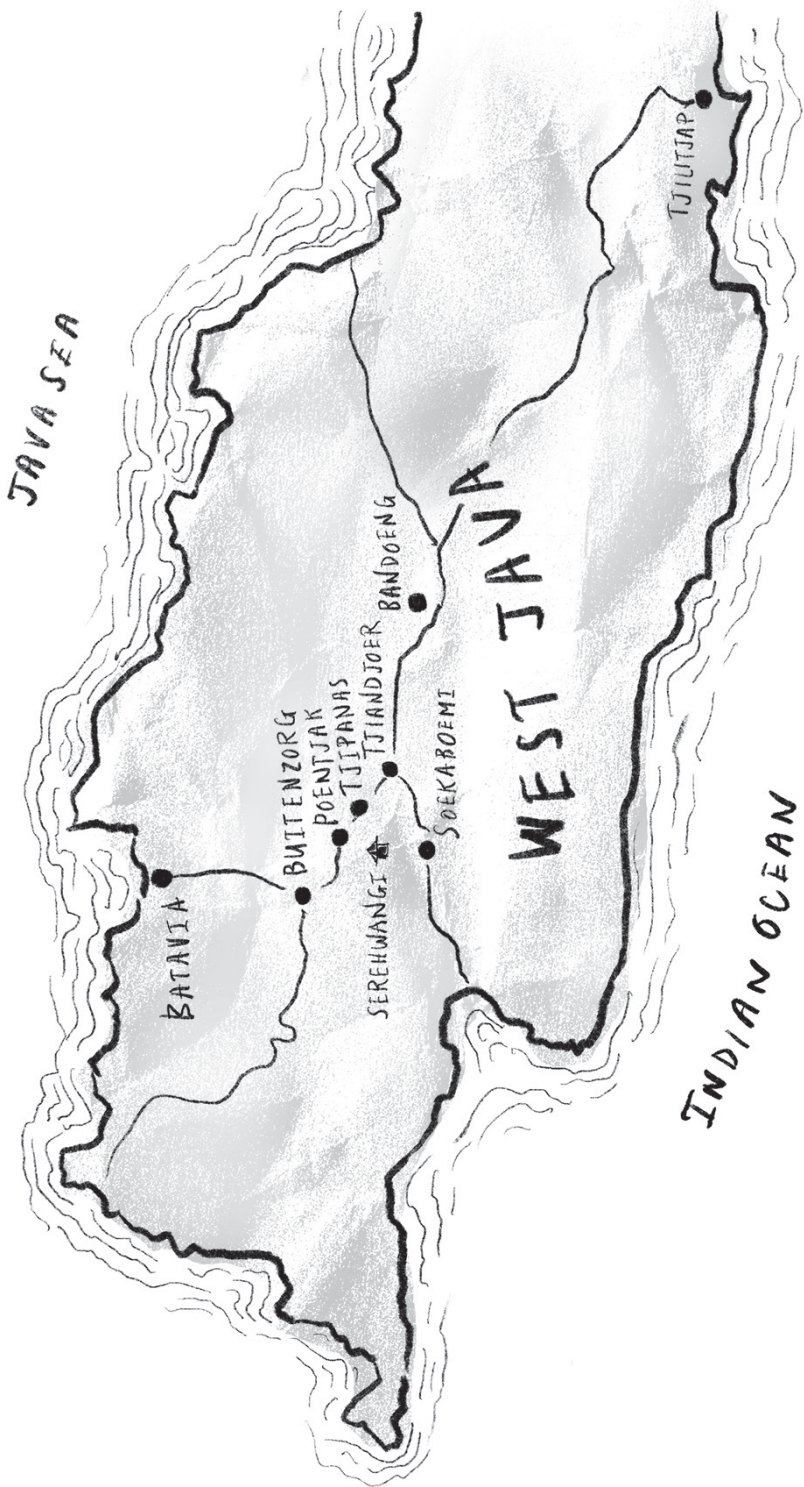
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For Meg – mum, reader, critic, raconteur



JAVA SEA

BATAVIA

BUITENZORG

POENTJAK

TJIPTANAS

SEREHWANGI

TJIANDJOER

SOEKABOEMI

BANDOENG

WEST JAVA

INDIAN OCEAN

TJIUTJAP

Prologue

Over the Indian Ocean, 3 March 1942

THE YOUNG WOMAN HAS NEVER been so cold in her life. A draught tickles the hairs at the nape of her neck and she hunches into the scratchy blanket about her shoulders. The seaplane dips for a moment before the pilot pulls her right again, and Mevrouw van Oudijck, crouched next to her, starts moaning, as guttural and grating as a buffalo. The young woman feels an answering cry rise from low in her own stomach but manages to swallow it down. Mvr van Oudijck curls her strong fingers around her forearm, and yells, 'I don't think we are going to make it, Mvr Huisman.'

For a moment the young woman is diverted from the darkness, the plane's tremendous rattling, the fear. How strange it is to hear someone call her that: Mvr Huisman. She nudges her handbag with her ankle. The neatly folded letter is tucked

inside, given to her by Mattijs as some sort of proof of their union. The proof she needed to escape.

She thinks of the suitcase she was forced to leave behind. Her clothes, the sandalwood soap, two cans of corned beef Kokie insisted she pack. What a waste. If she'd known, she could have left her things with Kokie. How much the cook would have appreciated the batik from Tjirebon, the dress with the Belgian lace trim. But she's not even sure she'll ever sit in the kitchen with Kokie again, and it's as though a purl-stitch threads her chest tight, reminding her of the vest she's halfway through knitting, now abandoned in her baggage. She wishes she had the needles, the wool, with her now, if only to keep her fingers warm.

At least she let her luggage go with decorum, though, unlike Mvr van Oudijck, who tried to cling to her trunk and baskets as they bundled her onto the first flight in Boeabatoeweg. 'No room, no room,' they shouted at the older woman, tossing the bags out onto the tarmac. Only the young mother – Eva, a senior civil servant's wife – seated behind them, her infant wrapped in metres of lace shawl and a batik slendang, was allowed to bring a small bag, which held provisions for her baby.

