

# Four Hikers and a Sicilian



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**Four Hikers and a Sicilian**  
Information Sheet



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**Pages** 320

**English sample** available

## Unique novel written by four female authors, each portraying their own character

- ◆ In the bestseller list for 14 weeks. 30.000 physical copies sold, 50.000 in total.
- ◆ Film rights optioned by Netflix; theatre rights sold. Book 2 in the making.
- ◆ The authors went on the hiking holiday the characters actually go on in the book. They hiked in the morning and wrote in the afternoon.

### About **Four Hikers and a Sicilian**

'A hilarious, well-written novel about four women who needed to get away from it all (...) There are many highlights in this book, but the serious conversations give the novel just a little more weight than just the predicate 'hilarious'.' *NRC Handelsblad*

'A unique adventure novel about one walk and four voices telling their own story. (...) Funny, exciting and moving.' *KRO Magazine*

### Four Hikers and a Sicilian

Four women sign up for a walking holiday in Italy. Led by Italian guide Vincenzo, they walk through the rugged interior of Sicily. The women all have their own motives for taking part in the hike, all of them fleeing life at home. Will they succeed in getting rid of the ballast of the past and adjust their expectations for the future?

Adventure, clashing characters, secrets, budding friendships, deep conversations and many kilometres of walking. Either way, it will be a journey they will not soon forget.

**Femmetje de Wind** is a publisher, writer, journalist and columnist. With her debut novel *Rivka*, which is partly based on her father's war past, she received much praise. *Het beloofde leven* is her second novel.

**Roos Schlikker** is at home in many markets: she is a columnist, writes scenarios for theatre and TV and regularly joins talk shows.

**Elle van Rijn** wrote several successful books, including *Mijn naam is Nadra*, *Mijn ontvoering* and the historical novel *De crèche*, which became an international bestseller. Her most recent historical novel is *Back to Insulinde*. Elle is also a famous actress in the Netherlands.

**Marion Pauw** is a writer and screenwriter. She wrote the bestsellers *Daglicht*, *Zondaarskind* and *Hemelen*, among others. With her latest thriller *Vogeleiland* she won the Gouden Strop (the most prestigious award for thrillers in the Netherlands).



**Four Hikers and a Sicilian**  
Summary, Storyline and Characters

## **Four Hikers and a Sicilian**

*Marion Pauw, Elle van Rijn, Roos Schlikker and Femmetje de Wind*

### **Short outline:**

Adventure, clashing characters, secrets, budding friendships, meaningful conversations and many miles of walking.

Four women sign up for a hiking holiday in Italy. Led by Italian guide Vincenzo, they walk through the rugged interior of Sicily. The women all have their motives for taking part in the hike, all of them fleeing life at home. Will they succeed in getting rid of their weighty past and adjusting their expectations for the future? Either way, it's going to be a trek they won't easily forget.

### **Characters:**

As a reader, we gradually get to know the four characters: Lot, Joy, Hannah and Bibi. Lot and Joy have been friends since childhood and are present, colourful characters. Lot (in her late 40s) works as a social worker at the crisis service and lives in Krommenie with her kids and husband Jos. Joy (in her late 40s) is single and an actress. The other two - Hannah and Bibi - are strangers to each other (and to Lot and Joy).

At 33, Bibi is the youngest of the group, but perhaps the wisest. She has worked in the Amsterdam Zuidas business district for years, but after being diagnosed with a brain tumour which was surgically removed, she drastically changed her lifestyle. She now lives with her (wealthy) father in Ibiza and teaches yoga classes. She is featherlight, almost transparent, and quite woolly.

Hannah (47) is a bit ponderous. She is a couples therapist but is heading for a burnout, partly because her husband Zac has been unemployed for some time, and she is the breadwinner. Their son Benjamin has moved out and studies in Tel Aviv.

### **What are we going to see?**

A spring Bibi decides to go swimming naked, blisters, a bull in the middle of the road that Hannah dares not pass, Lot's rucksack full of granola bars, Joy's grotesque audition on Zoom in Prizzi, Hannah many sleepless nights (Oxazepam), Bibi reading tarot cards predicting a not-so-rosy future for Lot, a dog and her puppy, burnt down fields (in which Bibi sees a

reference for her radiation treatment) loneliness within the group (the women are so preoccupied with themselves that they forget to look after each other), quarrels as both Lot's and Joy's shared their secrets with the group (their friendship is visibly coming to an end), Bibi giving Lot a tantra massage, countless conversations and instructive insights, clashes, a burgeoning love between Joy and guide Vincenzo and they get lost on the last day (just when Vincenzo isn't hiking with them).

### **Reason for the hiking trip**

**Lot:** Joy has discovered a secret Lot's husband Jos has been keeping and informs Lot about it. Lot, who is usually firm on her feet, is floored by the news. Her relationship, with her husband, is no longer the solid ground she can rely on. She tells Joy she has to get away: 'I need to walk.'

**Joy:** Pretends she has to go on a trip because her old school pal needs a break, but she has some problems of her own. Her agent dropped her because she was hardly ever cast for new parts. But now that she no longer has an agent, she gets no auditions at all! She has tried other agencies, but they classify her as a has-been actress. Meanwhile, the first debt collection letters have already plopped on the doormat. Shortly after they arrive at the hotel in Palermo, Joy gets a call. A well-known director has asked if Joy would like to audition for the lead in a film. But the audition is in 3 days, and they couldn't reach her through her agent. Could she maybe leave her friend in Sicily and go back for the audition? She decides to do the audition (completely inappropriately) on Zoom.

**Bibi:** We read that Bibi has made a headlong decision to go hiking and picked the first hike she came across. She is escaping something, and we also read that she is not physically very strong. Her father bombards her with apps asking where she is. We soon find out that the tumour is back and that she is avoiding radiation treatment.

**Hannah:** We read the tail end of her latest therapy session with a certain Linda. That one doesn't run smoothly. Once home, she collapses, dead tired. Her unemployed husband Zac holds up an ad for a walking holiday before her, but when the time of departure approaches, it turns out that he has a job interview for the first time in a long while. Hannah goes on a walking holiday alone. But after less than a day in Palermo, she gets a call from Zac. A letter has arrived from the disciplinary committee; Linda is suing her.

**Contents:**

Prologue: We witness the reason for the walkers' trip and their arrival at the hotel. Once at the hotel, Hannah and Bibi find out they have to share a room against their will.

Day 1 Palermo: The group gets a tour of Palermo from their guide, Vincenzo, Bibi separates herself from the group and goes to get hiking gear from a sports shop, Hannah gets a call about a letter from the disciplinary committee, her latest client Linda has filed a complaint against her. Joy does a digital audition and practices with Bibi for her role. In the evening, they have dinner at a rooftop bar overlooking the city.

Day 2 Palermo to Corleone: On the first day of walking, they are immediately left to their own devices. The luggage service cannot come, so their guide Vincenzo takes their belongings to Corleone. They cover the morning using a navigation app, but at one point Bibi feels they should go in a different direction than the app indicates. Some friction ensues between control freak Hannah and woolly Bibi. They follow Bibi and end up at a spring, where Bibi goes swimming naked. Vincenzo rejoins the group here. A stray sheepdog suddenly approaches them menacingly, Lot appeases him, and it turns out to be a shepherd's dog. Bibi, meanwhile, has come out of the water and is now standing naked behind Lot, who is startled by this sudden nudity. Joy later walks up with Vincenzo and complains about the length of their walking day. Moreover, she worries whether they will be on location in time for her audition the next day. At the hotel, Bibi tells Hannah over dinner that there are nightly ghosts in their room.

Day 3 Corleone to Prizzi: It is the day of Joy's audition. She has mobilised the group to leave early and walks briskly. The audition - after some WIFI problems - goes excellently, Joy is being worshipped by Prizzi's villagers. Bibi asks Joy to switch rooms with her, Hannah feels passed over by this but is happy to sleep with Joy instead of Bibi that night.

Day 4 Prizzi (day hike): They do a day's hiking and return to the same location that evening. Hannah falls and the group loses her briefly. Lot goes looking for her and eventually picks Hannah up off the ground. Hannah confides in Lot that she feels somewhat alone within the group, but Lot holds up a mirror to Hannah saying she is very reserved. In the evening, the

atmosphere in the group settles down. At a campfire, Joy asks Bibi to read her tarot cards for the group. When Bibi indulges Lot, her future doesn't look too bright.

Day 5 Prizzi to Casale Margherita: Lot has had a restless night after the tarot session. Joy asks if she can pass Lot's number to the casting agency because Joy's reception is still poor. While walking, they come across a mother dog with her puppy. Bibi sees the burnt fields as a sign for her tumour's radiation. At lunch, they picnic in a deserted village, where Joy makes an anti-Semitic remark. Hannah takes this badly (she is Jewish). Joy gets the brunt of it in the evening when it turns out that Lot has received a phone call saying that Joy didn't get the part.

Day 6 Casale Margherita to Sutera: Hannah talks to Vincenzo about his family, after he shows their picture on his phone. Lot apologises to Hannah on behalf of the group for the anti-Semitic remarks the day before. While walking, they stumble upon a bull on the road. Hannah dares not go any further. Bibi helps Hannah overcome her fear and pet the bull. Vincenzo is absent at dinner and Lot and Joy get into an argument. Joy blurts out in front of the whole group that Jos is gay. Now Lot's secret is on the table (the reader so far only knows that Jos had been cheating). The group turns against Joy and goes after Lot. Joy stays behind, looks for a pub and eventually ends up in bed with Vincenzo (who joined later).

