

# To you who is reading this

You have just opened the prerelease of *So, you're an orphan now*. And I am so very pleased that you took the effort and time to do so. This prerelease starts with four chapters and ends with an introduction to the whole story.

This book is written to raise awareness about orphans in modern societies. It has been published in in January 2013 in the Netherlands, and has reached a lot of (amazing) people. Many media have covered the story. I am very grateful for that. This book may be my true and personal story, but in essence, it's not really about me as a person. I have shared my story, tips and information, so orphans who are dealing with sensitive situations today, won't have to expose themselves, or explain how they are feeling. Because it is a fragile situation they are in today. And they didn't ask for it.

If you are interested in reading all chapters after this prerelease - trust me, this is just an glimpse - that would be great. From the 18th of December, a direct link will be placed on the site [www.westernorphans.org](http://www.westernorphans.org) and it will be available on Amazon.

Would you be willing to do something for them? Perhaps you might like to contribute some useful information for orphans. I cordially invite you to participate in the online initiative WesternOrphans. If you are interested, please send an email to [westernorphans@gmail.com](mailto:westernorphans@gmail.com), or send your tweet to [@westernorphans](https://twitter.com/westernorphans) or myself ([@Jojanneke](https://twitter.com/Jojanneke)). Just a click away, really.

Thank you.

Jojanneke van den Bosch

[www.westernorphans.org](http://www.westernorphans.org) / Twitter: [@westernorphans](https://twitter.com/westernorphans) & [@jojanneke](https://twitter.com/Jojanneke)

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# So, you're an orphan now

PRERELEASE

Jojanneke van den Bosch

*Experiences and suggestions  
from one of the tens of thousands of orphans  
in a Western country*

## *Dedication*

For my father, Menno Saranus van den Bosch (1925 - 1989),  
who could fill a room with himself and his stories, could write  
more beautiful letters than Santa and whose unbridled enthusiasm  
flows through my life every day.

For my mother, Aleida Berendina ten Hag (1941 - 1990),  
whose bright blue eyes and temperament could outshine  
Elizabeth Taylor on any day, and whose creativity  
I cherish dearly.

For my sister, who lovingly raised me as though I were a tiny  
sprout in a jam jar on a flat gallery and for whom I wish  
a long life and a full heart.

For my loved ones, who are part of me and I of them.  
For you and for every child, with or without parents:  
welcome to yourself.

For me.

‘Van den Bosch breaks taboos about orphans.’

*Nico Haasbroek, author and former editor in chief of national NOS News*

‘Jojanneke proves that young orphans are not pitiful (but that they do need reliable adults).’

*Daan Westerink, journalist and bereavement expert*

‘Until recently, Western orphans were an invisible group.’

*RTL News*

‘The number of famous orphans in classic stories is trifling compared to today’s reality. This book reveals the story of one of them.’

*RTV Rijnmond*

‘Many issues orphans are dealing with have been underexposed. Jojanneke shares them through her story.’

*De Volkskrant*

‘Jojanneke wrote about her experiences and founded a platform for practical information for and about western orphans. For the six thousand children that become orphans every year. There are over tens of thousands orphans living in western countries.’

*VIVA Magazine*

‘Western orphans are an invisible group. This book is a practical guide for those who have lost one or both parents, and people around them.’

*Trouw*

‘Chick on a mission.’

*Glamour Magazine*

‘The book encourages the reader to engage in the lives of those whose parents have passed away.’

*AD*

Things too often kept silent, Jojanneke reveals freely. Friends, bystanders, family, neighbours, teachers, professionals...people around young orphans often choose not to act. Not to speak up. Not to help. Or at least not enough. ‘So, you’re an orphan now’ hands suggestions that empowers people around orphans to act appropriately. The more people know about these experiences, the more people will be able to break the silence. Breaking the silence about orphans’ issues can make an enormous positive impact in the life of a young person who has to live without one or both parents. ife of a young person who has to live without one or both parents.’

*Kirsten Moonen, professional pedagogue*

The best thing is what Jojanneke has done with the story herself, And how her social media efforts to help orphans and how she offers suggestions. I think I’ll go see how I can make a modest contribution.

*Elisabeth de Ru on Goodreads*

# So, you're an orphan now

*Results since publication of the first edition:*

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science  
has agreed to contribute information  
and has issued further research about specific issues  
concerning orphans.

Several orphans have already been saved from eviction  
because of this book and WesternOrphans' efforts  
since publication.

Many people have offered to contribute information.

Several readers have made legal arrangements for their children  
after having read this book.

'So, you're an orphan now' has since its first edition  
been covered in all national newspapers, local newspapers,  
national and local television, national and local radio shows,  
several professional journals and magazines  
(in the Netherlands).

Changes are already visible. Public mindset is shifting.  
And we have only just begun.

WesternOrphans. Because growing up without parents  
is hard enough as it is.

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3083 AS Rotterdam, Netherlands

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The author wants as many people as possible to know more about orphans in the Western world. Therefore the entire introduction and the two chapters in this prerelease may be shared freely online, in photocopy and in any form the communicator sees fit, as long as the author's name is mentioned clearly in the publication.