Apart from the three women, the seaplane holds seven servicemen, the aircraft mechanic, two student pilots and the pilot, Captain Roos. Most of the seats have been yanked out, replaced with all sorts of tools and equipment, some crammed around the passengers, while a great number of cans of engine lubricant have been stacked along the aisle.

It must be over four hours since their stopover in Tanjung Priok, when they switched to the seaplane, but it's hard to tell.

Tension and frequent gusts of frigid wind have robbed her of sleep. The cabin is shrouded, apart from a few blinking lights in the cockpit. Before take-off, the ground mechanics found trouble with the starboard engine and they had to leave twenty minutes after the other planes, well after midnight. Peering blindly into the night skies, she wonders how the pilots can possibly know where they're going. She doesn't know if Mattijs is piloting a flight out of Bandoeng before or after theirs, whether he will be waiting for her in Broome – just that he told her to stick close to Mvr van Oudijck.

She straightens her back, rolling her shoulders against an ache. Her bottom is numb, as is her left thigh. She feels so stiff that she would stumble were she to stand. Leaning her head against the shuddering window, she shuts her dry, stinging eyes and wonders what the others have been doing at Serehwangi. Have they all been going about their business, sampling tea leaves, grinding peanuts for the cattle? Or are they tucked inside somewhere? Perhaps gathered by the radio or huddled low in the air-raid shelter they built behind the goathouse. Waiting for the rap of black boots to march up the front steps, the sound of raised voices and a strange language. How frightened they must be. And, finally, she feels a flush of warmth as sadness folds through her chest.

She's woken by Captain Roos shouting over the roar of the engines that they'd better be close, godverdomme; they're running out of fuel. One of the student pilots spreads out the pocket map again – surely too small for such a long journey – and traces with his finger a black line that has been penned across the blue of the ocean. She looks out the window and

a shimmer of orange slices the dark horizon, lighting the sky above. The sight of the cresting sun buoys her, loosens her breathing. She smiles a little, nudges Mvr van Oudijck to have a look too.

How strange to think that this same sun stretches its rays across both where she has left and where she is going. She wishes she were basking in that sunlight right now, seated in the stiff rattan chair out in the garden. The Tjipanas sun so fierce against her shoulders, drenching her sarung with its heat, that she needs to move beneath the shade of the melati vine, the fragrant petals catching in her hair. But she is one of the few lucky enough to have found a way out. If only she knew when she would return. How long she would be away from home, from—

The mechanic yells something, and the pilot looks to his left, out the side windshield. She looks out her window too, down on a glorious band of azure water between darker ocean and coast. A craggy bight scoops inward, and it seems to her that the cove's straggling shoreline, the white surf, the bleached sand are in the shape of a witch, the fine tributaries her spindly, sharp fingers, reaching, reaching. As they fly closer, angle lower, she too sees the plume of smoke that rises from the shallows. Dread clutches her throat. Mvr van Oudijck claws her arm. 'What is it? What is it?'

She presses her face to the window, trying to make out what has created so much smoke, but soon loses sight of the cove. They fly on, following the jagged coastline. The men have fallen quiet, and when they twist from side to side to peer out the windows, she sees that their faces are grim. One young serviceman, freckled and fair, looks close to tears, but perhaps

he is just tired, has sore eyes too. Another fellow reaches under his seat and brings out a flask, takes a swig, and offers it to the serviceman next to him, who shakes his head and continues to read what she thinks might be the Bible. It's only when Mvr van Oudijck mutters a prayer beside her that she realises her own fingers are pressed to her mouth, she doesn't know since when. She drops her hands to her lap and turns to stare out the window again, feeling a slight throb at the base of her skull. The ache leaches upward, until she's squinting against a headache. She squeezes the sinew between her thumb and finger, stares down at the pressure point, trying to draw away the pain.

One of the student pilots leans forward, pointing. 'That must be it. There. Can you see? Roebuck Bay.'

A flood of relief washes through her, accentuating the throb in her head.

The plane hooks around to the left, towards the bay, lower, lower, the blue of the water deepening the closer they approach. There's a sick dip in her stomach when Roos shouts something to the student pilots, and the mechanic stands and rushes to her side of the plane, craning to see. She looks too at the clusters of smoke rising from the blue. Flickers of orange. Black.

As the aircraft cruises in to land in the bay, a strange whine builds in volume and pitch behind them, fading in and out, louder even than the roar of the seaplane's engine. She hears a staccato rumble. Holes puncture the edge of the lower wing.

'A Zero! Zero!' the mechanic screams. 'It's the Japanese, Roos!'

The pilot jerks to the right, dodging another volley of

bullets, and she has to grasp the seat in front as they hurtle downwards. The plane skids to a stop in the heaving water, and Mvr van Oudijck tumbles from her seat, slamming against the seatback before her. She slumps onto the floor, and one of the servicemen leans across the aisle, hauling her back into her chair. Flames flare outside the opposite window.

One of the servicemen ushers Eva and her infant past, shouting, 'Mvr van Oudijck! Mvr Huisman! You must jump.' The men wrench the door open and a few jump into the bay, beckoning them. Eva stands back, clutching the swaddled baby to her chest and shaking her head, beseeching the serviceman to find her a boat. The young woman wants to help the mother, perhaps hold the baby in the water – she is a strong swimmer – but before she can offer, the mechanic grabs her by the shoulders and tells her to follow the others. Two servicemen lower Mvr van Oudijck into the sea, into the arms of one of the student pilots who is treading water, but she panics, arms flailing as she cries. He drapes her over the lower wing where she continues to bellow, eyes pressed shut.

'Mvr Huisman, your turn.' The mechanic takes hold of her hand and steadies her as she too slides into the bay, which is as tepid as the well water back home when bathed in the noon sun. A serviceman swims towards her but she tells him she is fine, she can swim. She kicks off her right shoe, then her left. A few strokes take her past the others, past the wing, until she bobs in open water, and turns to watch smoke rise from where the back of the plane is alight.