Day 7 Sutera to Racalmuto: All hell breaks loose the next morning when Hannah sees that Joy's bed is empty and finds her in bed with Vincenzo. While walking, Hannah tells Lot that just the day before, Vincenzo maintained that family is 'everything'. Bibi gets a nosebleed. Lot is furious with Joy: why would you destroy a family? Distraught and tired, Lot ends up in the hotel that afternoon, where Bibi advises her to 'get a little closer to herself'. Lot surrenders to a tantra massage from Bibi.

Day 8 Racalmuto to Aragona (train): Vincenzo is waiting for Joy at her hotel room door the next morning. He tells her that the family he talked to Hannah about is his sister's family. His brother-in-law was killed by the mafia, and he is like a father to his nephew and niece. Then Vincenzo declares his love to Joy, but she rejects him. He leaves. After a long wait, the group decides to leave without Vincenzo and just follow the navigation app. Hannah has an open conversation with Bibi and talks about the disciplinary case hanging over her head. Later that afternoon, Hannah gets a call that Linda has dropped the case. Lot talks to Hannah and finds out that she cannot just "fix" this problem with Jos, as she normally does with all the



problems in her life. That she has to turn inside first and find out what she wants from life. Bibi's body gets weaker and weaker, and the navigation drains all the phones' batteries.

Night: It gets dark, and they know they're officially lost. At an abandoned barn, they make a fire where Bibi can rest a bit. The group realises something is up with her. They panic, what if they have to spend the night here? Only Bibi herself is not afraid. When Hannah asks how it is that she is not scared, Bibi says: I'm dying. She tells the group about her brain tumour and then walks out for a while. Hannah goes after her. Lot and Joy stay behind and talk about their friendship, and that they miss each other. Then Bibi and Hannah come back, they have seen lights a little further down, it has to be Aragona's train station. They decide to sleep in the barn, as no trains run at night anyway.

Day 9 Aragona to Agrigento: They wait for the train in Aragona and eat cornetti (croissants). When they arrive in Agrigento, Bibi's father is there waiting for her. They return to the Netherlands because she has decided to get radiotherapy after all. At the hotel, Hannah calls her son Benjamin; the trip has taught her that she needs to think less and feel more. She tells Benjamin that she loves him and wants to visit him in Tel Aviv, to be there for him. Lot has realised that she needs to listen to her voice, not tune into others she needs to fix things for. We see her return to Jos, but whether they continue together remains to be seen. We see Joy three months later. She has continued hiking in Sicily and returned to Prizzi. That's where Vincenzo lives. She looks for him and says she wants to be with him.

## Long outline per character

### **Lot (Roos Schlikker)**

Lot (in her late 40s) works at the crisis centre, has a husband Jos ('big lug'), and two children and lives in Krommenie. In the first scene, her friend Joy is at her house. We read that Joy has found out something about Jos that affects Lot and Jos' relationship. Joy summons Jos to come home. He comes home, but Lot and Big Lug don't appear able to talk to each other.

For a week, they pretend all is well. But when Joy drops by again, Lot says she has to leave. 'I need to walk. Just, take steps, Joy. I'm not making any progress here at home. I don't know what to do.' They decide to sign up for the trip to Sicily.

### Backstory:

Lot is a fixer, even before there is a problem, she has already solved it. 'I stick plasters even before people have fallen or know they might fall at all.' She is the roll up your sleeves and go type. And sings (because: 'they who sing are carefree'). Her ringtone and also life motto is 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life'.

Her fixing nature goes back to her childhood: Lot's mother was emotionally unstable, so Lot always felt she had to make sure things were running smoothly. So it is not surprising she joined the crisis centre: there, 'we wear sturdy shoes, you can't knock us down'. She does have a huge aversion to psychologists, who only talk and analyse; she does get people who are having a hard time back on track.

The friendship with her school friend Joy has never wavered because they have been friends for so long. But the truth is their lives have grown apart.

On Day 1 (Palermo), Lot's putting on her mask. She has left her secret at home and is 'going to have a good time'. 'Come on, Lot. Forget your drama. You wanted to walk. Now you are going to walk. You just go on and then you'll see. Make sure you keep moving. Then everything will be all right. And sing, damn it. She who sings is carefree.'

Setting the mood and having a nice chat goes down well with Lot. Until halfway through Day 2 (Palermo-Corleone) they lose Bibi because she was following her intuition and took a wrong turn. Naked, Bibi lies paddling in the water. Lot stands watching her in fascination. But when a moment later a stray dog comes storming towards the group and Lot manages to pacify it, Bibi is suddenly standing naked very close behind Lot. Lot stiffens. In

the evening, during dinner, Lot says she felt uncomfortable with Bibi coming so close behind her naked.

Day 3 (Corleone-Prizzi) starts early in the morning with Lot apping Jos. He says he loves her, to which she replies: *'All's good here. Don't forget the cat's worming tablets. Greetings, Lot.* Lot then finds a note under the door, an apology from Bibi's *Yoni*, a conciliatory attempt that Lot finds funny.

On Day 4 (Prizzi), we see Lot as a typical caregiver. Hannah falls behind the group and even before the group realises Hannah is no longer behind them, Lot has decided to go look for her. She finds Hannah beside the road; she took a fall and confesses to Lot that she feels lonely. Lot feels it's not all that bad, picks her up, like a pillar of support, and advises her to sing extra loudly. Together they sing: Always look on the bright side of life, *tadada*.

Later that night, Bibi does a tarot reading for Lot and draws cards such as 'Death' and 'The hanged muse'. Bad omens. Hannah maintains it's all very unscientific, these tarot cards, but Lot lies awake that night regardless (Day 5 (Prizzi-Casale Margherita). She is so hot that she decides to hang out of the window for a while. But just then Joy enters, thinking Lot is attempting suicide. Almost breaking down before her old friend, Lot feels an emptiness. Their friendship is no longer there. Then Joy asks if she can pass on Lot's number to the casting agency, as she has poor reception.

Later that day, Lot tries to pacify the anti-Semitic discussion and stands up for Hannah. Later that night, she gets a call from the casting agency that Joy did not get the role and she blurts this news out boorishly and in front of the whole group.

On Day 6 (Casale Margherita-Sutera), Lot apologises for the escalation to Hannah on behalf of the group. The tension between Lot and Joy remains. While walking, Lot tries to set the mood again. She talks to Hannah about family and how wonderful her husband Jos is to the family. At the hotel, Lot is annoyed with Joy, who tries to arrange a bigger room for her and Hannah and she's loud during dinner. She tries to shut up her friend a little, but then Joy storms out. 'Right, that's what you prefer, isn't it? For me to shut up. So you can go on with your chit-chat.' Joy tells the group that Jos is gay.

On Day 7 (Sutera-Racalmuto), Hannah has discovered that Joy has been sleeping with Vincenzo and Lot cannot get over the fact that Joy is 'wilfully breaking up a marriage'. Lot is on a collision course, telling Joy that her career has been over for a long time. Lot drags herself through the walking day and once at the hotel, she is exhausted. In a flashback, we read that Lot once caught Jos kissing a boy as an adolescent. But Lot had 'fixed' this: 'We

buried the past and never talked about it again.' Bibi catches Lot off guard and suggests giving her a tantra massage.

On Day 8 (Racalmuto-Aragona), Lot kind of shuns Bibi. She walks up with Hannah, who asks what Lot is going to do with Jos when she gets home. Lot thinks about this, perhaps she has 'pressed Jos into a mould too much' and he has found the courage to break out of it. She respects him, that he is now 'who he wants to be'.

On the night of Day 8/9 (Mountain near Aragona), Joy hits the roof and wants to end her friendship with Lot, she pushes Lot away so as not to dwell on the fact that her life is empty, and her career is over. Lot comforts her. She acknowledges that their friendship has changed, but says it's still very important to her. 'You woke me up to something I didn't want to see. Please let me do the same with you.' They connect again.

In the last chapter, Lot realises she has to learn to choose for herself. 'I may leave. But I may also stay. This is my picaresque novel. This is my story.' She tells Jos upon returning home that they need to talk.

### **Joy (Elle van Rijn)**

Joy (47) is an actress. She is single and Lot is her childhood friend from Krommenie. She lives in a rented flat in North Amsterdam and is strapped for cash at the moment. In the first chapter, we read that Joy has a meeting with her agent Robert, which she is very much looking forward to because Joy believes he has a part for her. This conversation turns out differently than she had hoped, Robert wants to end the collaboration, he has not received any offers for her in years ('They say I lack depth for character roles, and I that I'm too old for commercial stuff.').

In the following days, Joy tries to inform all the agencies she is 'available', but she gets no response. The only message she gets is a letter from the Tax Office; it turns out she has a debt. With her life so messed up, she longs for Lot's life: a husband, children, and house in a village – 'a life you don't have to try your best to be somebody', even after discovering Big Lug's secret. Lot, meanwhile, is a wreck and suggests going on holiday. Joy grabs this opportunity with both hands (especially with Lot paying for it) - only she did have something else in mind than a walking holiday.

