

My mother Barbera, Erna Gianotten

(A fragment)

Red roses and love letters

On the day before my mother's cremation, eighteen red roses are delivered. They're the biggest and most beautiful I've ever seen, with stems straight as an arrow and sturdy dark-green leaves. As I'm taking off the cellophane in the kitchen, a razor-sharp thorn pierces my middle finger. A drop of blood falls onto a card tied to the stem with a piece of raffia. There's no address on it, apart from that of an expensive florist. Only two elegant initials: R.W. They mean nothing to me. My mother often received red roses. Never with a card attached, though.

In the kitchen I cut the stems obliquely, one by one, wondering about R.W. as I do so. Who could it be? The sound of hushed voices comes from the hall: footsteps ascend the stairs to her bedroom, where people come and go, mainly elderly women with lined faces. Quite a few of them are unfamiliar to me, I realise rather guiltily.

Did we miss out on so much of each other's lives then, during the last few years?

From the kitchen window I can see the rhododendron bushes with their plump buds. This year too they'll produce their deep-purple blossoms, like late symbols of mourning, but her elegant hands will never again arrange them into ornate bouquets.

In the darkest corner of the garden, among the still bare twigs of the jasmine bush, there's a glimpse of my mother's makeshift oven: here, wrapped in her man's duffel coat, she used to fry pancakes for her grandchildren.

A watery sun breaks through unexpectedly, illuminating the closed sand-pit that hasn't been touched for years. Then suddenly I hear her voice, crystal clear, as if she's standing next to me.

'You don't really think I'm lying upstairs, do you...?' It sounds conspiratorial, as if she's about to confide something for my ears only. 'No, love, don't you worry, I'm having a wonderful time here...'

I repress the urge to run upstairs and look into the gleaming light-brown varnished coffin that stands in the middle of her room like a misplaced stage-prop waiting for the play to start. Instead, I arrange the roses in a vase, realising that the tentacles of my sorrow are gradually beginning to unfurl.

'You'll never die, will you, Mummy?' I'm seven years old and things are already beginning to lose some of their certainty.

'Of course I'll die, everyone does.'

I look up at her. 'But not yet!'

She stoops down and gives me a kiss, light as a butterfly. 'No, not for a long time yet, I've still got all of you to look after, haven't I?'

I'm not reassured. 'Not till you're really old?'

She nods, tucks me in and turns out the light.

In the darkness, eyes tight shut, I try to imagine what that would be like: a dead mother. The thought is too dreadful. Bursting into tears, I wail, until the stairs creak and the door opens a crack. 'What is it, can't you sleep?'

'I don't want you to die. Not even when you're old.'

She strokes my face. 'That's not going to happen for a long time, but when people are old and ill, they don't mind dying, believe me.'

'You mustn't die, ever.'

But now the irrevocable has happened: my mother became old and ill, and in the end she died. Just as she'd foretold.

Only when all the company has gone do I walk up the wide staircase with its banisters down which I've slid so many times, and push open the bedroom door. Next to the big wooden bedstead is the cabinet, its drawers full of pills, letters, children's drawings, sweets, sugar sachets, postage stamps, sticky teaspoons, banknotes, loose change, pencils and a writing pad on which my mother recorded her thoughts, until three weeks before her death. In shaky thin handwriting that dances over the paper like mosquito legs. The bed now looks strangely empty, with its spotless sheets pulled tight and no untidy pile of pillows. From there it's two steps to the coffin with its white satin lining. Her face, with its ochre-coloured skin stretched tautly over the cheekbones, looks like that of a squaw.

I fix my eyes on the dead face. 'Now come to life again,' I say out loud, just like long ago, when she and my little sister and I played at being dead in the big bed. She'd always tease us by lying deathly still for just a little too long.

The pin-board with photos of her eight living and two dead children and my late father no longer hangs above the bed, I notice.

The sepia-tinted enlargement of herself at the age of four is still in place. She's sitting on a rocking horse in a white flounced dress, clasping a doll in her arms. Her half-closed eyes gaze absently into the distance. Unlike the doll, whose beady eyes stare directly into the camera.