An explosion cuts through the air and she swings around, watches as a flying boat perhaps a hundred feet away erupts

into a fireball. A little further along, a number of people leap from another flying boat, their cries carrying on the breeze. That plane explodes as well, and they're all engulfed in black smoke. The water laps her chin, echoes in and out of her ears. She tastes salt on her lips – sea salt and blood – and the dull acridity of gasoline.

The beastly whirring starts up again. Buzzing closer. She squints up into the sky, watching as two Zeroes beetle in on them again.

'Mvr Huisman.' The mechanic has swum to her side. His dark hair and moustache are blacker now they're wet. He looks up into the sky too, then back to her. 'Swim towards the shoreline. They're returning.' But instead of following his own advice he plunges back towards their fallen plane.

Her strokes are clumsy as she tries to swim backwards, not willing to take her eyes from the Zeroes, until their menacing rattle is too close, unbearable. One of the Zeroes peels nearer, strafing their plane, bullets pinging and slapping the water in a line, a deadly game of stone skipping. The freckled serviceman, passing equipment to the pilot from the seaplane doorway, keels over into the water, lost to a spume of blood. The first Zero lifts into the air again while the second one bears down, a flicker of machine-gun fire lighting up the water where the leaking fuel burns. She feels a sharp sting on her cheek and, wiping her face, gazes at the watery crimson smeared across her fingers.

Her eyes search the tattered wing for Mvr van Oudijck, making out her figure slumped over its length, the mechanic next to her. She glances up into the sky again, listens for the Zeroes. Funnels of smoke rise from burning seaplanes, pyres sinking in

the sea. Someone far away is shrieking and men call out. Closer to shore, she can see white dots bumping towards them across the bay. *Please, please be boats to rescue us*, she prays.

She turns towards their plane, determined to swim to Mvr van Oudijck. She wants to console the older woman, help her swim away from the burning aircraft, but the tide is too strong, pulling her away from the plane, away from the shoreline too. She keeps a determined eye on the wing, even as most of the men desert the aircraft, their strong strokes taking them a safe distance. Only the mechanic stays with Mvr van Oudijck, trying to pull her from the wing, but the older woman struggles and disappears into the water.

She gasps, tries to swim faster, fighting the tide, watching the mechanic duck-dive after Mvr van Oudijck, gone, gone, for far too long. The aircraft is almost totally ablaze now, and she stops swimming, treads water, wondering if it will explode. Even from afar the heat of the flames reaches her. She imagines she can feel it radiate towards her through the warm water.

The mechanic surfaces, and his dark head has the gleam of a seal. He looks about, panting, and swims towards her.

‘Mvr van Oudijck?’ Her teeth chatter despite the warmth of the bay. She feels she might choke on the smoke that billows from the plane.

He shakes his head.

‘The lady and her baby? Where are they?’ she asks.

He shakes his head again. ‘Try floating on your back, Mvr Huisman. Save your energy.’

They watch as the Zeroes snarl inland, until they are the size of mere wasps. Her arms ache as the strong tide continues to

tug them further away from the lumbering seaplane.

‘I think they’re gone – the Japs.’

And what of Mattijs? What of him? She scans the bay, taking in the riddled, lopsided seaplanes, the burning crafts, the distant specks drifting on the water – bird, human or wreckage, she can’t be sure. She presses her eyes shut and, taking a deep breath, recalls afternoons in the crystal waters near Serehwangi. She relaxes her shoulders and head into the water. Allows her limbs, her abdomen, to lift until she is floating on her back. Opens her eyes again to stare up into the impossibly blue heavens.

One

Java, December 1941

STARS OF LIGHT EXPLODE AGAINST the night sky. A shower of purple, plumes of pink. Smoke lifts into the air. Another burst of white. The fireworks' cinders drift to earth, singeing the tips of the nut grass, scorching the leaves of the kamari tree until a branch catches alight, and men run, shouting, beating out the flames that lap at the leaves. Mattijs tilts his head back to watch a silver spray spin high above, reminding him of the diamond ring nestled in his coat pocket. He wonders if the stifling humidity is a prelude to more rain.

He's glad to be standing outside, on the verandah, even if it seems the rest of the revellers have joined him to watch the fireworks display. He steps down to the grass to avoid being hemmed in and to escape the heavy scent of stale perfume, cigar smoke, hair oil.

He bows and smiles at two sisters who are seated on the lawn. 'Anke, Lynn,' he says, bowing again to their brother, who brings them glasses of orangeade. He recently met the Jansens at the club. Indeed, he recognises most of the party guests from the club, and although he has the privilege of staying with the van Hoorns at their tea plantation, Serehwangi, he's aware that most of the other guests have travelled for hours by car, carriage or horseback to attend their famous Sinterklaas party.

Mattijs only arrived earlier that afternoon from Tjiandjoer, and by the time the trim sandalwoods clopped their way along the tea plantation's long, gravel driveway, he'd felt in sore need of a bath. What had started out as a bit of a lark – hopping in the back of the dokar at the train station, instead of hiring a car – had turned into an arduous journey several hours longer than necessary, what with two post changes of horse and one change of driver. He'd mistakenly thought it would be charming to breathe in the fresh air of such verdant pastures and to take in the picturesque sight of the natives at home, but he'd only swapped the fumes of gasoline and belching smoke for the fug of horse sweat and manure, all while enduring hours of staring pedlars and village women.

As they trundled towards the manor, bushy tjamara trees rustled by the side of the stone gates, and he caught a whiff of something like jasmine. He was gladdened by the sight of the van Hoorns' magnificent home – plastered pillars, louvred doors – with its roof tiled in a neatly symmetrical version of the mountain that rose darkly behind. Serehwangi's famous tea plantation spread to the far south, an undulating sea of hedges and the occasional tea picker, bamboo hat tilted low over the

leaves. A late afternoon breeze was picking up and he knew siesta time must be over. Hopefully he was in time for tea.

They halted in front of the house and Willem – looking as boyish and mischievous as he had during their university days – ran down the front steps. ‘You should’ve called ahead, Mattijs. We would’ve sent the car!’