### **Backstory:**

Joy is an empty shell, absorbing her character's life for every new role. Sometimes she just forgets if she has experienced something herself, or if she has remembers it from a part she

once played. She went to drama school - there she experienced two #MeToo situations with a teacher and a director, but she always brushes that aside. She is boundless when it comes to acting. Everything at the service of acting, her life is acting. After drama school, she got a part in the show *Harten Vier* (Four of Hearts), which brought her great success. Robert, who was her sex partner and rookie agent at the time, also piggybacked on it.

Joy is an opportunist; she lives by tall tales and is also quite self-centred. Her school friend Lot is quite a contrast to Joy, she is tough & strong, civil, takes care of her friend (Joy forgets to take care of herself quite often) and is a good listener.

On Day 1 Palermo, after the tour Joy gets a message from a casting agency, they are casting for the film *Provo* and the director wants Joy to come and audition for the lead. Only there is a problem: the audition is the day after tomorrow. Joy suggests doing the audition via Zoom. She spends the rest of the afternoon practising her lines, with Bibi as her counterpart. Later that evening, they dine at a rooftop bar and Joy indulges in some serious drinking.

The next day, Day 2 (Palermo-Corleone), after lunch Joy walks up with Vincenzo, who is impressed that she is an *attrice*. She studies her lines while walking, but they still don't sink in. She talks some Italian with Vincenzo (she once learnt it for a part that didn't happen - 'the film did, the role didn't') and complains it's a very long walk. She asks Vincenzo if they will be at the hotel in time for her audition tomorrow. He says they should leave early, but that WIFI in Prizzi will be a problem. In the end, he promises to arrange something for her; after all, Prizzi is his hometown and it's not often a world-famous actress visits there.

The next morning, Joy managed to mobilise the group to leave on time. But once they arrive and shower on Day 3 (Corleone-Prizzi), the WIFI turns out not to be working after all. It becomes a race against time, Vincenzo moves heaven and earth, but Joy already sees the role passing her by. The mayor finally interferes and in a parade with all the villagers following them, they walk through the alleys to the church, where there is WIFI. It almost seems to turn into a farce when the parish priest happens to be an alcoholic and has fallen asleep with the doors locked. They decide to do the audition in the church square. Joy is totally absorbed in her role ('something is happening to me: I *am* Irene.') and the audition goes great. When she finishes, all the villagers burst into loud cheers and applause. Even the director says this is Joy's best audition yet. Then the church door opens and the priest stumbles out.

Later that night, Bibi and Joy switch rooms, leaving Joy in Hannah's room. Joy asks Hannah about her work as a psychologist and whether she would like to analyse Joy. Hannah

characterises Joy as boundless, insecure and someone with a bonding problem. Joy interprets her analysis somewhat differently than Hannah does herself. Joy nods in agreement: 'I'm good at something; I have a talent and that is my happiness goldmine. That sometimes you have to make concessions to achieve your goals, that's part of the deal.' She recounts two transgressive incidents with a drama teacher and a director. Hannah is shocked, but Joy dismisses them as moments that made her a better actress.

The next day, Day 4 (Prizzi), Joy is left with a bad taste in her mouth after her conversation with Hannah. She tries to contact her friend Lot but doesn't really encounter a sympathetic ear. When Bibi lays tarot cards later that night, Joy sees in them an omen for getting the part. Joy also asks if she can pass Lot's phone number to the casting agency, in case they call about the part. Her phone still has no reception.

On (walk) Day 5 (Prizzi-Casale Margherita), things escalate between Joy and Hannah during lunch. Joy thinks Hannah is overreacting. The hotel turns out to have a swimming pool and while Joy swims laps, she tries to assess her chances of getting the part. When she joins them at dinner a little later, it turns out that Lot got the call from the casting agency: Joy didn't get the part. The rest of the group was also aware already. Joy runs out and wonders who she is now. 'Years I wasted chasing a dream, the fervent desire to become someone I could be proud of.' Vincenzo comes after her and comforts her. His embrace culminates in an intimate kiss.

The next day, Day 6 (Casale Margherita-Sutera), Joy is still angry with Lot. This anger builds throughout the day and comes out at dinner. Joy is loud and drinks a lot. When Lot says something about it, something in Joy snaps. She tells everyone Lot's husband is gay. The group is shocked and takes care of Lot, who has stormed out of the restaurant. Joy goes looking for a bar in the village. An Italian man says there is no bar and invites her for a drink in his seedy garage. The man is a mirror for Joy: he holds a monologue about his career as an actor. Then she suddenly hears her name being called through the streets. Vincenzo has gone to find her and takes care of her ('You know the mafia is still active here in Sicily, right? You can't trust everyone, Joy. Especially men'). She asks if she can sleep in his room; she doesn't feel like sleeping next to Hannah.

The next morning Day 7 (Sutera-Racalmuto), the group discovers that Joy has been sleeping with Vincenzo. Joy is oblivious: they haven't had sex and she didn't know he had a family (he had previously shown Hannah a picture of his family on his phone). Joy gets wind of this from Lot, who also makes it clear to her that Joy's career really is over now. Later, Joy walks up with Bibi. They talk about the importance of friendship.

After a broken night, Joy starts the morning on Day 8 (Racalmuto-Aragona) with a hearty conversation with Vincenzo. He explains that the family on his phone is his sister's family. Her husband was murdered by the mafia and Vincenzo has been taking care of them in remote Prizzi ever since. He says he is in love with Joy, but Joy rejects him ('I have nothing to offer'). All sad, Vincenzo walks away, leaving the group without a guide.

That entire day, they don't see Vincenzo again. The group decides to follow the navigation app, but soon their phones' batteries run out, and they get lost. Everyone blames Joy; after all, Vincenzo's not being there is her fault. It gets dark and at a dilapidated house, they decide to spend the night. Joy is scared and expresses that to the group. She feels misunderstood, lonely and abandoned by her friend Lot. At Night 8/9 (a mountain near Aragona), Lot and Joy have a good conversation and find each other again.

In the last chapter, we read that Joy has stayed behind in Sicily and walked the route again. She arrives in Prizzi, looking for Vincenzo. He is not there, but she is welcomed with open arms at the local restaurant. Just before she wants to leave, he enters (alerted by the villagers of Joy's presence). She declares her love for him and says she wants to stay with him in Prizzi.

### **Hannah (Femmetje de Wind)**

Hannah (47) is a relationship therapist. Her husband Zac works in finance but has been out of a job for a while. He mostly hangs around the house, reading the newspaper. Hannah is the breadwinner, and this pressure weighs on her. As do the stories of her clients that she has to listen to every time. With one of her clients, Linda, the therapy session went pretty much off the rails. Hannah arrives home overworked, but the housework is also awaiting her. Her husband Zac suggests they need a break; he shows her the advert for a trip to Sicily. They sign up, but shortly before leaving Zac is invited for a job interview that week. Hannah decides to go on her own, resulting in her having to share the room with Bibi.

*Backstory:* Hannah is the control freak prototype, she's hugely cerebral, and everything has to be thought through, considered and have a (scientific) rationale. She is serious and broods a lot. And because she is so cerebral, she always seems somewhat distant to those around her, as if she is not present, not participating. In addition, Hannah is Jewish, with second-generation trauma (hence the entities Bibi sees). Her son Benjamin went to Tel Aviv at 18 to study.

On Day 1 Palermo during the tour of Palermo, Hannah relaxes a little. Getting away was a good plan. They walk through the noisy streets of Palermo, Hannah notices that in one particular neighbourhood the street names are also in Arabic. Turns out this used to be a Jewish neighbourhood. Then her husband Zac calls. She has received a letter from the disciplinary committee; her client Linda has filed a complaint against her. Immediately Hannah is again overcome by anxiety, stress and worry. That night she doesn't sleep a wink and takes an Oxazepam.

The next morning, Day 2 (Palermo-Corleone), Hannah confesses this to Lot, who reacts rather reluctantly. Lot works at the crisis centre ('hands on'), rescuing people from the gutter, people that psychologists like Hannah have not been able to help 'having a few chats'. The walking day starts nicely, although they have to follow their navigation (instead of a guide) until lunch. Some discussion ensues with Bibi, who thinks she knows the route intuitively when Hannah notices on her app they should be heading in a different direction.

Tensions soon rise between Bibi and Hannah. In Corleone, Bibi explains there are quite a few 'dead people in Hannah's energy field'. On Day 3 (Corleone-Prizzi), Bibi went behind Hannah's back for Joy to move into Hannah's room. Joy is euphoric after her audition, Hannah plunges right back into her psychologist role as she talks to Joy. Joy tells Hannah



about two situations involving transgressional behaviour by directors. This infuriates Hannah: why were they never convicted and why am I now on trial before the disciplinary committee because of a manipulative client?

On Day 4 (Prizzi), Hannah gets a call from Zac, his job interview is today, and he needs her encouragement. As she stows her phone in her backpack, she stumbles with the rest of the group already ahead. She wallows in self-pity, staying on the ground and feeling lonely. 'Just now I felt strength, just now I talked Zac out of his misery and experienced that wonderful feeling of calm, the calmness of the counsellor. Now I lie here in pain on the dusty Sicilian earth. The difference between happiness, between strength and vulnerability, was only a matter of a few seconds.'

