Windmills to Wheat Fields

A woman's life can really be a succession of lives, each revolving around some emotionally compelling situation or challenge, and each marked off by some intense experience.

–Wallis, Duchess of Windsor

Mama died on a Monday. As soon as I heard my brother's voice on the phone that afternoon, I knew. Felt it in my bones. After we spoke, I set the phone down, walked numbly to the window, gripped the sill and gazed up at the sky. The day had come. My mother was gone. *Really gone.*

The sky outside my window looked the same. Clear blue. Wisps of cloud. And the sun continued to shine. Was she out there now, somewhere in the Universe? It was a tough one to grasp.

It hit me then: I didn't have a mother anymore. And the tears came …

So many years, so many memories. *Her gentle smile. Those large Dutch hands of hers. The comforting whir of her sewing machine. The feel of her arms hugging me. The delightful*

smell of fresh-baked bread that always reminded me of her. The clatter of pots as she worked in the kitchen. The familiar mother-scent that clung to her sweaters. The sound of her laughter, the warmth of her touch. The love in her eyes …

All gone. Irretrievably. *I'll never see her again, never touch her.* I knew the day would come, yet the reality was so final. It changed everything. *I can never go back to that safe place that was my mother.*

It hit me again at the cemetery, days later, as I watched the small urn of ashes descending into the ground. *My mother doesn't exist anymore …*

But how could she not exist? As far back as the shadowy corners of my memory could reach, she was there. Always. Without fail. And even then, I knew there was something different about her. When other kids scraped a knee, they shrieked and their moms came running. Not mine. She couldn't hear me. When I needed her, it was up to me to toddle off and fetch her. Whatever was wrong, my mother would fix it – she always did. Once I found her, I'd tug on her skirt, "Ow-eee, Mama, ow-eee." And I'd point at the cut, or the bruise, or the little red mark she could barely see. Then I'd get my hugs, and a bandaid if I needed one. From the beginning, I knew I could count on her hugs. Mom was my rock, the anchor in our family.

It wasn't just her deafness that made her unique. Nor was it her Dutch roots, or even that she was my mother. No, it was more than that. There was something wise and wonderful about her approach to life – she *knew* why she was here. Somehow, she'd discovered the secret; she understood what was important, what mattered.

And that's how she lived her life … until the disease. Then her life unraveled, and we floundered. For a long, bleak decade, we watched her slide away, each day a little further beyond our reach. This, finally, was something she couldn't fix, and neither could we.

My mother died one summer's afternoon in 1996, slipping away as quietly and peacefully as she'd always lived her life. For me, that dark day was the quiet epilogue to a life filled with grace and dignity, clear purpose and tremendous love.

How blessed I was, to have Hendrika as my mother for forty-three years. But a senseless disease was not the ending I would have wished for the proud, gentle woman she was. She gave so much, to get back such a cruel reward.

During her seventy-three years on earth, Hendrika was daughter, sister, schoolgirl, factory seamstress, friend, newlywed, farm wife, mother, and finally, doting grandmother. Along the way, she faced two major illnesses. One she conquered, though it derailed life as she'd known it and altered the course of her destiny. The other she couldn't beat; it shattered her mind and squeezed the life from her. In the end, she lay in a nursing home, staring with unfocused eyes at caregivers and loved ones alike, and recognizing no one.

An ordinary woman. An ordinary life. What happened to my mother could happen to anyone. There were no riches, no fame, no glory in her life. Not even a scandal. What story is there here, you ask?

Only that Hendrika made a difference. Even in the ordinary, there are seeds of greatness. In small deeds, there is glory, and in love, there is enormous wealth. My mother was a great woman in small ways, an extraordinary being of humble origin. She created scarcely a ripple in the world, yet she touched hearts and stirred souls in ways that cannot be measured.

Mom would surely dodge any effort to celebrate her life. The spotlight would only embarrass her. "There's nothing special about me," she'd protest.

And, for once, she'd be wrong …

*Rewind the decades to a slower time and a gentler world, far across the sea. Travel inland from the Netherlands coastline for a glimpse of rural Lemelerveld on a spring day in the early 1920s. There, inside a sod-thatched dwelling, my grandmother Hendrika ("Rika" or "Rieke" to some) – wife of Rijk*Visscher and mother of two – bears down with the labor pains of her third pregnancy. A midwife hovers around the bed, and female kin – a sister, perhaps, or in-laws – scurry in and out of the room, wiping the young mother's brow, stoking the fire, and hustling the toddlers out of the way. No doctor is present, nor is one expected. There is no need; doctors are summoned to childbirth only if something goes wrong.*

Soon the two small boys in the next room hear a newborn's cry, and poke their heads around the door. "You have a sister," they're told, and they rush in to peer at the tiny, blue-eyed bundle and touch her velvet baby-skin. It is the last day of March, 1923, and the first Visscher daughter has arrived.

It is Dutch tradition to name babies for family elders, less so now but commonly then. Accordingly, the newborn was christened Hendrika, for her paternal grandmother. Like most *Nederlanders*, she received no middle name; one was plenty.

Such Dutch thrift is practical, certainly, and tagging on a "senior" or "junior" to the name is simple enough. When recycled too often, however, such name-repetitions confound everyone. Witness the Visscher trend even today: The Henrys, Johns, Peters, and Rijks (or variations of) far outnumber the rest of us. Any more, and we'll be able to field same-name baseball teams!