I flop down onto the bed. On the bedside cupboard is a bunch of sweet peas. Bought by me on the day that the telephone rang and a voice said: 'She's dead, Eliza. Died in her sleep, just as she'd wanted.' The scent of flowers suddenly takes me back through time, and I'm with my mother on the big balcony adjoining her bedroom. I'm sitting on my little chair, while she reclines on the ancient wicker *chaise longue*, her slim legs crossed at the ankle and her bare arms folded behind her head. Between us, on a low table, a vase of flowers that look like butterflies.

Such beautiful colours and shapes that I stare at them, breathlessly. My mother holds the flowers to my nose. 'Lathyrus, smell them.'

I've just learned to read and savour the word like a chocolate. She tears a page from the marbled notebook beside her and shows me how to spell the word. Then she hands me the three-sided black lead pencil with eraser, which we're only allowed to use on special occasions. 'Now you.' That was the moment that my love for difficult words came into being.

I look in the coffin again. Only a week ago I'd combed her long white hair and slipped a bandeau of soft material over it, to stop it hanging in her eyes. I'd shown her how it looked in a mirror.

'Rather nice, as if I'm just off to play tennis,' she'd said, pleased, before sinking back into her pillows. Still vain, even then. Then she fell into a deep sleep.

Long white skirts, that's what she and her friends wore on the tennis court in the Roaring Twenties, just after the First World War. With rolled-down socks and gym shoes, wooden tennis rackets casually clasped in their hands. She was eighteen when she met my father and the story of their love began. The story that I'm going to tell. But not just yet.

After the cremation I inherit my mother's diaries and put the box in our basement, beside the tumble dryer. When the heavy box is in place, I tug a red and black exercise book from the pile. It falls open at a bulky page with a sprig of heather: when I turn the yellowed page, the adhesive tape comes loose, so that the sprig hangs sideways and a few pale purple grains roll over the paper like tears. I read three sentences and it all comes flooding back. It's a warm August day in the late 1960s: in a sandy hollow in the dunes surrounded by sweet-smelling heather, she and I look on as my two-year-old daughter digs away with a spade. It's three months before we leave the Netherlands for a remote mission station in East Africa. I regard the venture with dread, partly because I'm in the early stages of pregnancy, though no-one knows about it yet. Not even my mother.

'O God, let it stay like this, and let me sit here forever with my precious daughter and her little girl,' I read in her diary. Did she write this pathetic sentence when I'd gone away for a moment to pluck some heather? And directly after that: 'Why do such tiresome things always happen to me, such as my children going abroad?' I promptly slam the book shut and put it back in the box.

When the tumble-dryer in the basement bursts into flames seven years later, the notebooks stay miraculously intact, apart from a coating of soot. I'm both relieved and disappointed. What on earth am I going to do with sixty-nine journals, seven writing pads and a heap of diaries? After the basement fire, I equip every notebook with stickers stating the year, and discover that the period from 1938 to 1948, the period of war, sickness and death, is completely missing.

My mother lugged her diary everywhere she went, together with the black three-sided pencils and a transistor radio that provided her window on the world. Throughout all her pregnancies, grief and daily chores, she found time to entrust her deepest thoughts to paper. The later diaries in particular are covered in tea and coffee stains, containing not only her written text but also newspaper cuttings, children's drawings, photos and the occasional dried flower. Sometimes entire pages have been ripped out, sometimes half-pages. No doubt for lessons in how to spell lathyrus, shopping lists, darts for my brothers' blowpipes and aeroplanes for the grandchildren. Her untidy handwriting and a hastily read entry in one of the last notebooks, full of prying comments and spiteful remarks, make me feel a sudden aversion. I really don't want to read any more. The notebooks go back into the cellar.

Years later, in a half-hearted attempt to read the diaries one day, I move them to my workroom, putting them in a deep cupboard where the white labels stare back at me like eyes every time I open the door.

(End of fragment)