Lot eventually returns to fetch her, and Hannah confesses she cannot connect with the group at all. Lot makes it clear to Hannah that she somewhat distances herself from the group, not participating. 'You feel lonely, but you also place yourself outside the group. You don't participate, and as I just said, you are somewhat aloof. [...] I think you should turn from being a spectator to being a participant.'

Through trial and error, Hannah takes Lot's advice to heart, and she does her best, even though Bibi introduces tarot cards, which, of course, have absolutely no scientific basis according to Hannah.

Then on Day 5 (Prizzi-Casale Margherita), they arrive for lunch at an abandoned village, which Vincenzo tells them was built during the Fascist era. Joy comments it's a nice place to invest in and - naive as she is - remarks that Jews are good real estate investors. Bibi concurs with her, which adds fuel to the fire. Hannah is caught off guard, says it is an anti-Semitic prejudice ('by characterising us as a people with distinct qualities or character traits, you make us vulnerable') and calls Joy a racist. Vincenzo and Lot try to appease the situation.

The next morning over breakfast, on Day 6 (Casale Margherita-Sutera), Hannah talks to Vincenzo about family. She has seen a picture of a woman and children on his screen, and she talks about her son Benjamin, who has been in Tel Aviv for a few months. Before they go for a walk, Lot thinks they should apologise to Hannah on behalf of the group for the day before. It is the extra push for Hannah to show her feelings, and to be less distant. Because - she analyses - by not showing her feelings, she cannot connect with the group. 'This is why I just don't manage to connect. I find it terrifying to show my feelings and therefore garner little sympathy, even though I very much need it.'

On Day 7 (Sutera-Racalmuto), Hannah wakes up after a restless night and notices Joy is not in her bed. She discovers that Joy has been sleeping with Vincenzo (even though he told her only yesterday that his family means everything to him...).

On Day 8 (Racalmuto-Aragona), Hannah gets a call from Zac - he didn't get the job. Bibi overhears the conversation and explains to Hannah that she tries too hard for others, just to be perfect. Hannah talks about her disciplinary case, Bibi says Hannah should just see it as an opportunity ('If you haven't done anything wrong, then you will win the disciplinary case. But then again you will have experienced something new.'). Not much later, Hannah hears her client Linda has dropped the disciplinary case, she's beaming again, takes the initiative again and stands firm during the night they get lost at an abandoned farmhouse.

End of Hannah Day 9 (Aragona-Agrigento): She calls her son to tell him she misses him and loves him. And she decides to travel to Tel Aviv with her husband Zac to look up Benjamin.

### **Bibi (Marion Pauw)**

Bibi (33) signed up the night before the trip begins. She flies in from Ibiza, where she lives with her father. She comes to Sicily unprepared: she has only a small, crocheted bag with her, and she buys her hiking gear on the first day in Palermo.

*Backstory:* (chapters on day 1 and day 3)

Bibi used to work at a law firm in the Zuidas business district, about 60 hours a week. Increasingly, she began to suffer from headaches and stabbing pangs in her head. She initially attributes it to her work, until she suffers a seizure during a night out. At the hospital, they tell her she has a brain tumour, which is operable.

Her father takes care of his only daughter and after the operations, Bibi decides to come live with him at his home in Ibiza. There she changes her entire lifestyle: she used to live mostly in her head but has decided to surrender to the (higher) world of yoga and reiki. Every six months, she returns to the Netherlands for check-ups.

At her last check-up, the tumour turns out to have grown. Bibi despairs: she is living so healthily, isn't she? The only option appears to be irradiation. In the two weeks between the results and the start of radiotherapy, Bibi goes back to Ibiza. Two days before she needs to go back for radiotherapy, a neighbour drops by. She tells her that she walked to Santiago de Compostela, and that walking was a purifying experience. Bibi is impressed: on a whim, she signs up for the hiking tour in Sicily. She believes that walking can help ground her and will have a purifying effect on her (tumour) as well.

The first hiking day (Day 2 Corleone) goes well for Bibi: she follows her intuition and ends up at the spring where they have arranged to meet Vincenzo for lunch. There, she decides to go for a nice nude swim. Although she loves it, her nudity is not much appreciated by the group; she is somewhat ignored for the rest of the day. While walking, Bibi has a hard time, the other women are fitter than she is, and she gets these stabbing headaches again. She initially shares the room with Hannah but suffers at night from entities, and ghosts that haunt the room. Moreover, Hannah and Bibi are like water and fire: Bibi feels Hannah lives in her head far too much, and Hannah thinks Bibi is far too woolly.

On day 3 (Prizzi), Bibi and Joy swap rooms with Bibi moving into Lot's room. The group slowly forms.

Day 4 (Prizzi), is a cosy one and Bibi takes her tarot cards to the campfire. Bibi draws positive cards for Joy (who reads omens into this that she will get the part), but the cards predict bad luck for Lot. This, of course, prompts Hannah to further emphasise that those tarot

cards are highly unscientific. Bibi feels bad about imposing her world on the others, that she is that 'weirdo' again.

Day 5 (Casale Margherita) is all about hiking: Bibi has blisters and Vincenzo explains why Sicilians burn the fields (for fertile soil). 'Burning is best', he says. Bibi wonders if he is referring to her tumour.

On day 6 (Sutera), Bibi's father calls again, she does answer now and he tries to persuade her to come to the radiotherapy session. Angry, Bibi hangs up. Then Hannah and Bibi find each other again: Hannah is afraid of a bull standing in the middle of the road and Bibi lets her experience that there is nothing to be afraid of. 'So you have found that this cow is okay. Why not trust what you have observed instead of letting an idea in your head drive you crazy?'

Bibi is also a pillar of support for Lot. On day 6, Lot's secret was revealed to the group by Joy at dinner. On day 7 (Racalmuto), Bibi catches Lot off guard: she helps her with a tantra massage to get a little closer to herself. 'Would you like me to help you get a little closer to yourself? To be able to feel yourself, to be in your body?' Bibi lets Lot experience her physicality.

On day 8 (Aragona) we approach a climax. The group gets lost after Joy argues with their guide Vincenzo and the latter just runs off. It gets dark and Bibi suffers increasingly frequent flashes of light. Panic in the group: what if we have to spend the night out here in the open, at an abandoned farmhouse and without food? Bibi looks calm, so calm that Hannah asks if she is not scared. Bibi reveals her secret to the group: I'm going to die.

End Bibi: On day 9 they arrive in Agrigento. There, Bibi's father is waiting for her. She has decided to go for radiotherapy.

## **Four Hikers and a Sicilian**

Sample Translation (p. 1-35)

## Lot

They say that human beings have two motivators: love and fear. Of course, I would have very bravely exclaimed that it is love - just love that motivates who I am and what I do. But when Joy stumbled in a fortnight ago and I saw her mouth moving, I felt a spasm in my crotch. Joy never dropped by on an ordinary Tuesday afternoon. In the evening, she would sometimes ring our doorbell. When a lover had run away, or when she couldn't concentrate on her lines, or when she thought she should have played some part instead of 'that hysterical witch with the scary nose'. But Joy preferred to avoid the banality of my family life that developed at the beginning of every evening - children to sports, shopping, putting together a wok dish. Still, she stood there, and as her mouth moved everything below my womb contracted. It is a misunderstanding to think scaredness lives in your chest. Anyone who has ever had to brake for a wild animal nocturnally crossing the road and looking at you red-eyed through the windscreen knows that deep, intense fear has no place above your diaphragm. Fear settles in the lower parts. Since that afternoon, it has been nagging in my body. Joy's lips formed letters that melted into words. Words I didn't quite understand at first. Words that after a while became images. Images that I forged in my head and can't get rid of.

While she was talking, I stared at those lips, a hint of pearl in her gloss. Only when they stopped moving briefly did I realise I had a question to answer. 'Have you really never known anything?' she asked again, this time more forcefully. Have I really never known anything? What nonsense to think that after fourteen years of marriage you know every daily move the other one makes. Because what is knowing? A strange thought that suddenly pops into your head. *He wouldn't...?* A skittish look. *What a funny look.* A jovial shoulder tap. *Ouch.* Too rough. Like you're his mate. Are you sheepish if you have no idea what you should conclude from this? Or do you just dare to trust? And are you guided by love instead of fear?

Maybe it was out of love that I kept silent for so long. I'm good at that: shutting up. Or simply babbling on without really saying anything, which is basically the same thing. Just being firm, back straight, you know. But Joy had called him while sitting next to me and said that he needed to come home now. That it was important. Joy likes to talk in capital letters. She is a walking exclamation mark. Her loud voice, her exuberant way of dressing, her smile that resonates like scaffolding being assembled by construction workers on a pavement. There is no way to get around Joy. Let alone Jos.

'Big Lug, you report to Lot in fifteen minutes and then you two will have a very, very good talk!'

It was Joy who had started calling Jos Big Lug. Lot and Big Lug, she found that funny. Big Lug himself she found a little less funny. Well, she didn't think anything of him. Comparable to the colour beige.