Mattijs grinned, taking his bag from the back of the buggy and paying the driver. ‘It’s fine. I found out I could make it at the very last minute. Turns out I have a few days leave; a slight hitch in flight plans.’

Willem’s face became serious. ‘Still talk of combining forces with Australia?’

Mattijs nodded, wiping the palms of his hands on a handkerchief, still black with soot from the train. He rubbed the handkerchief down each side of his nose, which stung from mingled sweat and dirt. ‘I’ll tell you about it soon. But, first, look at me. I am in dire need of a bath, and this white suit is merely a shadow of itself.’

He followed Willem up the steps and out of the sunlight. The verandah was cool, rocking chairs and potted palms arranged artfully along its length. Inside the house, it was even cooler, the marble floors so smooth they reminded him of the frozen lake he used to skate on when he was a child. He’d felt a sudden urge to peel off his shoes and socks to enjoy the floor’s cold surface against the soles of his feet.

A crackle of fireworks brings Mattijs back to the party. Sparks dot the heavens like a swarm of angry bees, their buzz interspersed with the strains of jazz music coming from the ballroom. Mattijs turns to contemplate the house, its wide

verandahs, its tall, arched windows. Chandeliers blaze from within, illuminating couples dancing and servant boys flitting here and there, offering trays of champagne or canapés. A room above is alight, a refuge for some of the more sober guests playing cards. He catches sight of Anna by the French doors and smiles. She looks radiant in a gown of black silk with gold spangles along the neckline. She beckons to him before disappearing among the crowd and dazzle of the drawing room. As he follows, he drains the last of his whisky split and places the glass on the tray of a passing servant.

In the hallway stands a single fir, nearly as tall as he, resplendent with tinsel and shortbread hanging from string. Red wax drips from the twinkling candles onto the white floor. The Christmas tree is a fine touch, but it doesn't feel anything like Christmas or Sinterklaas to Mattijs. It's far too hot, for one thing – he takes up a chill glass of champagne from a table and swallows down half – and much too merry. Not that he minds the cheer. It's just that in Breda the strains of a hymn or two might be heard, not the sound of a saxophone blasting out a dance tune. And perhaps the smell of roasting venison with plenty of potatoes and carrot would linger in the air, instead of the richer aromas of spice and smoke.

Mattijs remembers the excitement he felt as a young boy, waiting for the end of his father's homily after morning mass, for his mother to finish baking a batch of speculaas – when he could open his presents. He thinks of the lichen-covered tombstones behind the church, the crust of snow clinging to the elm's naked branches, and for a moment he wonders again if he's made the right decision. He throws down the rest of

the champagne. It's too late for regrets, in any case, now that the damned Germans have overrun Holland. This is where he lives now. This is where he needs to forge a life.

★

Anna scans the ballroom for Mattijs. Mr Bakker lurches past and slops champagne down her skirt, and as Anna steps to the side, Maria twirls past in the arms of Finn Damer and trips over his foot, colliding with Anna's shoulder. Her friend is drunker than Anna's ever seen her, even more so than the time she spent the night and they played sad songs on the gramophone and cried over her father's schnapps. In fact, everyone seems drunker than usual, even Willem. Usually her brother holds his drink well, but tonight he's especially impudent, especially ready with his sharp tongue. She saw him cut poor Maud Bakker off when she tried to offer him her arm into the dining room, and before that he'd kicked the new boy in the pants for dropping a platter of pastries.

There's an urgency to everyone's revelry, what with the bright laughter and jerky elbows and feet dancing to the swinging beat of the drum and trumpet. The clamour of their gaiety almost drowns out the news from Europe, and that from closer to home.

Anna thinks of her father's British business associate and his family, who've had to flee Malaya for Singapore. She wonders if they will stay there or find a ship home. It's hard to know what's possible, what's safe. Anna smiles at the boy as she takes a glass of champagne from his tray and taps her foot to the music

and thinks how difficult it is to believe that the war in Europe could touch them here. Smile fixed to her lips, she hums along to the tune, more to soothe herself than anything else.

The song rolls into a new one without pause, encouraging the dancers to continue, and a few clutch their sides and laugh, try to catch their breath, before they slide their hands together again, fall into step. The jazz band is the very best on offer, all the way from Batavia. It cost her father a pretty penny to have them travel to their plantation, but he would never skimp on his Sinterklaas party. Although the band is mostly made up of Dutchmen, Anna has heard one of the bandmates is from America, and she wonders if it is the piano player or the tall trumpeter. There's something about the piano player's moustache, his slicked-back hair, that makes her think it might be him.

Anna's eyes come to rest on the female singer, with her carefully coifed dark hair – only a very expensive hairstylist in Batavia could achieve such a feat – and her gown with the shimmering bodice and flowing skirt, almost as gorgeous as Anna's own dress, which was imported from New York. The singer's name is Rosa, and for months now Anna's heard Willem and his friends sing her praises when they visit from town. She appears at all the best nightclubs and parties in Batavia and Bandoeng, and Anna's quite sure she is of mixed blood, just as Anna is herself, although the singer's skin is milkier than her own. She wonders if Rosa has a Dutch father and a pribumi mother from Java, or perhaps even a peranakan mother, with Chinese blood, like her own. Either way, Anna is sure Rosa is Indo, just like she is.

Although Rosa's voice is as sweet, as silken, as a tailorbird's call, Anna thinks perhaps it is her swollen red lips, or the glint from beneath her sleepy eyelids, that the men find so alluring. Earlier that evening she'd watched how Rosa gazed at Willem, how there was a knowing lift to her shoulder as she spoke to him. Anna lifts her own shoulder, wondering if she too could enthrall those around her if she were as languid, as controlled. But Anna isn't naïve. She knows that beyond the men's lingering touch, beyond the admiring curl of their lips, there's a taint, as honeyed as the scent of oleander, to someone like Rosa. Men like her brother would never allow themselves to be captivated so far as to be trapped.