No other parts of the complete version of the book may be distributed in any way without written consent by the author. For questions or comments, please contact the publisher at [westernorphans@gmail.com](mailto:westernorphans@gmail.com), or through Twitter: [@westernorphans](https://twitter.com/westernorphans) and/or [@jojanneke](https://twitter.com/jojanneke).

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# Valentine

*The end of the beginning.*

*Dear Harry, \**

*Probably you know that I sent you this Valentine's card.  
Please, don't tell our class mates. I really like you.*

*L.V.*

*P.S. Greetings to your mom.*

This was the text of my first Valentine's card. I got it from Lars. It was a card with a jukebox on it. I didn't like jukeboxes particularly, but that's probably also the reason that I still remember the picture on the card. It's not uncommon with details that you cannot explain. They tend to stick. Waiting for answers.

Greetings to your mom. Lars meant that so well. And what was he supposed to say? What do you say to someone whose mother is about to die? Greetings to the other side? Take good care? I didn't know. Lars did not know. No one knew. It was as it was.

I never got the opportunity to pass on the greetings. The next day, on February 15th, I became an orphan. I have never forgotten the text on the card. Especially the postscript. *'P.S. Greetings to your mom.'* We knew she was terminally ill. I didn't really talk about it with my classmates. They also didn't ask me anything about it. There was a strange sense of unease. Death. You just don't talk about it. And I did not really know what to say about it.

My father had already died five months earlier. Everybody was silent about that, so I thought it wasn't 'proper' to talk about him or the loss. And I didn't feel the need to do so. 'Just' living and doing my homework was challenging enough at the time. But at the same time, homework and other daily normal things kept me going.

\* That Lars called me Harry was really endearing. Possibly it was a result of my tough behavior as a child. I had this attitude of 'Buzz off, I can handle it'. It took years before I had shaken that attitude off.

## Suggestions

If someone around you loses his or her parents, it isn't easy to think of what to say. Often this results in saying nothing. Understandable. But when I look back, I am grateful to everyone who actually tried to come up with some words. I appreciated that it was 'seen'. That it wasn't unnoticed. That it didn't have to be concealed. That Lars had the courage at age fourteen to say something was nice.

So, if someone around you loses a loved one, give evidence of the fact that you know that it happened. Show that you notice what he or she is going through. Realize that at one point after the event, the grieving person looks back on that special time in his or her life. Try to just 'be around' in the time of dealing with the loss. Make sure the grieving child can include you in what's happening to him / her.

Contribute to smoothing the rough edges of a traumatic event in someone's life.. Smooth edges make a person more able to deal with such an overwhelming event, in the shorter and the longer term.

If you want to offer assistance to a grieving child, make sure to keep it manageable for yourself. You don't have to 'take everything over'. They do not need anyone to fully contribute everything at such a moment. It may be enough to follow Lars' example; it's not rocket science. Just be around. Pay attention. Listen.

# Cabinet

*My grandfather's strong hands  
that built many houses  
carving two tiny shoes out of wood  
during lunch break  
from carrying bricks and mortar.  
Stories, treasures, disappointments, successes,  
all displayed in our cabinet.*

*Walnut cabinet  
for sale*

We, my sister and I, remained in the house my parents once rented. The owner had ordered us to move out, but after long talks, pleading our case and crying, we were granted the right to stay. We wouldn't have known where to go, if the owner had persisted. We were grateful we could stay in our parents' house, the house where I was born. It became a place where our past no longer resided, but where it was impossible to grow new roots. It didn't resemble our home as it had once been. We changed things, trying not to violate our own and our parents' past. We did our best to make it work, but felt overwhelmed by the struggle to cope with everyday life. It was not at all easy to make ends meet. Our energy seeped into showing other people around us that 'we were doing just fine'.

Still, we felt the need to make a fresh new place for ourselves. We had kept some furniture from 'before'. A hand carved, deep brown walnut cabinet. With an allegorical scene and beautiful drawers. If you closed your eyes, you could still smell my mother's cinnamon stick. We kept just about everything in that cabinet. Old concert tickets, painted Easter eggs, school reports, glasses, the tiny wooden shoes my grandfather had carved for my mother.

We decided to sell the cabinet. To confiscate our own space, but especially to pay our two enormous school bills. We had no clue that there were welfare funds available for children like us.

One day, a buyer came by our house. 'Fifteen hundred guilders, that's all I can give you for it,' he said. 'But only when the copper kettle comes with it. I can't get ripped off by charming young girls now, can I?' Bollocks. A smart merchant who grabbed his chance at a nice bargain. A couple of young girls, absolutely clueless about the value of antiques. We expected to get a little more for our cabinet. At least two times the one thousand and thirty guilders we owed my school, one month's rent and maybe shoes for the winter. That was a no-go. We lost the cabinet, got the fifteen hundred guilders (about six hundred euros in today's currency). The money evaporated in a few hours: school paid, a bit of our rent paid. No winter shoes or groceries, though.