'Big Lug is just there,' she would say. When we still went out together, she made loud jokes because I had already settled down. 'You're a bourgeois bitch,' she sneered. She didn't mean any harm, the contrast between me and her was just extremely large. Joy with her low-cut jumpers ('as a woman, it's okay to show a bit of cleavage'), her tale tales, her funny imitations of famous actors ('I can do a fan-tas-tic Meryl Streep '). We didn't compete, ever. She would take the limelight and I would happily watch her, have another beer and at night curl up against Big Lug's sturdy buttocks.

Ten minutes after Joy had summoned him home, Jos put the key in the lock.

His gaze, which he immediately directed towards the tips of his shoes as he entered the room, betrayed him. Shame always makes you look down. And I, I looked at him. And suddenly saw a smudge of grey in his hair that I hadn't noticed before.

'Shall we have some wine?' he murmured.

No one answered.

'Big Lug. Lot. TALK.' When Joy speaks not only in capital letters but also in measured syllables, you know it's for real.

So there we were. Lot and Big Lug. The exclamation mark had left the house with much ado. Our house. Which it still was. But I now had a man opposite me I didn't seem to know, at a table that was suddenly foreign to me. Our mouths moved. He reached out his hand to me. My arms hang limply along my body. Suddenly he muttered: 'Busy day? Lots of looneys?'

I shrugged. 'Jos, I... Do you have something to tell me? '

And then he nodded. After which our mouths remained still. Valves of an inflatable bed. All the air had escaped us.

'I could eat a mammoth.' Thank God Noelle came rushing in. 'My bio test went really bad. Oh and mum, my sports bag smells really weird. Like it contains an animal that disintegrated three weeks ago. Can you take care of that?'

Relieved, I jumped up. Stay of execution. My execution. Or Jos'. Or ours. 'Just sit down you,' I said, starting to pry open Noelle's football boots and unbuckling the shin guards

that had nestled in her adolescent flesh. The smell of sweat wafted around us, even stronger than the odour of a dead polecat coming off her gear. I had no idea whether the smell came from her or me.

Jos was still sitting at the table, unmoving, like an ornament. A Chinese vase among the old newspapers and booklets belonging to the homework help. A vase that was already broken, but you wouldn't notice until you lifted it and fell apart in your hands.

In the days that followed, it seemed as if Joy had never swung by that Tuesday afternoon. I walked Kees the Bouvier every morning. *Keep going*. I helped Jani with prime numbers for maths. *Keep going*. I cheered when Noelle stopped a penalty. She was a giant in her goal. You can't knock her down either. *Keep going*.

Jos and I joked at the table, watched a series on the sofa, and asked how work was going. But politeness had crept into us that felt strange. No one could see our sudden loneliness in that crowded house of ours. There was a silence beneath the everyday noise. A sound that was no longer reassuringly normal. A sound that no longer sounded like home.

They say people have only two motivators: love and fear. But what if you have become afraid of the love that is no longer there?

A week later. The kitchen table that had long since lost its Chinese vase - it was watching Formula 1 in the pub - was occupied by Joy. She grabbed my hand and was ready to open the conversation. But I just kept blabbing. I asked about her work, a valid reason for a Chekhovian monologue. 'And how is your agent? Anything nice lined up for you? He must have,' I rattled. You must be the biggest name in his stable. A showpiece. Right? Come on, tell me, I want to hear everything.'

For a moment, a proud light flickered in Joy's eyes. She went on about her manager, rejections, the younger generation, and sex scenes. I half listened. Yet there was something in her words that tantalised me. Because there was a snort. Coming from me. 'Lot! Are you crying? Honey, you never cry!'

Joy opened her arms and pressed me against her bosom. Defenceless. Passively. A straitjacket of flesh, that's what she was. And though I wanted to resist, my body slowly went limp. I leaned against her soft breasts, took a deep breath and suddenly heard myself say: 'Joy, I have to get out of here for a while.'

Joy looked at me and started grinning. 'Great idea! How about a week of sunshine? I'm so pale.'



'Walk!' My bass voice bumped against the kitchen walls. 'I need to walk.'

'Sorry?' asked Joy, not used to her stories being interrupted. 'I need to walk. Just, literally take steps, Joy. I'm not getting ahead here. I don't know what to do. Clamped down, that's me. And you did that.'

Joy's eyebrows shot up. 'Well, Jos did that. I'm just a good friend.'

She was right, of course. But without Joy, everything would still have been ordinary. An ordinary safe life. A pleasant nesting in the dimple under his collarbone. 'Had a nice day?' 'Mmm.' An answer I swallowed for so long without any distrust.

Yet my voice softened as I continued talking. 'Sorry. Of course. This is not your fault. You are my best friend. And that's why...well. I've always wanted to walk the Pieterpad. I was going to do something similar with Jos next summer, but...'

I struggled to suck in air. Finally, I said it again, by now wheezing profusely. 'Joy, I need to walk.'

It is now four days later. Surprisingly quickly, Joy recovered after the initial shock ('Walking?!'); the tickets were bought before I knew it. I take a final wipe across the table when the doorbell rings. I grab my rucksack I have trekked with so often through the mountains with Big Lug. He hands me a banana for my trip to the airport.

'Will you be careful?' he asks. I nod and reply, 'Will you be careful?' I hear the weight of my words. Careful of what? The thing I was not supposed to know?

He walks towards me. His belly bulges over his waistband. His arms spread wide.

'Come here for a second.'

Just as he's about to hug me, I duck. I don't even do it on purpose, but my lace is loose. The lace of my sturdy walking boots. When I get up, he stands helplessly beside me.

'Well, hang in there!' I say cheerfully. And I pat him on the shoulder. Too hard.

'Bye Big Lug.'

'Bye Lot.'

## Joy

Sometimes you just wish you had remained ignorant. In my case: that I hadn't cycled through the Vondelpark and seen Big Lug jogging there unexpectedly in a hip tracksuit. At first, I burst out laughing. 'What are you doing running around here, Big Lug ?' I wanted to shout. But I saw that he was running towards someone who was apparently waiting for him. I followed the couple until I had watched long enough to be certain my eyes were not lying. Without notice, I had gone back to my home village. Krommenie is a place where everything has remained the same since I left it behind twenty-five years ago. Something as oppressive as it is liberating.

Lot had been pleasantly surprised. 'Joy, how nice!' she had exclaimed. Her broad Lot-smile, however, had quickly vanished from her face when I told her why I had come over so spontaneously. I asked if she had never suspected anything. She couldn't provide an answer to my question. 'Well not me, anyway,' I had blurted out. Lot thinks I find Big Lug boring – which ultimately, he is - but I thought he was perfect for her. PERFECT! So I told them to talk because communication is the only way to overcome this. Her arms, which I really only know in full swing, hung limply along her body.

Fifteen minutes later, they were sat together opposite me, like two convicts on the dock. My eyes shot from him to her and back again, like a director carefully editing his close-ups so as not to miss any of the drama. Big Lug with his square head, brown spiky hair, two eyes more apart than average, and his heart in the right place, so to speak. Lot is his female counterpart, with her white-blond hair as bushy as Big Lug's and bright blue eyes that you can't, ever, avoid because they are always sparkling with energy. Except now.

After a hesitant start from Big Lug, I urged Lot to say how she felt. But the conversation fizzled out like beer in a greasy glass. Call it professional deformation, but as an actress, I unerringly know when words come from the heart or are empty. When it's the feeling speaking or the reason.

I stood up. 'Apparently, it doesn't work as long as I'm here, but please talk to each other!' I didn't mention that I had to leave because I had an appointment with my agent. I gave Lot a firm hug to show her that I was there for her and that it would work out one way or the other, but I didn't get any Lot-strength back. The look she threw me before I left, wearing my sponsored trench coat, gave me a stomach ache. My friend who had always kept me safe was now in danger of losing her safety.

I had no idea that the real misfortune was yet to come. Unsuspecting, I took the bus from Krommenie back to Amsterdam, to walk into my agent's regular eatery with my head held high. I had been looking forward to dinner with Robert; he would definitely have a part for me. His enthusiasm on the phone was too obvious. An offer for a film or play would not only boost my ego, but also my empty bank account. Fame itself doesn't put any bread on the table. Just last week, my debit card was rejected, and the cashier made me put back all the groceries. I was lucky the manager did recognise me, otherwise, it would have become much more embarrassing. Now that Robert had invited me, I trusted to be back at work soon, but the conversation took a completely different turn. I lacked depth for character roles and was considered too old for more commercial parts. Robert had chosen his words more subtly, and it had taken a while for their meaning to sink in. Did he really announce an end to our collaboration? Because I was out of date, passé?

For the second time that day, I stormed out of the door. What was he thinking? I was the one who had given his agency a name at a time when nobody had heard of Robert Talent Agency. My success in the *Four of Hearts* hit series had not only made him money but also enabled him to make a name for himself as an agent. And just because things had been a bit quiet in recent years as far as bookings were concerned, he had taken it into his coked-up head to cast me aside!

Fuelled by pure adrenaline, I rushed to North Amsterdam on my bike. Before I reached my little flat, I had already devised a plan to take revenge. I was going to teach Robert who was more powerful. Within an hour, I emailed all the agencies that I had become 'available' and was open to an interview. Then, I opened a bottle of wine and immediately nestled on the sofa with a blanket. Satisfied, I started thinking that this experience would fit nicely into my Stanislavski toolbox of emotional memories. I had really felt the experience of what it is like to be fired.