Anna is reminded of the murdered girl, Fientje de Vries. She hasn't yet seen today's newspaper from Batavia, so she doesn't know the latest developments. Her eyes find Rosa again, and she wonders if this beautiful creature ever knew Fientje in Bandoeng. Anna imagines the two Indo girls together in a dark club, Rosa perched on the lap of some fellow, her red lips pouted over a glass of whisky, and Fientje's arm flung about the neck of another man, a cigarette clamped between straight, white teeth. Their skin, their hair, reeking of lily and myrrh. The candlelight flickering, the air close, as a hand snakes around Fientje's low-cut bodice, nudging the curve of her breast, while the fingers that rest on Rosa's thigh glide higher.

Someone clasps Anna's hand and swings her onto the dance floor. Mattijs. He takes her glass, throwing back the rest of her champagne, and grins down at her.

'What were you thinking of so deeply?' he says, drawing her hand into his as they sway to the music, a little off the beat.

‘I was watching the lovely Rosa,’ she says, nodding her head towards the singer. ‘All the fellows seem quite smitten with her.’

Mattijs looks around at the singer, fleetingly, his eyebrows raised. ‘Really? Don’t see the appeal, myself.’

She’s pleased but also a little curious. What is it about Rosa that fails to attract Mattijs? For the woman doesn’t look unlike herself. Anna wonders if he has a taste for blonde women, after all; for fair types who clutch parasols in the sun lest their skin freckle. Do the young women in Holland look like the Dutch women here, or are they even fairer? She shies away from discussing this with Mattijs, doesn’t want to call attention to how she might differ, how the slippage of lineage and the sun have bronzed her skin. Perhaps it’s simply that Mattijs is as taken with Anna as Kokie would have her believe. He does seem to show a preference for her company when he stays with them at Serehwangi, and sometimes he even visits them when Willem remains in town.

The first time Anna met Mattijs was when her brother took her to the airfield near Bandoeng. How gracefully Mattijs’s plane arced across the blue sky. How agile he appeared as he leapt from the cockpit. She rests her cheek on his sleeve, smiling a little, her eyes still on Rosa. It’s not so bad to be sought after by a handsome pilot from the fatherland. Even if she does wish he were a better dancer.

The band moves seamlessly from one song to the next, and Anna asks, ‘Are the parties in Holland much like this?’

Mattijs looks around, tossing his head a little to clear the hair from his brow. She admires that he’s as comfortable in his dinner jacket as in his pilot whites, and she thinks his nose is quite perfect.

‘Well, there certainly wasn’t any call for me to be at fancy balls like this. A night out drinking a few vaasjes of beer with your brother was much more my type of thing in Utrecht. Life was very boring back home compared to life here, I can tell you.’

Back home. A phrase Anna hears all the time but can’t say herself. This far-off place from where the delftware plates, the chintz curtains, the grandfather clock have come; this place from where her father, too, has come. But it is a homeland she has yet to visit.

Since she was around ten years old, she has been preparing for her study years in Europe, to receive what her father calls a ‘finishing touch’, in Geneva, Munich, London, Amsterdam. She marked points on her father’s globe of all the places their ship would make land – Ceylon, Port Said, Suez, Gibraltar, Athens – to finally disembark in Marseilles, where she could practise the French she had learnt for their short stopover. *Oui. Je m’appelle Annelies van Hoorn. Bonne nuit. Avec moi.* Years of collecting acquaintances who had returned to Europe and perusing Dutch fashion magazines, all stymied at the last moment by the Germans. And who knows when she’ll get there now. Maybe never. All those dreams of snow fights and dancing at the Dorchester and eating poffertjes by the canal gone. There will be no *afduwen* for her.

The saxophone squeals to silence. Somebody yelps. She steps away from Mattijs, craning to see what the commotion is about. A group of men lean over someone at the feet of the trumpet player and two of them slowly draw Anna’s mother back to her feet. She laughs as she tugs her cerise gown into place,

pats her dark hair. Her dance partner, the Assistant Resident, Rob Klerck, frowns at her, mutters something in her ear. If there is one woman in the room who can challenge Rosa in beauty, it's Anna's mother.

'Hermine, did you hurt yourself?' somebody calls out as the piano starts up again. Anna's mother shakes her head but holds an imploring hand out to Klerck as he stalks from the dance floor.

Anna feels a prickle of disgust, embarrassment. She's too out of temper to try to find the rhythm of the music again. 'It's just Mama. Too much champagne,' she says to Mattijs, looking about the ballroom. 'I wonder where Willem and Pappie could be.'

Turning to leave the dance floor, she's pleased to feel Mattijs's light touch on her back as she moves through the crowd. They look in the library, where a group of Willem's friends play billiards, and then the sitting room, where the Teeuwen twins and Mvr Valck take coffee. They finally find her father and brother in the study, gathered about the radio with her father's overseer, Johannes, and Bloembergen, the police inspector.

'Schatje, sweetheart, what are you doing in here?' Her father moves forward, stands between her and the radio, arms wide.

Anna's always thought of him as a tall man, but now as he stands beside Mattijs she wonders if he has perhaps shrunk a little with age, like her dear opa did in his last years with them. His nose is pink from drinking whisky and his hair is white, but there are still peppery strands in his beard.

'You should be dancing,' he says. 'You should be out there, enjoying yourself.' His smile is cheerful, his eyes ever kind, and

his glance falls on Mattijs. 'Please, young man, go dance with my beautiful daughter.'

'Pappie, we have just come from there,' she says, trying to keep an impatient note from her voice. She considers telling him of her mother's drunken fall, but thinks of Rob Klerck again, of his dark good looks, of the arrogant twitch to his moustache as he looked down on her mother. Again she feels that prickle of irritation.

She catches Willem's frown as he bends lower to the radio. 'What are you listening to?' she asks. The newsreader's voice crackles through the speaker and she hears something to do with British planes and Penang. 'Is it more news of Malaya?'

'Do not trouble yourself with the news, my dear. Let us men do the worrying,' her father says, his false teeth clashing on the sibilants as they do whenever he is rattled. 'You enjoy yourself. Please, return to looking after our guests.' He glances back over his shoulder as he speaks, lowers his voice when he sees the others straining to hear the newsreader over their talk.