Over twenty years later, at a Twitter meetup in a local pub (*Chez Antoinette*) in the town where we lived and sold the cabinet, I was enjoying drinks and laughter with friends. After a few drinks, I went to visit the ladies' room. While passing through the hallway, I saw it. The cabinet. Our cabinet. For a few moments, I was just staring at it, catching my breath. It was without any doubt our cabinet. I recognized the hand cut scene, the loose gurney, the hinges. A familiar sight. I opened the door to the shelf where I once kept my seventh grade report. I closed my eyes, stuck my nose in the compartment and tried to recapture the familiar smell. Scents can

become memories instantly. I thought I recognized something of times almost forgotten, trying to evoke images of bygone times. But I just smelled the wood....and a glorious dark hint of chocolate. The memories once captured in the cabinet were chased out by a luscious, glorious scent of dark chocolate.

The cabinet was now used as a chocolaterie cabinet in the restaurant part of the pub. Moments later, the restaurant owner joined me. I told him the cabinet used to be my parents' and mine. 'Tell me, why did you sell it?' I obliged. The man seemed pensive and then replied: 'It makes sense. I bought it from that same buyer. It's a bit awkward to say that I've paid a lot more for it than you got for it. Oh, and there's that other incident. A few years ago, a girl, somewhat older than yourself, stood in front of this same cabinet and wept. She told me more or less the same story you're telling me now. Really, the girl was sobbing.'

A few moments later, I joined my friends at the table and made them partakers of the story. It felt good to share. As far as the cabinet was concerned: it had a good purpose where it was. I took a bite from a chocolate I took from the shelf, enjoying the full, luscious chocolate flavor and felt genuinely happy that this once harsh memory had been given a formidable sweet end.

## Suggestions

Material things may be just that. But objects are often associated with memories. Beautiful memories, painful memories. They can also become like milestones, or rather little keepsakes with great emotional value in your personal development process. A report, a cherished gift from your childhood, a cabinet. They can represent a sense of home, hope, or a sense of belonging. Tiny slices of your own roots.

If a child loses a parent, keepsakes become more important. Objects that do not seem to have any value can mean the world to a grieving child. Mom's coat. Dad's reading glasses. The carved wooden shoes grandpa made for Mom. They are all gone in my life, are mere memories. When I think of my Dad's reading glasses, in my mind's eye, I can see him taking them off to scratch his nose. A simple gesture, but something I will never witness again. Those glasses are gone. So are almost all other small and large things from my house. Family members had chosen to toss it all away, after I decided to move to the other side of the country, and 'forgot' to notify me. So I couldn't take a last glance at some of my parents' personal belongings and my own toys from my own childhood. Sometimes, when I see a duplicate of something insignificant we had at home (such as a measuring cup or a spoon or something like that) in a thrift shop, I still take a picture of it. So I won't ever forget, even though others tossed our things away.

A suggestion for anyone who sees a child losing his or her parents is to let the child choose keepsakes. And to keep them in a safe place. If it's necessary to throw things away, let the child take pictures and tell stories about them. It's a part of letting things go in a non-violent way. The reality is tough enough.

Thankfully, years ago I found my sense of home in myself and in connection with my friends, my loved ones. They are my chosen family. My feeling of being at home with myself, wherever I go, gives me a feeling of peace. Nevertheless, objects often trigger my memories. They have become symbols. Sometimes to cherish them, to preserve them. Sometimes to let go, to set them free from the meaning I once gave them...so they can get a new, nice sequel in their existence.

# Dad number two

*'We don't walk on egg shells in this house.'*  
- my foster dad

At my new school in Delft, there was this girl who caught my attention. She used to walk past me, throwing withering glances. I didn't really know why, but I had a hunch it had something to do with the fact that there were a number of things we had in common. The most obvious similarity was our appearance. She was a dead ringer for me. Or, as she saw it: I was a dead ringer for her. The same dark red bob hairstyle, the same eyeliner, long shirts and Doc Martens boots. It was almost frightening for our school mates. They started confusing us with one another.

Our resemblance annoyed the girl a lot. It's not surprising: when you're sixteen, you do your best to find out who you are by defining (or choosing) a certain style, thoroughly custom made. Every detail was carefully chosen, such as bright laces for Doc Martens. Once the style was perfected (for as long as it would last), you're not waiting for another girl to show up in those same bright laces in those same Doc Martens. At one point, the girl and I sat across from

each other during lunch break. I decided to break the barrier of polar ice between us. I'd had enough of all those deadly glances. Moreover, the girl fascinated me. Would there be any more similarities than just our appearance? 'Why are you always eyeballing me as if I'm the reincarnation of the Wicked Witch from the West?' knowing her reaction to that would be totally unpredictable. 'What do you expect? You look like me. That seems to me enough,' she said. 'No way, you look like me,' I snapped back. Our faces were dark clouds and our eyes threw thunderbolts. Our friends were standing next to us laughing out loud. 'Hahahaaa, they even react the same! This was meant to be! How weird is that!' Secretly, the girl and I knew our friends were right. Suddenly the ice broke. The collision of our fierce characters marked the beginning of an intense friendship. Two girls that looked like and acted like ice queens, but were inwardly insecure, searching and complex characters.