But now, a week later, apart from some thank yous to my e-mail, I haven't received any serious response. My phone is so quiet I'd like to throw it out of my window six flights down. The only message I get is from my actors' club, asking me if I fancy having a bite to eat with them. They haven't seen me for such a long time. I say I'd love to, but unfortunately, I'm too busy. Too busy? The truth is that I just don't have the money to dine in such a chic place. I'm so desperate that I start fantasising about a scandal or an accident - shopping naked in De Bijenkorf or running under a tram - to launch me back into the spotlight. Getting myself kidnapped? There must be a better plan. I know an actress who became a cabaret performer

later in life, and another is now a successful writer. I am startled out of my thoughts when the bell rings. In my onesie, which I haven't taken off for three days and nights, I walk to the front door. It's my Senegalese neighbour with an envelope that had ended up in his letterbox by mistake. A blue envelope.

My tax debt doesn't appear to be high - I haven't earned much over the past year - but with an empty account, you're still facing a problem. What the fuck! What the fuck! Involuntarily, I think of Lot. For the first time in my life, I would like to fill her shoes. I want to be that family, with children you can call your own blood, food that is invariably on the table at six o'clock, a dog that smells like a dog. In a village where they call you by your name at the bakery and the butcher's, just because you go there often, not because they know you from the telly. A life where you don't have to try to be someone. Yes, I would like to be Lot, even with the prospect that Big Lug ...

I need to go back to her anyhow and to our decades-old friendship. Back to where it once began.

When I enter Lot's house, Kees immediately jumps up against me and starts riding my leg.

'Off, Kees, off!' Lot says fiercely.

'I thought Kees was a girl,' I say in surprise.

'She is,' says Lot. 'Tea?'

Nothing seems to have changed from a week ago. The shoes were still scattered across the floor, the dishes were still on the sink, and the picture of a happily smiling family still hanging on the wall.

'So, what's happening?' I ask Lot. Her eyes turn as pale blue as ever, but her expression is dull.

'You know.' The thermos she pours my tea from hisses.

'Have you spoken to each other?'

'Oh sure,' she says with raised eyebrows to come across convincingly. 'Not everything yet, of course, but we'll get there. 'Nice blouse, is it new?'

I look at what I'm wearing. 'No. Old. Has Big Lug explained to you exactly what the deal is? How long he's been walking around with this, whether it's an infatuation or...'

Her hand suddenly shoots out to the oatcakes on the table. 'Take as many as you like,' she says, while some crumbs are flying around. Even before she has emptied her mouth, she takes a big sip of tea. 'These are so addictive. I discovered them at the back of the cupboard,

leftovers from that Christmas box...' She doesn't finish her sentence. 'How's your work? Any new parts?'

'It's true what they say,' I start. 'Misfortune never comes alone. Robert wants to let me go.'

'Oh, and that's bad news?'

'Robert! You know, my agent, the one who gets me my parts?'

'Ow, that sucks. You were his showpiece, right?' She pours herself another cup, with the tea splashing out of the pot like a waterfall and flooding everything. Routinely, she grabs the kitchen roll and wipes the table dry, as if this happens more often. 'Can't you move to another agent?'

'A relationship with your agency is like family, you don't just get rid of them.'

'Sure, but if there are no more parts.' She shrugs, then grabs another biscuit.

'Yeah, but whose fault is that? Not mine.' I feel exasperated by her lack of empathy. 'And of course, I can go to another agent – they're lining up for me - but that is not the point! The point is that when I got out of drama school, Robert begged me to join his little agency.'

'Oh right, and you had a thing with him.' Lot's face suddenly turns tragic.

'Just sex, nothing more. Anyway, it was my starring role in that TV show that made his business grow. My popularity made others join and made him big. And now he casts me aside!'

I wait for her response. But instead of giving me support, she suddenly starts crying.

'Lotje, dear. Just let it all out. It's okay.' I rise to hold her. Her body shakes in my arms. 'I'm here, Lot, just let yourself fall.'

Suddenly she looks at me with a puzzled expression. 'What do you mean?'

'You don't always have to be strong. Neither am I.'

She has pulled a sheet off the kitchen roll and is blowing her nose loudly. 'I need to leave, Joy!' she says.

I have to switch briefly, but then I think to myself: sure, why not? Maybe it would be good for me to get out too. 'I could do with some sunshine. Recharge my battery, get some Vitamin D, and take a dip. Think about my future... Trip to the Caribbean?' I grab my cup and lean against the kitchen counter.

'Sorry Joy, but I really don't feel like knocking back five mojitos a day at an all-inclusive resort on a white beach in Curaçao,' she responds.

I almost choke on my green tea. Because that was exactly what I had in mind. 'No, no, you really don't have to... So, what do you feel like? A city trip, or something sporty?'

She shrugs her shoulders and lowers them again so hard it makes her breasts perk up. 'Jos goes cycling once a year in France with his circle of friends.' She emphasizes the word 'friends'.

'I'm really not too keen on a bicycle saddle.'

She thinks for a long time. 'No city trip for me either, I would only see crises.'

'Got it. Something with animals?' I suggest.

'Animals? What do you mean? A donkey or a camel ride?' Her facial expression suddenly turns aggressive, as if I personally want to do something to those animals by loading them with our weight.

'I mean a safari or something?'

'Surely that's not our thing, now is it, Joy?' For a moment she seems to feel sorry for me. 'Who's going to pay for that?'

'Check.' I can't pay for it anyway. My unemployment benefit has merged into welfare, quite embarrassing for a well-known actress. 'But then what?'

'I need to walk,' she says decidedly.

From the air, I can already see the island in the distance. No idea what to expect from this walking trip. Well, we'll probably walk a lot - something I am not necessarily a fan of. 'When you walk, thinking gets easier,' had been Lot's simple explanation. She had suggested the Pieterpad. 'No way, girlfriend,' I had sputtered. 'If we're going to walk, we'll do it right. And so it became Sicily, an eight-day group trip with a guide. It was cheaper than on your own, and the chances of being kidnapped by the mafia were also considerably smaller in a group with an Italian guide. Also, I am a public figure, and worth quite a ransom.'

I briefly look sideways at Lot, who is snoring softly with her head bent. Lot has advanced me the trip. I haven't told her yet that I may never be able to repay her. I feel like taking her hand and putting my head on her shoulder. The first time I saw her, we were in kindergarten. A boy had pushed me off the tricycle I was carefully riding laps on. Lot had run up to that boy racing away and pulled him off the bike. With the bike above her head - as if it weighed nothing - she had walked towards me: 'Here!' We have been inseparable ever since.

Suddenly Lot opens her eyes as if she feels I'm looking at her. 'Are we there yet?'

'Almost, just have a look.' I point to the Sicilian coastline, with the yellow-brown hills behind it.

'We're about to land, please put your seats upright?' the stewardess asks. Lot and I nod. 'Ah, now I see, Joy de Groot!' The stewardess looks at me with admiration. 'Welcome on board.'

I put on my professional face. 'Thank you, but please keep it to yourself.'

'No, sure. I understand.' She bends over Lot to me. 'Are you going to Italy for work?'

'No, we're going hik...'

I nudge Lot. 'Preparing for a role yes, research.'

'Would be nice to see you on the telly again. I used to watch *Four of Hearts* all the time as an adolescent. Well, I'd better get on.' Then she walks away in her blue suit that fits snugly around her young body.

'You are now officially recognised abroad,' says Lot mockingly. 'You've got that one in your pocket.'

I look into her smiling face, and for a moment everything hurts a tiny bit less.

## **Hannah**

As a psychologist, you are a midwife. Ready to help, but never to take over. My tool is asking the right questions. I watch, I encourage. I only intervene when it threatens to go wrong and only as sparingly as possible. Of course, 'really wrong' is a relative term. What feels like a failure to one can feel like a victory to another. As a psychologist, you offer the other person a safe space to come to an understanding.

But lately, I have been a bit tired. All those people hobbling in and out of my consulting room: I can't bring myself to let them go on anymore. Most of the time I can see what is happening and what is threatening to go wrong from miles away. It's like helping a child do simple arithmetic: it's so tempting to prompt the right answer.

There's Linda, right on time. She walks into the room without a hello and sits on the beige armchair as if it were hers. She takes a tube of lip gloss from her bag and starts smearing pink on her lips. Patiently, I wait. No matter how uncomfortable. That discomfort is greater for the patient than for me.

'Alright then,' says Linda. Her voice is husky. 'I'll just get straight at the point.

'To the point', I hear myself say inside.

'I want to quit therapy.'

The blood draws from my face, my palms become clammy. Mild panic, coupled with the fear of loss. I recognise my trauma, yet it always overwhelms me, as if it were something new. Rejection. Not belonging.

'It has nothing to do with you,' Linda says in an almost soothing tone as if she can read my confusion. She applies another layer of lip gloss.

'Pray tell,' I say calmly. After all, I am trained to hold myself up.

Linda searches for words, but I already know what she is going to say. That she thinks she can manage on her own again. That she wants to thank me for everything I have taught her in that short period. These are things people say, to be rid of them. To continue pretending. To avoid saying it's too confrontational. Too painful to turn inward.

I recognise them, the people who drop out. It's not the first time someone has decided to quit therapy. But this time it feels different. The feeling creeps up on me that maybe this is my fault. An unpleasant feeling. Having a click is not something you can force, but we had that click and then something went wrong.

