

## The Near Drowning

One fine summer's morning, my girlfriend Marijke and her mom, living next door, had rang the doorbell and asked my mom if I could go to the "beach" with them. Marijke was two years older than I, and a very pretty, blond and blue-eyed girl. Her father had a nickname for her and called her "Kitty", although I was never allowed to call her by that name. Surely if her mom went too, we would be safe and have a great play-day! "Well, as long as you obey and listen to Marijke's mom, it is fine by me", my mother had said.

The cozy little town of Diemen, only a few minutes walk away, had placed interlocking steel posts in the bend of a canal named the "Keulse Vaart". I suppose this was to protect it from the daily traffic of barges, trawlers and cargo ships that used the canal every day to transport their goods. For backfill the town had used tons of sand and it had created a perfect little "beach". In the summer the water of the "beach" would warm up quickly as it was not connected to the canal and not extremely deep. Needless to say it was not the cleanest water for swimming, but people used it for some fun when it was extremely hot.



This morning it was already quite warm outside and it had the promise of a beautiful, but hot day. Holding hands, we walked through the park and up the stairs to the crosswalk near the bridge (Hartveldse brug) into the town of Diemen. (The bridge that would eventually be entered by the Canadian Army coming into Amsterdam liberating us, with their tanks and jeeps). From a distance, we could already see lots of mothers and children at the beach and we looked for a spot to settle down. Soon Marijke and I were in our bathing suits and playing games. Because she was a few years older, she knew a lot of games and we were having a lot of fun. We looked for different and funny stones to decorate our sand castles, and made doors and a bridge, but I noticed her castle looked much nicer and I tried to copy it to be just as pretty.

Another game was: "Which one of us could turn around ten times, and then walk straight into the water." Being older, Marijke won most of the times. Of course I tried to win too, but I would lose my balance and landed on my bum in the sand, my fat little legs flying about or I fell lopsided into the water. I must try and turn more often I thought; and this time really spinning fast around and around, with a helping hand from Marijke turning me, I walked into the water as straight as I could, according to the game. But then, confused, instead of walking out of the water towards the beach, I went deeper instead and water was coming over my

head. I tried to find my way back out, but I was dizzy now and went deeper and deeper. Looking through the murkiness of the dirty water, I couldn't see and instead went deeper yet. I could faintly see water-plants and fishes that were swimming all around me. I couldn't breathe, I kept swallowing water and it was filling up my lungs. I swallowed and swallowed until finally, and just before losing consciousness, I remember thinking frantically: "Now I will never see my mommy and daddy again." Hysterical now, I wanted to scream, but I couldn't. I could not breathe or utter one word! I am so scared! I can't find my way out of here anymore! Where are my mommy and daddy? Oh, no, I can't breathe, all I do is swallow water and I can't swallow any more ..... I am so scared!!! Someone help me!!!!!!!

Out on the beach, Marijke's mother was talking to another lady and had not noticed what we were doing. After a while, she looked around and not seeing me anywhere, started to search the beach. It was crowded and lots of people and children were on the beach and in the water, and it was difficult to find a little toddler amongst them. She frantically looked around the beach and again in the water; where was Lisa? She called me: "Lisa, Lisa!!!!" Others hearing her call for me joined the search.



They then spotted my big bow on top of my hair, bobbing upon the water, and I was found floating unconscious underneath. Two ladies carried me onto the beach and lying stretched out, I remember how someone was pushing down on my stomach and they finally resuscitated me. A loud cheer went up now: the little girl was breathing again! I remember throwing up lots and lots of water! To see if I was all right, they quickly checked me over and sent me on my way home, along with the shaken-up neighbours. (Funny how no ambulance was involved at that time, I just walked home) Unfortunately I was too little to thank my rescuers and I never did get their names.

I came home and was immediately put to bed, my worried parents popping in and out of the room now and then to see if I was still okay and breathing. It was great to be safe and home in bed, it felt so good. A week went by and I developed a nasty throat infection, most likely from the polluted water. I was in bed most of that time and it took weeks before I was well again.

Learning to swim in the Keulse Vaart with my cousin Harry.



With water all around us throughout Amsterdam as well as all throughout Holland, it became obvious I needed to learn to swim. At first I couldn't even look at a picture of a lake or canal, remembering how I had to swallow the water and couldn't breathe. I just flipped by any pictures that looked deep and scary and still.

Later, when I was about eleven years old, my father took me to the Keulse Vaart to learn to swim. He said if I was scared at all, I should let him know and he would immediately pull me up. He fastened a big rope around my waist, held the long end of the rope firmly in his hand and told me to lower myself into the canal, along the side, where it was the shallowest. I trusted my dad completely and when my feet reached the bottom of the canal I stood up. Mind you, there was no bottom of sand, but anything and everything from mud and broken bottles to items people had discarded. My father was very encouraging and told me to try and float and do the doggy paddle. And, this is how I eventually learned to swim.

Barges, trawlers and cargo ships sail in the canals



A summer later, I had seen my brother Harry who is seven years older than I, swim across the canal (see black/white picture above) to the other side and disappear from view. I wanted to go to him, so I looked to see if there were any boats approaching, and that not being the case, I went for it. I swam across the width of the whole canal all by myself

to the other side. Once there, I noticed a big sand hill where lots of teenagers were gathered. Some were kissing girls and lying down. I saw my brother with girls and he was furious I had swum the canal alone. I still wonder why he was so angry. Was it because of the danger to me, or had his little sister spoilt his secret hide-out with his friends?