Soon I met her parents. Warm, welcoming people with big hearts and an enormous social impact on my life. When we met for the first time, they saw why their daughter and I had to meet each other. Sometimes they called me by their daughter's name, and vice versa, during house chores or when casually passing by. They had an eye for individuals and (rightly) showed and encouraged a healthy level of self-esteem. The self-esteem was rather noisy; they spoke at a high volume, as though there were bonus points to be won if they were loud enough. That was funny and nice, especially when their whole family was gathered. It was a vivid bunch of amazing people. I had to get used to their communication style: we didn't raise our voices in our parents' house. Not that my parents weren't enthusiastic. On the contrary. The enthusiasm just appeared totally different. My friend's mother and father were down to earth and practical. They worked hard and diligently. My parents were full of dreams and very talented. But they lacked the practical approach, and so only about half of their dreams came true. I always had a slightly sad feeling about that, and promised myself to chase my dreams more efficiently. My friend's parents showed me how to

pursue goals and dreams: By Getting Things Done. Their healthy, pragmatic approach was rather confrontational, but very effective. My new foster dad (our bond grew quickly) used to call me 'pancake' every time I did something clumsy, followed by 'well goodmorning to the real world, ye pancake. Listen. We are not walking on egg shells in our home. And honestly, don't you agree it was just utterly witless what you just did? Haha!' That was exactly what I needed. Plain, reasonable feedback without drama. Without trying to spare anyone. Without thinking 'oh my, she is an orphan, now we have to be careful.' They saw me as I was. A sixteen year old girl, searching for a goal in life and struggling along the way. Orphan or no orphan. Doc Martens or no Doc Martens. Attitude or no attitude. Their supervision was initially a bit scary to me, but it was a real eye opener.

I visited their house regularly. At one point, I really needed help. My room, which I had found through people from the student café, was a sloppy place. The doors of both my room and the bathroom wouldn't close. If there had been other girls living there, it wouldn't have mattered as much. But it was a place above a snack shack, and the guys who worked there stayed in the rooms above it. And myself. The window looked out onto a wall The sink was clogged. Everything smelled of shawarma snacks (the smell still reminds me of the place). It was, so to speak, a real paradise. But it was my room and I was glad to have found a place to stay.

When I got my school report and heard that I could enter the next year and take my final exams, my foster dad picked me up from my place to take me and his wife and daughter out to dinner. To celebrate. I had never gone out to dinner while living in Delft. Too luxurious. My step dad insisted on seeing my room. After about two seconds, he said: 'Very nice. I see a weekend bag over there. And a tooth brush. That's nice. Pick them up. You're coming home with us.' At first, I refused. Felt a stone in my stomach. I couldn't just let them take me in. It wasn't as if I didn't have a place to stay.

I didn't want to take advantage of the situation and of their big hearts. He continued: 'Okay, I've got your bag. Come on. We'll have dinner, and afterwards we're going home. At least for a while, you'll have a better place to stay. We'll take it from there, we'll talk about further plans. But first...dinner. I could use a bite.' My foster father was adamant and was already waiting in the car. I may have been a pancake. But a pancake with perspective, in any case.

What my foster dad did is one of the most powerful acts of love that I have experienced in my life. He and his wife intervened for me at a time when it was most needed. They didn't hesitate for a moment, despite all the fuss that it subsequently brought to the family. At the house, I experienced the daily affairs of a family. Homework checking, doing dishes, cleaning. Making lunch bags, tea and school bag packing. Rhythm, boundaries, clarity. After a few months, I had the opportunity to move into a retirement apartment which three years later would be demolished. My foster mom worked at the municipality of Delft and she had made my case a social project. So that was it: I had my own digs. Mine. A home. Of course I had a house warming party for my friends. My kind neighbour Philip (age 83) was completely fine with the planned noise. 'What do you say? Gardening? Warning? Oh, housewarming. Oh miss, go right ahead, I can't hear anything.'

To this day, my foster parents say: 'We just did what was necessary. Nothing more, nothing less.' That may be true. But the mere fact that they actually took action says everything about them and makes them extraordinary people. My dear friend and her parents are strong people who, all three of them, unfortunately live with an enormous loss in their lives (they have lost their youngest daughter and sister). And yet, they are so immensely loving and strong, balanced people. They are part of me and I consider myself lucky to feel part of them. We see each other two or three times a year. Although we are not blood related, I feel connected to them. Gratitude fills my heart. I am one lucky pancake.