Linda is silent.

'I'm afraid you're making the wrong choice,' I finally break the silence.



She looks at me in dismay. As if she can't believe I'm still not - or again not - taking 'her side'. Her gaze wanders to her designer bag as if it understands her better than I do.

I look at my notepad and write down: *When Linda feels intimacy, she turns away. Wants to stop therapy after four sessions.* I scribble on some more because I want to avoid her gaze. An accusing look, saying I have failed. Oh, come on Hannah, I tell myself, you're not letting such a young woman upset you, now, will you? Just tell her it's okay to clash with your therapist, that that's what therapy basically is all about. Everything that happens in this treatment room also happens in real life. The only difference is that here we are safe. Here we can analyse what is going on, what is really going on behind the masks, beneath the platitudes and retreating or attacking movements people make in the outside world. But no words are coming out of my mouth. Linda has hit me where it hurts, my integrity and my professionalism are at stake.

I sigh softly. I am tired I am exhausted. For almost twenty years I have been sitting between these four walls working my ass off to bring couples closer together, and put people back on track; but how many people did I really help in those two decades? I should have become a psychiatrist, then I could have sent them home with a pill and maybe some of my therapeutic guidance would have worked. Now it seems as if my advice keeps bouncing off a wall full of rejection and coping.

'We're going to end the conversation,' I say more brusquely than I want to. 'I'll close your file with the insurer. You can go.'

On my ride home, I plough through the heavy evening air. The warmth of the day still lingers in the park as if, like the visitors, it doesn't want to go home. Long-haired men and girls wearing wide shirts sit on picnic blankets and drink beer from trendy bottles. Young people in the prime of their lives, just like Benjamin. I pedal even harder. Surely Amsterdam is a great city to study. Why did he need to leave so badly? Shit, I promised I would call him this afternoon. As soon as I get home, I will. Linda had hijacked all my energy and attention. I had let her hijack it. Had I gone too far in our previous conversation? I had shared my own problems at the beginning of my marriage to Zac. I don't do that in principle, I never do, but I wanted to convince her that she'd better stay with her husband. I had warned her about the consequences a divorce could have for her children. I had told her not to do it. Or at least, not now: therapy first, then the decision. But maybe she had taken that as meddling.

When I get home, Zac half looks up from the newspaper. 'Hi,' he says.

'Hi,' I say from the corridor. 'How did your interview go?'

'Was cancelled.'

I hang up my coat and walk into the living room. 'Too bad. What are you reading?'

'Oh, hmm,' says Zac.

'What's that: oh, hmm?' My therapist's voice is still on. He doesn't react.

'Why don't you put on your reading glasses when you read the paper? You'll get a headache.'

Zac taps his glasses from his forehead to his nose and continues reading.

'I really had a bad day today,' I continue. Out of the corner of my eye, I see half the countertop full of dirty dishes. I march to the kitchen and inspect the damage. A burnt pan of oatmeal. A couple of plates with lettuce and hummus leftovers. Four used coffee cups. 'You can also drink coffee from the same cup,' I mutter. When I open the dishwasher, I see that it is still full of last night's dishes.

'Geez. You know Zac, I'm kind of done with today!'

'What happened today?' he asks absent-mindedly.

'That conversation with that patient who wants to leave her husband, remember?'

He nods. I walk back to the living room. 'I'm afraid I went off-book. I advised her not to leave her husband. But I'm not supposed to do that, I'm not a coach.'

'What's wrong with being a coach?' Since his dismissal, Zac has been visiting a career coach, a girl in her late twenties who has barely started her own career. She was part of the *golden parachute scheme* that came with his dismissal. Zac is very appreciative of her, although so far, I've detected few results. He suggested the other day that he might want to become a coach himself. I immediately talked him out of that. There are plenty of coaches in this world.

'There's nothing wrong with being a coach,' I say. 'But unlike a coach, I have a professional code. And I'm afraid I've gone over the top.'

'You're so good at self-deprecating yourself,' says Zac amusedly. 'Could it be that this patient of yours is just an unruly, self-righteous bitch?'

'Come on Zac, don't be silly.'

'You can straighten things out with her in a future conversation, can't you?'

'She has decided to quit therapy.' Tears sting behind my eyes. I'm not going to cry over this, am I? We're talking about a patient here, damn it. I grab the dirty coffee cup sitting on the table in front of Zac and take it to the kitchen.

'You shouldn't doubt yourself, Han, you're a good psychologist. The best,' Zac calls after me.

I turn around. 'What exactly do you mean by that? That I shouldn't whine? Goddamn, say what you really think or mean. Say it, don't spare me.'

I say what I really mean, but you never want to accept that people mean what they say.

'Stunned, I look at him. 'What do you mean by that?'

'I think you're tired,' he says and looks at the paper again.' And I don't feel like arguing, so shall we continue this conversation some other time?'

I put the cup next to the other four dirty cups on the countertop and bite my lower lip, so the tears don't continue. I noisily clear out the dishwasher first and then load it again. Zac doesn't budge. Some people call household chores meditative. Some people calm down from smashing crockery.

'Nice, now I've got palpitations,' I say to a plate. 'I have palpitations,' I then say a little louder so it can't escape Zac

'Sorry,' Zac says. 'I'm almost done with this article.'

'Fine, fine,' I say. I'm starting to see stars from pent-up anger. I know I shouldn't take it out on Zac. This is not about him. This is about me.

After making tea for myself, I turn around. 'Zac, do you think I have a heart condition? I really don't feel well...'

Zac is silent.

'Listen, if I'm having a heart attack, do I have to wait for you to finish the paper too?'

He sighs and focuses his gaze. 'What is wrong with you, Han?'

'Yes, that's exactly what I'm asking you, what do you think is wrong with me?'

He shrugs. 'I think you're perfectly healthy. You jogged in the park for an hour this morning.'

'Some people go into cardiac arrest after a round of running, so that doesn't mean anything at all.'

'Do you have any other complaints?'

'I'm just tired, I'm just so tired.' Gloomily, I sit down opposite him at the table, the tea glass clasped between my hands. I want to cry, hard and full-blown, but nothing comes. I have no tears, my mother always said. Hannah has no tears. That was a compliment, by the way, or at least that's how it was phrased. Hannah solves everything with her brain.

Zac looks at me helplessly. He always does that when I feel unhappy. He doesn't have to; he could also just let me be unhappy for a while. But no matter how many times I've told him, it doesn't sink in.

'Maybe you have a bit too much on your plate,' he continues.

'My plate is broken,' I reply.

'Why don't you go and see the doctor tomorrow?'

'He'd rather see the back of me. I know his assistant better than he does.'

'Zac slides the newspaper towards me with a telling look. 'Look at this.'

I push back the paper intruder. 'No honey, I'm not in the mood for a crossword puzzle.'

'I mean this ad, that looks like something for us.' He points to the black-framed square at the bottom of the page.

*Walking holidays in the Italian mountains. SNP is offering relaxing walking holidays for the fall, including a professional guide. Small groups, interesting company or just complete tranquillity. Come and discover Sicily's unknown interior.*

Just by reading the ad, my central nervous system comes to rest. A walking holiday. I wouldn't have thought of it, but it sounds good. No gloomy people around me for a while, but everything light and green, a chirping bird, the September sun on my bare skin, and the crunch of pebbles under the soles of my walking boots. And Zac directing all his attention to me.

'What about my patients?' I ask.

'Surely they can do without you for two weeks?'

Ten days later, it's happening. Dead tired, I wait for my suitcase at the Palermo airport baggage carousel. I was up at four this morning. Zac couldn't come with me at the last minute. He had three job interviews. With one interview you can go: there will be others. But with three interviews, that's almost a guaranteed new job. And so we decided that I would go on my own, a decision I regretted even before I stepped off the plane. To be fair, my decision to go alone was economically motivated. We weren't getting the money back.

'Think of it as a form of therapy,' Zac had said. Then he said something about taking on things you don't dare being the fastest way to grow. He must have got that from his coach.

When I enter the arrival hall through the sliding doors, I see a man holding an SNP sign with HANNA on it. I step towards him. 'Hi, my name is Hannah,' I say. 'With an h.' I turn

my hands into the letter h. He looks at his sign and then wipes away my name with his sleeve in one motion.

*'I'm Vincenzo,'* he says and greets me with a smile. Just as well, because I don't like people hugging or shaking my hand for too long. A large row of slanted forward teeth becomes visible when he smiles.

'And where is your husband?' he asks.

'My husband had a very important congress he needed to attend,' I lie. No one needs to know that my husband sits at home.

A new stream of visitors comes out through the sliding doors. We stand in the way. Vincenzo writes a new name on his sign with graceful letters. Together we wait for Bibi. A young woman approaches us, wearing panther leggings and a tight silk shirt. Her bosom bulges over it like two blooming hydrangeas. She has long wavy brown hair and a row of gleaming orthodontist teeth. I estimate her to be in her early thirties and I wonder why someone like her would join a walking tour. She's more of a Glastonbury type.

'My name is Bibi,' she says to no one in particular. 'Nice to meet you.'

She opens a crocheted rainbow bag and takes out a reusable bottle. Is that all she has with her?

'Nice to meet you,' I say. She nods and gently touches my upper arm by way of greeting me.