Anna brushes past him and, as she approaches the others, she hears the newsreader's voice crackle through, voice sombre: *Once again, the British have failed to destroy resources that are now in the hands of the invaders. Besides armaments and fuel, a fully functional radio station was deserted to the Japanese, from which they broadcast this cruel message: 'Hello Singapore, this is Penang calling. How do you like our bombing?'*

The Japanese are creeping closer.

Anna looks around at Mattijs, who swears under his breath. The police inspector, Bloembergen, ploughs his fist into the palm of his other hand. The newsreader continues, talking

of lootings and killings, of a Lieutenant-General Percival and his defensive campaign, but Anna's ears are muffled. She can't catch all that he says.

'Thank the Lord that Rutherford got his family out of there,' her father says, mopping his upper lip with his handkerchief.

Willem offers around a decanter of whisky. 'I've heard the Japanese are locking up all the Europeans,' he says, the crystal clinking against the glass in Mattijs's hand.

'What do you mean?' Anna looks from her brother to her father.

'Better than killing them, surely, sir,' says Johannes, taking a sip of his whisky.

'I have no doubt those dogs are doing that too,' says Willem. 'Look at the work they've done in China.'

Anna feels the warmth drain from her body. Her shoulders loosen, her legs become weak. If the Japanese have succeeded in breaching Malaya and are soon to push through to Singapore, how much longer will it be until they arrive here? She tries to picture fleeing Serehwangi, just as the Rutherfords were made to leave their home in Penang. What were they forced to leave behind? Furnishings they'd collected over the years? Most of their clothes? A beloved pet? If she were forced to leave behind Anki, her mare, or her piano, or even the beautiful batiks she's collected from far and wide, she would feel very reduced indeed. She stares at her father, hoping to find some solace, but the set of his mouth is familiar, similar to whenever her mother starts screeching at the servants or leaves her hand on the Assistant Resident's arm for longer than necessary. When he catches sight of Anna, though, his face softens, and he shakes his head, says,

‘No, no, Willem. That’s impossible. The British wouldn’t put up with such a thing.’

Mattijs offers her his glass, which she carefully cups with both hands. She brings it to her lips and swallows the rest of the whisky, grimacing against its flame.

‘What if they come here?’ she says.

Bloembergen gives a rough laugh, then slams his fist into his palm again. ‘I’d like to see them try! I can tell you this – we’ll put up a better show than those British.’

‘And we’ll receive more arms from Australia, don’t you think, Mattijs?’ says Willem, flopping back against the cushions of an armchair.

Mattijs nods, lighting a cigarette. ‘Yes, perhaps even from America.’

‘You see, my dear?’ Her father takes her hand and leads her to the doorway. ‘There will be nothing to worry about. Nothing at all. Go enjoy yourself. Mattijs, please take Anna back to the ballroom.’

‘Of course, Meneer van Hoorn.’

Mattijs closes the door behind them, and as they walk along the wide corridors the roar of chatter and laughter and the band become louder. Anna pauses on the threshold of the ballroom, a sadness overcoming her as she watches their guests. She almost winces against the screaming notes of the saxophone as the whisky and champagne churn in her stomach, and her silk bodice, with the corselet rigged up beneath it, feels too tight about her chest.

She pushes through the dancing couples to the louvred doors at the end of the room, becoming momentarily entangled in

the Franzens' messy jive. Mvr Franzen's pink lipstick smears Mr Franzen's coat sleeve, as sweat trickles from his sideburns. He steadies himself against Anna, gripping her forearm with clammy frog fingers, and one of Willem's friends slides past, almost knocking a tray of confections off a side table. Broken crystal crunches under the soles of her shoes. As she reaches the back patio, the cool air smites her skin and she feels as though she can breathe again. She rushes down the shallow steps until her feet sink into the deep grass. After another deep breath in, hands on hips, she glimpses the shadow of a cerise skirt disappear behind the mangosteen tree by the greenhouse.

'Much better,' Mattijs says behind her.

She turns, her eyes searching his face by the light of the Chinese lanterns hanging in the mulberry trees, wondering if he, too, saw her mother flit into the darkness.

To divert him, she points across the field towards warm lights flickering in the distance.

'Pappie always puts on a show for the villagers when we throw our Sinterklaas ball. Let's walk that way.'

Anna feels unmoored. Usually she delights in festivities, is at her best on nights like tonight, when there are men with whom to dally and women with whom to gossip. But anxiety seethes through the arches of her feet, her stomach, all the way to the crown of her head, leaving her light-headed. All these months she's been reading the news out of Europe, picturing how bravely she would have nursed soldiers or cared for orphans, or even helped build trucks and planes, had she made it to Holland. But the thought of the Japanese marching on their own land, here – from Pattani to Malaya to Serehwangi – fills her with a

trepidation she's never experienced before. She's afraid she might be a coward, after all. She's craven – yes, as craven as Kokie's silly goat that feints and bolts from any sudden movement.

Mattijs catches her hand, gently pressing her palm before dropping it. 'Anna, slow down. What's the hurry?'

It's darker where they stand, somewhere between the house and the distant stage. His shadow falls on her, and she feels an urge to step closer into his shade.

'I'm just now realising how ghastly everything is. All of it. Of course, I know how terrible things are in Europe. Terrible! I cried the other day when I watched the news reel at the cinema.' She thinks of the flickering grey images of smiling Nazis, explosions, damaged rail lines. 'I just don't know what's to become of us. We can't go back to the Netherlands with the Germans planted there, and the Japanese are sure to make their way here. What then? Where do we go?'

She presses her fingers to her mouth. After a moment, Mattijs reaches up and takes her hands in his.

'It will be fine, Anna. Everything will be fine.'

She can hear the concern in his voice, the care. She feels the warmth of his body where the backs of her hands rest against his chest, and her fear dissipates like bubbles from warm champagne, to be replaced with a much more pleasant disquiet. He leans in, but pauses – two, three seconds too long – and her laughter is shaky when she tugs her hands away.