## Suggestions

It's unavoidable: you have an extra vulnerability when you're an orphan. This is a fact. This does not mean that friends, family and teachers should treat orphans as if they were disabled (by the way: even the disabled shouldn't be treated as such). A child is entitled to get support towards the future. This sometimes means a more confrontational honesty than the child may have been used to in an earlier stage in life. Families lead different lives and people communicate differently, in their own unique manner. It is healthy when a child learns to function in different environments and, despite verbal loudness or directness, learns to feel safe. They can learn to feel safe with themselves and with people they choose to feel secure with. It is therefore advisable not to walk on eggshells. Speak freely. Don't sweep important issues under the rug just to keep the peace.

Inspire a growing child by speaking up. This teaches the child to do the same, when needed. Show your own power constructively, so that a child learns that he or she may grow into a steady, powerful personality. The origin of the tendency to walk on eggshells is to keep the peace. Peace keeping keeps people from being honest. That's not necessarily a bad ability to have in life, but when it comes down to real life in a family, it should be okay to be direct in communication. Furthermore, an orphan is not 'pathetic', is not covered in scales or anything. Any orphan is really an ordinary child, like everyone else. You treat ordinary people in a normal way. You talk to orphans just as you talk to other children. Invest in children by inspiring them to be the best they can possibly be. It may be a cliché. But clichés are generally true. A harsh word can be hurtful, but not as hurtful as living with the effects of avoiding life's lessons, and the additional effects in years to follow. Help someone to learn how to use their own strength, so they can become who they truly are: the best version of themselves. I can't imagine a more precious gift than this.

# Dial 555-Heaven

\* Ring \*

‘Hello, Jojanneke speaking.’

...

‘Huh? Really? This is the last thing I expected. I can’t believe it. Don’t really know what to say. How are you? Are you guys a bit nicer towards each other? Ah, so that’s more pleasant now. Good to hear that. But what are you doing over there?’

...

‘What? A sewing studio? Seriously? Is that really what you wanted all along? Gosh. And Dad? Eh, ‘living’ like a fighting-cock. Some things never change. And Grandma? Playing blackjack? Is that allowed? Oh. Oh yeah. I see. Does she still have her daily egg nog? Ah, she probably likes that. Do you mind me saying you sound er, remarkably, ehm, sane? Tell me, are you still ill in any way? You’re not? That’s a relief. I was worried about that.’

...

‘Also a relief for you. Well, bless you. Who? Jimmy Stewart? As in Jimmy - Vertigo - Stewart? Well, I’m really very happy for you. Enjoy. And ehm, I’ve got to fill you in on something. Oh, you know already. Yes, you’re a great-grandma. Fortunately the little girl has survived and is really healthy, smart and utterly cute. Your genes with a fabulous scoop of Indian blood. How beautiful is that. Me? No, no plans. My little boy is already with you. And no, no. I’ve married myself. Nothing narcissistic. Just a reminder to make good choices for myself and for others. And ehm, how’s my foster parent’s youngest doing? That was so incredibly heartbreaking.’

...

‘If it’s any consolation, I’ll tell her parents. Please, do look after each other, will you.’

...

‘Yes, things are fine here. Going pretty good. Yes Mom, I eat healthy. Well alright, not always. But most of the time. Yep, the job’s okay too. Something with the Internet. In-ter-, oh, never mind. No, I’m not going to bed on time. Yes, still a knack for languages. English, French, German. And uh, Italian and Spanish, Irish and Swedish with hands and feet. For fun. But not everything at once, the diary is full enough as it is. Choose? Skip things? Why, for Pete’s sake. Oh right, now I’m being immature. Well, with any luck it stays that way. I guess we’ll have to eh, live with that. But I’m floating off-topic. Fortunately, from a floating point of view you see much more. But you probably know all about that. Sorry - bad joke.’

...

‘Oh my, if I’d known you’d call, I’d have thought of all those questions that have been lingering all those years. Tomorrow, I will probably think ‘Shoot, I should have asked this-and-that.’ But you’re right: we could probably talk endlessly if given the chance. But we probably can’t.’

...

‘Well, if we have to. You go first. No, you. No, you. Okay, I will. Remember how it went, every night? You first. No you, haha. Well. Good night, sleep well, until, well, not until tomorrow. You know what? Eternity stinks. It’s way too long. Well, okay. What then? Okay, good. You first, yes.’

...

‘Good night, sleep well, until someday.’

\* click \*

## Suggestions

Sometimes you wish you could just dial 555-Heaven. To discuss every day trivialities. A word of advice, just to feel that true unconditional commitment. Even after not seeing each other for twenty-four years, you can still feel the desire for contact.

Sometimes, strange miracle-like things happen. For instance, in May 2013, five months after the release of the Dutch version of this book, my half-brother gave me an old cassette tape. 'Jo, I have something for you. It belongs to you. Dad recorded a personal message for you, your mother and sister. I don't know what he recorded, maybe his voice isn't even on there anymore, I don't know. But he gave me the tape in 1985, and asked me to give it to you. I never did. I forgot all about it. But here it is. It's yours.'

While driving back home, one of Bruce Springsteen's amazing songs was on the radio. The lyrics were piercing.