'When were you born?' she asks. There is a sigh in her voice, not from fatigue, but a kind of wonderment at the world around her.

Slightly confused by this strange question, I politely reply: '10 November 1975.'

She blinks her eyelids rapidly as if I have confessed something she needs to process.

'Ah... yes. I felt as much. We'll work it out together.' Then she turns to Vincenzo. 'This is the whole group, right? So, let's go?'

The guide nods and together they walk towards the door.

'Hey,' I call out, trotting behind them with my suitcase. 'Why did you want to know my date of birth?'

She looks over her shoulder. 'Oh, I have a negative interaction with Scorpios. When I meet one, I can feel it within seconds. And I try to keep my chakra energy rather clean. Do you understand?'

I want to say something, but I can't think of anything quickly. 'I'm Hannah,' I say instead. 'Hannah with an h. And I'm from Amsterdam. I was supposed to go on this trip with

my husband, but he couldn't make it at the last minute. He has a very important congress...' I rattle. Why am I rattling?

Then she stops and takes me in intently. 'You know Hannah with an h, there are times when silence is a poem. How would you like to learn that poem?'

Stunned, I stare into her russet eyes.

'Let's go, ladies!' encourages Vincenzo. 'The other hikers are already at the hotel. You'll have plenty of time to chat in the taxi.'

## **Bibi**

As we approach the island, I see shadows of mountains. They are higher than I expected. I know nothing about Sicily, except that it is the ball the boot of Italy kicks against. I normally delve more deeply into my travel destinations, but I only booked this trip last night. I chose the first available hiking holiday. I only read the travel information on the plane. I am going to walk the Magna Via Francigena, a thousand-year-old trade route once covered by Norman knights and medieval pilgrims, on their way to Jerusalem.

As soon as I step off the plane in Palermo, the heat hits me in the face. At the same time, it is hazy, with sea fog. On the airstair, I feel myself losing my balance for a moment. I quickly cling to the handrail. People are not made to fly, just look what happens to a water bottle on landing.

On the way to the exit of the small airport, I am overtaken on the left and right. Why all the rush? At the baggage carousel, I see them again. I recognise a carefully dressed old lady who sat in the row in front of me. Two boys who have rolled up their trouser legs and smell of aftershave. They keep their gaze fixed on the baggage carousel gate, possibly thinking this will speed up time. I didn't check in any luggage, simply because I had nothing from the SNP packing list. No mountain boots, no hiking socks, no canteen. I will have to make do with a handbag containing my passport, phone, wallet and a few light items of clothing.

Just before the exit, a man is standing with a sign that says SNP TRAVEL. Next to him is a woman who has already checked her watch three times in the short time I have been approaching them. She could be pretty with her symmetrical face and straight, brown hair, were it not for her prominent frown line and compressed lips.

I introduce myself to the man who turns out to be our guide. Vincenzo is his name. His hands are rough with calluses, and he radiates the pleasant type of energy of someone who is completely grounded, and who knows who he is. The woman with the watch turns out to be named Hannah. And although she is a lot older than me, she reminds me of myself, eight years ago. A woman who has left her body long ago and lives in the attic with her eyes wide open. Maybe I can help her, maybe not. After all, every person has their own process to go through. At most, we offer something and politely say: 'Look, you could also go this way.' But in the end, people only drink when they are thirsty.

At the hotel, an old building in the middle of the city centre, there are two more travel companions: Joy and Lot. They arrived on an earlier flight and have already taken a walk through the city. It feels like a relief that they are there too. Lot strikes me as an approachable, sociable woman who has everyone's best interests at heart. Joy looks vaguely familiar, though I can't really place her. With her around, you will never be bored, that much is clear. In a loud, cheerful voice, she tells me they have already bought sandals for Lot, who apparently had only flip-flops with her.

'A real Italian only wears her flip-flops to the beach and wouldn't think of wearing them in the city,' Joy asserts.

On Lot's feet are now silver sandals with flashy crystals. They seem rather frivolous for someone who comes across as practical as her. But from her facial expression, I cannot tell whether she is happy with them or not.

I look at my own feet. They are dirty and have lots of calluses because I usually walk barefoot. The Birkenstocks I hastily put on this morning are at least two years old.

Joy now looks at my feet too and bursts out laughing: 'But on Ibiza, very different rules apply, apparently.' She has a girlish cackle that is infectious.

'If you want, I have a nail brush with me,' says Lot. 'And a clipper, because if your nails are too long, you can have serious problems walking.'

'Thank you,' I say. 'I'll knock on your door later. '

Meanwhile, Hannah has got her key from the receptionist and it's my turn to check in. 'The other lady already has the key,' says the receptionist after she has looked up my details. She nods at Hannah, who is frantically banging on the lift button.

'What do you mean?'

'You've booked a shared double room.'

'I don't think so,' I say, although I have no idea what I've booked.

'It says here: shared double room.' The receptionist wants to turn the computer screen towards me to prove she's right, but I gesture that's not necessary.

'We also have a shared room,' Joy says.

'But we've been friends for twenty years,' Lot says. 'So that's different.'

'Okay... Can I still book a single room?'

The woman looks at her computer and shakes her head. 'Sorry, we're completely full.'

Hannah has caught the conversation and has now joined us.

'You can't be serious,' she says in such an indignant tone that for a moment I feel slightly insulted. 'We don't even know each other.'



'Well,' says the woman. 'I'm afraid you'll have to take that up with your travel agent.'

Hannah and I look at each other for a moment, the revulsion in her expression is unmistakable. Then she turns her head away as if she can no longer bear my gaze.

Everything has a reason, I tell myself. The Universe is an inexplicable multidimensional puzzle of which you by no means know all the pieces. Surrender and let it happen. Breathe love in. Breathe love out.

'Shall we just go to the room?' I say. Hannah hands me the key. 'You take it. I'm sure something else can be arranged.'

The room turns out to be on the second floor at the front of the building. It is soberly furnished: two beds that can be pushed apart, and there is a strong camphor smell. I move the beds as far apart as possible and lie down on the one by the window. A tiny electric shock hits my head. I suddenly feel very tired and close my eyes. Outside I hear the loud honking of cars and in the room, next door a man is having a heated telephone conversation. Yesterday it all seemed so logical. As if I didn't even have to decide, it felt like the decision had already been made. A *given*. But now I'm having doubts. What am I doing here? And who do I think I can fool? I have to stop thinking because I have enough of a headache without that cackle in my head.

I must have fallen asleep because moments later I am woken up by a fierce knock on the door. When I get up, I lose my balance for a split second. Hannah comes storming into the room with her huge suitcase and backpack.

'Can you believe this?' she asks. 'I'm going to file a complaint because this is outrageous. Show me your booking.'

There is no question mark after the sentence, it sounds more like a command, but still, I pull out my booking. 'Shared double room,' she reads out. 'I suppose it's your fault then.'

'How do you mean?'

'I had booked a double room because my husband was going with me. And so now I have to share it with you because he cancelled at the last minute.'

I follow my breath that goes deep to my belly, re-energising my organs and letting me come home to myself, and I blow out whatever it is that this Hannah releases from me.

'It's just for one night,' I say to calm things down a bit.

'Two nights. Tomorrow, we have a tour of Palermo, and we'll sleep here again.'

Even though I dread sharing the room with this woman, the fact that we have an extra day off comes as a relief. Now I can go into town tomorrow to buy hiking gear.

Hannah throws her suitcase on the other bed and opens it. She puts her neatly ironed and folded clothes in the wardrobe.

'See, I left half for you,' she says emphatically.

'I don't have that much with me,' I say.

She drops her eyes to my bag and says nothing.

I lie back down and close my eyes, chanting a soundless mantra.

*Aum hring namah aum.*

All beings are absolute energy and consciousness. Including me. Also Hannah. Then an app arrives from dad.

*Bibi, where the hell are you? You should have been on the plane by now.*

*Aum hring namah aum*, I say softly to myself again.

Again I fall into a deep sleep. In the middle of the night, I startle awake. There is something, but I can't immediately place what. Then I see a man next to my bed. He is wearing a threadbare jacket and looks at me with hollow eyes. I want to scream, but my throat is closed. Then I realise he is a ghost.

I have been seeing 'dead people' since I was young. I used to think it was quite normal to talk to my dead grandmother and there was always an old man in our house who later turned out not to exist. At least, not in a material form. After I studied law and joined a law firm, I lost contact with my body as well as my 'gift'. I didn't think about it anymore until the gates opened again through yoga, and the ghosts returned too. I have learned to shut myself off from it because it can become quite a hag. Of course, I should have known that in an old building in Palermo there could be quite a few souls lingering around who have not yet managed to cross over into the light.

I would love to switch on the light because ghosts thrive in the dark, but Hannah is asleep. Her breathing is quick and shallow as if she is being chased by a pack of angry dogs, and maybe it is truly happening in her dreams. I wonder if she notices anything about the presence in the room. Someone who is not at home in her body often has all the doors and windows unconsciously open. Then I realise that the entities have nothing to do with the room, but everything with her. This woman has half her family tree hanging around her.

*Aum hring namah aum. Aum hring namah aum.*

I repeat the words in my head until it gets light, the ghost hour is over and Hannah's alarm clock goes off with a hysterical ring.

## Contact Information

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