'Of course. You are right. I am being silly,' she says, feeling foolish.

They continue on their way, passing her mother's maze of rose bushes, the lone palm tree and a soka bush, the moonlight

picking up the pink of its flowers. Anna becomes more relaxed, more herself. Much more familiar with this sparkling, anticipatory feeling of an evening stroll with a fine suitor, conscious of Mattijs's sleeve rubbing her bare arm. It wasn't far from this very spot that she embraced Tom McNeil one afternoon outside her childhood playhouse, and it was on the pretence of a dip in the local cascade that young Levert once stole a sly kiss. Of course, she doesn't share these stories with Mattijs, but she does point out the spot he overturned a chair to run from a monkey, while he teases her for losing their last game of tennis on the lawn.

Anna plucks a champaca bud from a tree and inhales its heady scent, before turning to Mattijs to press its stem into the buttonhole of his lapel. She leaves her hand there, feeling almost proprietary, despite that moment of hesitation she sensed from him earlier. She sees the smile in his eyes as he looks down on her, the curve of his lip. She taps the hard shape in his breast pocket, asks him for a cigarette.

He places his hand over hers, trapping it to his chest, and she drops her gaze from his as heat rises to her cheeks. She doesn't step back, though, or avert her face. In fact, she longs to feel the warmth of his lips on hers.

Using his other hand, Mattijs withdraws a slim box from his pocket. 'Actually, this isn't my cigarette case. It is something I was hoping to give you.'

'A gift! But what is it?'

He gently presses her fingers. 'It comes with a special request.'

Anna becomes still. Wonders if he can see, or feel, the heartbeat pulsing through her body.

‘Anna, we have known each other for a number of months now, and you must know how much I admire you, how much pleasure I have in your company. Come, admit it, darling.’ He squeezes her hand, his voice a little breathless as he laughs. ‘Don’t we enjoy our time together? You were talking just before about your future here, worried about what will become of us all. Perhaps the future is us, together. Marry me, Anna. We can build a new life here, perhaps return to Holland when the war is done. It doesn’t matter – it’s not important where we are. You needn’t go through all this alone. Join me. Marry me.’

He draws her closer and presses a soft kiss to her forehead. She can feel his stubble, coarse against her skin, and smell the citrus of his soap. Releasing her hand, he prises open the jewellery box, and by the dim lamplight she can see the gleam of diamonds.



Diah takes a moment to stare up into the wide sky, ebony dark now that the fireworks are done. As she walks back to the kitchen from where the stage is set up for the villagers, she savours the gentle breeze that ruffles her kebaya, the soft prickle of the grass against the soles of her feet. She clasps two empty jugs to her chest, ready to be refilled with cendol, thinking she needs to send Arief back to replenish the baskets of bacang and krupuk for the audience. The sound of popping firecrackers and the responding squeals of glee from the village children reach her ears, almost as loud as the riotous music coming from the ballroom at the other end of the house. She breathes in

the fragrance of coconut oil burning in the outdoor lamps and her eyes smart as she passes the lamb saté charring on the grill. Iwan, usually to be found pottering around the garage and the Tuan's motor car, is seated cross-legged behind the grated barbecue and smiles at her through the smoke as he turns the skewers. He tells her he will save her five pieces, and she thanks him, says she will be glad of the meal once this long evening is over.

The kitchen is large, with space for two ovens, two work tables and numerous cabinets, washbasins and baskets, and it is stifling after her brief trip down to the wayang stage. The ceiling is as black as the night sky from years of smoking tilapia, carp and beef, and soot creeps up the walls. Kokie won't let anyone scrub the walls or the ceiling, though, convinced that should the surfaces be stripped back to their neutral tones the food she prepares would be robbed of its complex flavours. Even the Tuan, van Hoorn, doesn't interfere with Kokie. As he boasts to his guests, Kokie is the best cook this side of Buitenzorg, of both Dutch recipes and local.

Diah hurries Arief off with more food for the audience from the village and arranges a selection of tulip glasses filled with pink sherbet, whipped cream and candied fruit on a platter, asking Joyo to take them as quickly as possible to the dining room before they melt. She wipes her hands on a tea towel, glad that supper for the van Hoorns' guests is almost done.

'What's wrong with Joyo?' she asks Kokie, who is stirring the peanut sauce for the saté. 'It looks like he's been crying.'

'Master Willem.'

Diah nods but doesn't ask for the details. 'I'll have a chat

with Joyo later, when we're less busy.' Taking the pan from the cook, she adds lime juice to the sauce and tastes the tip of the spoon.

Diah escapes the kitchen again and delivers the sauce to Iwan. When this evening is finished, her hair will be suffused with the smoky aroma of scorched kecap, cumin and coriander. She's looking forward to a refreshing plunge in the stream on the morrow before everyone else is awake. She directs two of the men they've hired for the night to take plates of saté down to the wayang audience, and she watches as Iwan arranges more skewers of meat across the grill.

'How's the daging babi going?' she asks him, looking over at the remnants of the pig still rotating over a firepit. Three men are hunkered down on their haunches behind it.

'Almost half the meat was taken to the dining room earlier this evening.'

The roast pork and the firecrackers are more to do with the mistress's Chinese background than with the family's Sinterklaas celebrations. Diah's already collected a cut of loin and fat for Njonja van Hoorn to burn, as she does every year, to ward off evil spirits. And Diah knows Kokie will come up with recipes for the family to eat the leftover pork. Certainly, she and the other servants will not touch it.

Returning to the kitchen Diah makes up two more jugs of cendol and takes a sip to make sure there is enough palm sugar. Instead of asking Arief to return the filled jugs to the refreshment tables by the stage, she tells him to empty the ashtrays in the study and drawing room and carries the cendol herself. It's a lengthy walk across the grass and she's thankful when she can

place the heavy jugs down before her wrists give out.

A small troupe of dancers are on the stage, and she pauses to admire the graceful angle of their heads, the dainty flourish of a scarf as they move languorously to the chime of the gamelan music. The dhalang, Haji Tunru, her uncle, arranges his puppets along the side of the stage for his performance. It must be nearing midnight, the hour he will begin. The audience, well sated by Kokie's cooking and tired out by a long day working in the sun, have left behind the earlier excitements of the evening and sprawl across the grass, some nursing young children in their laps.