*'I walked the avenue till my legs felt like stone  
I heard the voices of friends vanished and gone...'*

I must have thought over a hundred times: 'If only I could hear his voice once more', although he was 'vanished and gone'. And then all of a sudden, I could.

It took me over thirty hours to find the courage to play the tape. I didn't have a cassette player, so my brother gave me one of his old Walkman's. I plugged a speaker onto it, pressed the play button and recorded the sound on the voice recorder on my smartphone. To be able to keep what's left of my father. To keep him near.

It was a recording of 66 minutes. My dad made the tape in an intensely emotional period of our lives as a family, in which he had

to be apart from us, without knowing where we were. Our mother had taken us (during one of her psychotic episodes) without telling my dad where we went. It took us over a month to return home. And now, many years have gone by. And that tape was still waiting to be listened to. My half-brother probably had no idea what he was giving me at that moment. It was amazing to hear these words, twenty-four years after my father's death:

*'Children from our neighbourhood came searching for you here in the house. They miss you around here. And so do I. I miss you, Jojanneke.'*

It was as close to 555-Heaven as humanly possible. Perhaps even closer than we were when he was still alive; I had never heard his heartfelt emotions ever before, all those years ago.

There is nothing and no one that can replace the unconditional connection between you and your parents. There are no answers. The only thing you can do is open your heart, and save some space for the loss. But filling that void with something or somebody else is often a path to more suffering. Just let it be what it is. Feel what's no longer there. And then, maybe, if you are really lucky, you'll find your prematurely lost unconditionality once more. Within yourself.

*'(...) We ourselves shall be loved for a while and forgotten. But the love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that had made them. Even memory is not necessary for love.'*

*'There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.'*

- Thornton Wilder

# Introduction

*Nothing is stronger than an idea that is ready for the world.*

On the 12th of September 1989, my father died of heart failure. On the 15th of February 1990, my mother died of a very aggressive form of lung cancer, after five years of severe depression. I was fourteen and orphaned.

Twenty-four years have passed. They have been turbulent years, with setbacks, struggle, resistance. But also with success, surprise, acceptance and opportunities. And bizarre moments of great happiness, as strange as that may sound.

In this book, I share situations and brief reflections which give an insight into situations that each orphan could encounter. These are all true stories from my life. But, this book isn't intended to be a life story. Many more things than described have happened. I choose to limit myself in this book to several situations that can illustrate to you, as a reader, what it means to lose your parents and what happens (and can happen) after that. And besides the fact that my life is just thirty-eight years along the way and I hope to stay around much longer, it's not necessary to be complete and to share all stories. These twenty-four short, true situations address the issues and they should suffice for now. They illustrate universal themes that can have a key impact on young people's lives: themes such as losing unconditionality, taking care of oneself, coping with setbacks, dealing with practical hurdles, finding a sense of belonging when roots may have been damaged, defining and accepting who you are and what you can become.

I could have chosen to tell the stories about the lives of my father and mother. To share how special they were, what their amazing talents were, which jokes and peculiarities made the biggest impression on me. And how absolutely beautiful and smart they were. How they provided for me and my sister by getting up at the crack of dawn to run their small newspaper distribution service. But also how they, at times, were severely depressed, with sharp edges. How they, in the last years of their lives, suffered, emotionally and physically. As special as telling those stories might feel, they would not have an additional educational value in the light of the topic 'what situations might you encounter when you become an orphan.' Maybe I'll share those untold stories some other time. But for now, I limit myself to anecdotes that focus on the time after their passing. A totally new era in my life at age fourteen.

It goes without saying that every situation is unique. Every person is unique. But in the life of an orphan something irreversible has happened. It touches fundamental life issues. Every orphan has to find his or her own way in facing these issues. And sometimes it's impossible for a child to find a way, or the child even gets lost while trying. That, in my opinion, is a situation that can't 'just happen'. In fact, we cannot reasonably look ourselves in the mirror if we do not make a real effort to reach out. To help a seeking child in need of practical or emotional assistance. Looking away is negligence. In these situations, I think we should take social and personal responsibility and ask ourselves what we can do to assist a child. Taking care of people who just need that extra nudge to get their lives started in a positive, constructive way. A stepping stone. Helping young people with their own story, their own lives, their own unique backgrounds and perceptions. We can learn so much from each other. We can help each other so well. The key is the willingness to do so. Often enough, this is the biggest barrier in situations in which people feel powerless. There is no ready-made solution. No one size fits all. In reality, 'one size fits all' often means 'one size fits nobody'. Every woman knows what this means (combine the

concept of ‘one size fits all’ with ‘bikini’: one size fits nobody). But there are many experiences. Experiences to be shared, so that other people can benefit from them.

In the 1950’s, the last Dutch orphanages closed their doors. In the United States, there are not many orphanages left. Some of them really make an effort to make opportunities happen. In Ireland, orphanages closed their doors on 25 September, 1996. Concerning Irish orphan houses: there were regular orphanages and the notorious Magdalene Laundries. They were run by religious orders, both Catholic and Protestant. A lot of the children in these orphanages were taken away from single mothers who wanted to keep them but weren’t allowed because they were unmarried. Many children were put up for adoption without the consent of the mothers. Authorities would send young girls with ‘attitude problems’ to work in the Magdalene Laundries. This happened to approximately 30,000 women and a not specific known number of children. Currently, there are no orphanages in Ireland at all anymore. As far as we know, few women put their children up for adoption. But the facts and figures about this issue are not entirely transparent. The question is: how important is it to have all of the numbers? In the United Kingdom, orphanages have been closed many years. Most children who lose their parents, are eligible for foster care. Children’s futures are at stake. And every single one of them counts.

Most care responsibilities after the closing of orphanages in Western countries were taken over by boarding schools, foster families and regular youth shelters. Currently, there are approximately thirty boarding schools in Holland. These schools and shelters are housing young people who do not have the option to live with their parents (because of death, psychological difficulties of a mother or father, or because the child chooses not to live at home). Also children of seamen, circus artists, and children who need above average assistance live in shelters and boarding schools. Some of them are orphans. It’s not easy for them to recognize opportunities

as they pass by or to connect to people who could be willing to help them in a way that could offer their lives more possibilities.

Because there is no distinction between the backgrounds of orphans and other children (with or without specific care needs) in shelters or foster families, it is perfectly understandable that few people know of the specific issues and situations that young orphans may face. To give an idea of the number of orphans in Western European countries: every year, approximately 6,000 parents of children (under 18) die prematurely. So at least 6,000 children lose one parent or become orphans. The actual number of orphans (per year) is by definition higher, because in general, more than one child lives in most families. In the past ten years, the annual number of dying parents remains fairly constant. There are approximately 34,000 thousand minor orphans and children who have lost one parent in Holland. Thirty-four thousand young lives, irreversibly changed. In Ireland, approximately 39,000 children have lost one or both parents. In the United States, 400,540 children are living without permanent families and/or have lost one or both parents.

That's a lot of lives, irreversibly and deeply changed. For them, unconditionality has gone forever.

Quite frequently, people ask me: "Why share your stories from your personal history?" And they ask this not only in the context of this book. Some people around me, past and present, far and near, ask me about the real "why" of this book. Some of them knew my history years ago, others didn't. Sometimes people ask me, "Is it really necessary to hang out the dirty laundry? We couldn't be there for you when your parents died. It's all so long ago. Why not let by-gones be by-gones? You're all grown up now." Well yes, it's a long time ago. And I can imagine that it might be confrontational to read, especially if they really didn't have any means to assist me in any way (whether or not by force majeure) when my sister and I needed it most. This however cannot mean that I can't bring these

stories to light. In fact, I think that because the stories are painful for some involved, this fiercely illustrates the need to share the stories, so that young orphans today and the people around them, can benefit from them and turn painful situations into something more constructive. To change things for the better. To make a future for young orphans today. I think, for reasons mentioned, it's extremely painful for an orphan child NOT to share what's wrong. What is (or was) wrong with the situation. And what could have been done better. Most importantly, I think these stories matter for all of the tens of thousands of grieving youngsters today. For them, it not 'all so long ago'. No 'by-gones', no 'water under the bridge'. For them, it's painfully relevant today. They face really challenging situations today. Every day.

The image of today's orphans in the media isn't accurate. 'Orphan'. A simple Google search on the word 'orphan' or 'orphans' provides a prominent link to a Hollywood movie in the horror genre (a creepy murderous orphan girl). It is also linked to a film about the comical little red haired Orphan Annie (happy ending included) and the tale of The Little Match Girl (horrifying ending included, a very cruel fairy tale. Surely, it can't be a good thing when a little girl freezes to death because nobody invited her into their homes on Christmas Eve. The fairy tale is a classic romanticizing of neglect). In the Google search, you will also find a link to an online game (*'Orphans make a really good meal! Kidnap as many as you can from the streets of Victorian London!'*). Also, it's a little jump to Huckleberry Finn and Harry Potter. News clippings about today's orphans state, in a probably well-intentioned way, but nevertheless poorly, that 'all orphans today are well and lovingly taken care of by friends and family and orphanages therefore do no longer exist.' All in all not a representative picture. It's time for an update. More than twenty years ago, I wanted to talk with a dear friend of my mother's about his fond memories of her. Stories about what kind of girl and woman she was before I came into the world. I longed for fresh perceptions and personal memories. But it

wasn't meant to be. The answer I got was: *'Please don't ask those questions. Otherwise he'll get all emotional, and then it's our problem.'*

My questions went up in smoke and the answers I longed for, as well. Apparently, it wasn't possible for me to hear, cherish and remember stories about my mother. Apparently, people near to her were trying to forget about her. Some people missed her, other people didn't get along with her while she was still alive. At the time, I didn't pursue my questions, afraid that I would be perceived as a nuisance. Years later, I felt the void that those unanswered questions left in my heart. They stopped me from having a healthy mourning and also an honest chance to integrate the loss and build a new life for myself. I knew I didn't know the whole truth about my parents. I let myself be silenced. So they could remain silent. It became a missing link in my heritage. I needed that part to feel whole.