Diah feels a tap on her shoulder and, turning, can't register the face before her, so familiar yet supposed to be so far away. 'Sigit! Brother! What are you doing here?' She's so pleased to see him tears squeeze her throat.

'It was time to come home,' he replies with a shrug. And he's smiling too. Grasps her upper arm, then pats it twice. 'You look well.'

'Thank you. I am.'

'Still chasing around after the van Hoorns, I see,' he says, his eyes moving from the shadows of the tea fields to the main house, the windows ablaze with light.

'Yes, still here. But what of you? I read about the collapse of the sugar industry in Tjilatjap and I did wonder if you'd return.'

'Most of the families had to leave when the work dried up, and there were no children left for me to teach. So I followed some friends here – well, near here, to Soekaboemi.'

'When did you arrive?' He looks tired. The cotton of his

shirt is thin, a little tattered at the collar. The batik of the blangkon on his head looks faded.

‘Just a few hours ago. I caught the train and then walked.’

‘You must be hungry. Let me get you one of Kokie’s delicious bacang.’ She fetches one from a basket on the table and peels back the banana leaf, exposing sticky rice and meat, and hands it to him. ‘Eat up. I will send you home with a basket of food,’ she says, licking her fingers.

They move a little closer to the stage to watch the gamelan orchestra. When they were very young, Sigit played the celempung, and Diah is amused to watch his fingers tap his thigh as though still plucking the strings.

He finishes eating the bacang and two sticks of saté and then lights a kretek, blowing the fragrant smoke into the air. ‘I see things are thriving here. The locals still bending under the van Hoorns’ rule.’

Diah looks about and waits for a woman to run past, chasing a toddler. ‘Sigit, be careful what you say around here. The van Hoorns are good to us. They’ve always been good to us. They sent you all the way to Leiden to study. They’ve looked after me all these years, taught me Dutch, helped me train as their housekeeper.’

He stares at her, eyebrows raised. ‘Helped you? To serve them? I think it is the other way around, Sister – you have helped them. I am sure you are the best housekeeper they’ve ever had. Certainly the most loyal.’ He smiles at her indulgently, nudging her shoulder with his. ‘But all these people here,’ – an arc of cigarette smoke following the sweep of his arm – ‘they should be working for themselves. Working their own land. Because it

is their land, not the van Hoorns' – nor any Dutchman's.'

A middle-aged woman takes to the stage, resplendent in a lace kebaya and a richly textured sarung. A pink rose adorns her lavish chignon. Accompanying her is a younger man, wearing more sober batik. They croon a popular local song, swaying side to side, and the audience joins in, roused once again.

'Who's that?'

Diah follows Sigit's gaze to a couple standing across the audience from them. 'That's Nona Anna. You must remember her.' Anna looks beautiful in her silk dress and her mother's diamonds. Even more beautiful than usual. 'I used to bring her to the village sometimes when I had a chore to do. When she was little.'

He nods. 'And who is that with her?'

'That's Mr Huisman. He is a friend of the family. He stays with us quite often.' She watches as Anna claps to the music and sings along. Once in a while she turns to her companion, perhaps explaining the Sundanese words of the song to him.

'Hollander?'

'Yes. He hasn't been here very long. He's a pilot. Anna told me he flies between here and Australia.'

Sigit shakes his head. 'When the Japanese arrive they will stop that sort of nonsense. They will help us stop all the Europeans using our country for their own gain.'

Something has hardened in him, she can see. Ready with his easy smile, but quick to sober. It was the same when he returned from Holland, but his convictions seem to run even deeper now. On first seeing him, she thought perhaps he had returned to seek work on the plantation, but clearly she was wrong.

A group of the van Hoorns' guests cross the lawn towards them, their laughter ringing loud. The women carry their dance pumps, and the men have loosened their collars, discarded their dinner jackets. They each clutch a champagne glass and their steps are a little wobbly. Arief and Joyo run ahead carrying chairs, which they arrange towards the front of the audience, off to the side, and some of the locals crane to see the guests better. Diah presses her lips together, conscious of Sigit's critical eye.

'Where are you staying?' she asks, to divert him.

He nods towards their uncle, the dhalang. 'Bibi Mawar said I could stay with them.'

Diah looks about for her aunt. 'Ah yes, I saw her earlier. She was with the old seamstress. You aren't going to stay with your friends in Soekaboemi?'

His eyes narrow a little. The tobacco crackles as he draws in on his cigarette. 'Have I told you about Pak Sutan Sjahrir? I first heard about him in Drachten from other students.'

'I'm not sure you have.'

'He set up the National Party, but the Dutch have arrested him and he's been detained in Soekaboemi, along with others.'

'So you're here to be near him?'

He rocks his head a little. Doesn't explain.

The performers finish singing and a swell of music accompanies the dhalang as he makes his way to the back of the stage and his puppets. The air is infused with the deep beat of the kendang and the gambang's melodic tinkling. One of the van Hoorns' guests, a plump buxom lady, twirls her hands to the music. The weary members of the audience are alert again, sitting forward to watch the wayang.

Diah glances back at the house, feeling guilty. She must get back to help Kokie, although the cook will understand – she will be delighted – when she hears that Diah’s brother is home. She beckons to Joyo, telling him to take some food out to the drivers and to sweep out the barn for those who will need to find sleep while their bosses stay the night in the big house.

Sigit smokes his kretek and she doesn’t like the cynical expression on his face.

‘Sigit, this is how things are. How do you think it could change, anyway?’

‘It’s clear. The answer is revolution. Total revolution. If the Japanese don’t arrive to help us, then we will have to take back the country ourselves.’

‘Please, Sigit. You should be careful about what you say,’ she says again, looking over at Anna and Mr Huisman. ‘Someone might hear you.’

Sigit clicks his tongue. ‘Diah, your caution is wasted. They are not listening.’