A few years ago, I heard the actor Gabriel Byrne say in an interview: *'We lie by silence. Silence is the enemy.'* He said those words in a completely different context, about another painful and damaging experience. Anyone could have said these words. Mr. Byrne is probably not the only one saying and believing them. But that particular interview resonated with my need to share. Those words hit the core of my story and the reason why I feel the necessity of sharing my experiences, to contribute to an awareness about this issue. And to share as soon as possible.

*'We lie by silence.'* When I heard those four fierce words, I instantly felt that I would be complicit in someone else's possible future suffering, if I didn't increase awareness about this issue immediately. Two years earlier, I had published the first six chapters of this book. After those first chapters, my daily life and business enterprises took over my attention. But right at that moment in the south of France, when I was vacationing, hearing Mr. Byrne's piercing interview, I instantly felt horribly guilty. Because I wasn't doing what I was supposed to be doing.

So I changed my vacation plans, picked up a note pad and a pen and started writing. The stories poured out effortlessly. About three months later, around New Year's Day 2013, the book was completed and printed. Today, many people have read it and shared their opinions about it. It's been covered on national television and radio shows, national and local newspapers and professional journals for caretakers. I share, because of those 34,000 Dutch, 39,000 Irish, hundreds of thousands of American and so many more Western children. There is no time to waste. It is undeniably true. We lie by silence.

The stories are written to provide a helping hand, to build a connection between people. Between orphans and the people around them. For me personally, the writing of the stories was a labor of love. Love, to me, has nothing to do with blame and guilt.

I didn't write these memories to name, blame or shame anybody (and yes, that means that I left some stories out on purpose). I did it to provide answers and possible solutions. And to entice people to come up with solutions. I hope that this book provides inspiration for organizations, caregivers and people around today's young orphans. And perhaps a nudge of recognition for orphans. The memories are part of me and I carry them - loving and in a good place in my heart. The anecdotes that I have included in this volume can contribute to a picture of what is going to happen if you become an orphan. Maybe I cross a vulnerable line here and there. So be it.

For most people hearing the word 'orphan,' an image of a child in a faraway country, from a culture different than your own, comes to mind. However distressing the situations of orphans in countries far away may be, in the Western world there are many young people who have to build their lives without their parents. Each and every one of them is facing his or her own challenges. But the strange thing about Western orphans is that they don't look different anymore. They don't wear certain orphan uniforms, don't

Speak in a certain way, aren't covered in scales or anything. They appear to be your average girl or boy next door. And most of the time, they do their utmost to appear as normal as possible. Think about it: when you're in junior high, you want to fit in. Be part of the crowd. Have friends. And stand out for great accomplishments, such as a wonderful singing voice or your own fashion style. Or something like that. But not because somebody might perceive you as pitiable. They're brilliant actors, in a way. But that doesn't fix the still existing problem: the child is trying to take care of him- or- herself and hides it proficiently. Because of that, nobody notices the real problem. The issue is invisible. And it is a taboo.

In my work as a consultant in online communication and social media, I often advise my clients to go to and communicate openly on the online platforms where their target groups are. They should go where their target group is and tell their own authentic story in a way that really triggers the imagination, so they can have real conversations. I think I would fail my own advice miserably if I did not follow it myself. Hence the decision to share true stories about my own history. Not really an easy choice, business-wise. It makes me somewhat fragile. But I feel strongly that it was the right choice. Because is this not the way to true engagement between people?

I believe I'm telling the story with the primary goal being to open up the issue and increase the possible involvement of others in raising social awareness about this thus far quite silenced issue. To make sense of what happened, to provide suggestions for those who need them, to give insight to those who do not know that this issue still occurs today. Here and now. I have to address this issue.

Many adults with an orphan history have had to come up with solutions themselves for situations that they could never have anticipated, all those years ago. Their knowledge is extremely valuable. So in May 2007, WesternOrphans, a project for sharing practical information with and about orphans in my home country, started.

Orphans of all ages, with varying life stories and experiences, take the opportunity to share their knowledge to help their peers make a wiser decision, find a solution, see that there are other youngsters going through the same ordeals, or simply find an address.

It's an amazing feeling to speak up freely and to notice results. We've managed to prevent the eviction of several children whose parents have recently died (thousands of kids are being evicted because they are not the official renters of their homes).

Another result thus far is that several social organizations and two governmental ministries want to be involved in the goals of our project. The Central Bureau of Statistics has come up with recent numbers. The National Youth Institute has decided to include the author of this book in the process of developing new policy, based on specific issues concerning orphans. People are contributing information for young people. Awareness is finally growing.

Years ago, in the days of paper diaries, I scribbled on a cover: 'Nothing is stronger than an idea that is ready for the world.' So it is. Look into your heart. Keep your loved ones close. Help people to grow into someone even bigger than yourself.

I hope the short stories in this book can contribute to that.