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*Sometimes spelled as Ryk or Riek

The lack of middle names compounds the puzzle. Which John are we talking about? Or which Henry? To distinguish, the family has adopted the habit of labelling each by the father. One is "Henry from Rijk," another is "Henry from Harm," and so on. A mouthful, certainly, but it works.

Little Hendrika was soon dubbed *Zuster* (Sister) by older brothers Hendrik (Henry) and Jan (John), thereby sidestepping the inevitable confusion with her mother's name. Later, it was shortened to Sis, or *Zus* in Dutch, and the affectionate nickname followed her through life. She became, rather paradoxically, "Aunty Sis" to my cousins.

Rijk Visscher with his bride, Hendrika (van Dalfsen) Visscher, married December 1919 (Sis's parents)

Tattered old photos, in the faded sepia tones of the 1920s, show a sturdy, wide-eyed girl. Bluntly-chopped hair, thick and fair and tied back with a ribbon, frames a square face. She responds tentatively to the camera, her mouth curling into a shy smile. Long-ago moments, forever frozen in time. If only we could step into the picture frame and touch the hand of the child she was … what would she tell us of her life?

Home was Lemelerveld, near Zwolle in the northern province of Overijssel, she'd tell us, though her tongue would surely stumble over such a mouthful. To the south and west, what was water then is now Dutch farmland, reclaimed from the ocean and walled by dikes. Further west, the North Sea stretches to the horizon.

The Visscher Family in Lemelerveld, 1928
L to R: Peter, Hendrika (Sr), Sis, Aagte (Rijk's sister), Dirk, John, Harm (Rijk's brother), Henry, Rijk

She'd tell of windmills droning never-ending circles against the sky, fields of tulips splashing vibrant colors over the landscape, farmers working their land. And perhaps she'd tell of racing her brothers along narrow canals and waving at bicyclists as they pedalled by, hurling gutteral Dutch greetings to each other, "*Goedemiddag*!" On a brave day, she might even shout back, "*Hallo!*" On market day, she'd revel in trips to the village, clutching her momma's skirt with one hand, gripping a brother's hand with the other. She'd stare as cheese vendors stacked neat rows of wax-cloaked Edam and Gouda *kaas*, and listen as they hawked their wares to passersby, their voices blending with the clip-clop of wooden clogs on cobblestone.

The rumble of automobile engines was still foreign to Lemelerveld, and to most of the country for that matter. The Visschers never owned a vehicle in Holland, nor did my

grandfather know how to drive then. “I can still envision Dad and Mother going on the bicycles,” Mom’s brother Henry told me, “to take us to church, or Sunday School, or visiting the neighbors. Always on the bicycles … that was the only transportation.”

Hendrika with her brother, Henry, in Holland, circa 1928

By most accounts, Hendrika’s early childhood was uneventful. She learned to speak her native Dutch, tussled with her brothers on the farm, and eagerly anticipated the arrival of each new sibling. There was no money for dolls, but there was always a new baby in the house or one on the way, and Sis adored her “real live” dolls. Large families were commonplace in Holland then, and the Visschers embraced the tradition. My grandmother was pregnant without pause. Often she’d carry one infant over a belly swollen with the next, while a toddler clung to her free hand.

By the time Sis turned five, she had two more *broers*. Dirk was born in the summer of 1924, Peter the winter of 1926. Soon after – on Christmas Day, 1928 – a baby *zuster*, Jennigje, arrived. Another girl, at last. What better Christmas gift?

With six *kinderen* underfoot and a household to run, Rika had little time to pamper her babies. So five-year-old Sis filled in, claiming the little ones as her own and mothering them with gusto. Too much gusto sometimes, according to Henry. One day, her two-year-old brother got away from her, and by the time she’d chased him down, he was covered in grime. Like most toddlers, Peter cared little about cleanliness, frolicking joyfully in the dirt. Sis, aghast at the sight of his smudged little face, decided she’d better get him cleaned up, pronto.

"We caught her with water all over the place," Henry chuckled, remembering the sight, "washing her little brother's face with a dead mole!" Practical, yet ever innovative – that was my mother. Little Peter, resigned to Sister's maternal fussing, didn't object.

Even as the Visscher family swelled, the world around them changed, in ways that would shift the course not only of my mother's life but countless others. In America, the carefree flamboyance of the Roaring Twenties was hurtling toward the stock market crash of 1929, and a crippling Depression that would last years. But even before the American after-shocks rippled worldwide, the European economy had been faltering. In the Netherlands, business ventures seemed destined for failure, discouraging even the most ambitious. Losses were staggering, and hope was withering.

Overcrowding, too, was cause for alarm in Holland. After generations of large families, the population was fast outgrowing the land. As Henry explained it, "Farms were being divided up for the children all the time, and eventually there wasn't enough land to make a living on."

For farmers like Rijk Visscher, dwindling resources became a desperate reality in the Twenties. Times were tough, and money scarce. "Dad had four boys by that time already, and each one would have to have a little piece" (of land). Henry added, "There was no future, for families!"

With eight mouths to feed, the Visschers were forced to mortgage their property and borrow money from wherever they could. The future looked grim.

"And then," Henry recalled, "Jack Fuite arrived." An old friend of the Visschers, Fuite was back in Holland to visit his mother. With his arrival came a glimmer of hope. Some years earlier, Jack and his brother Dick, both bachelors, had emigrated to Canada. Well established as farmers there, they spoke highly of their adopted land.

Gentle into the Darkness

My grandfather's interest was piqued, and he met with Jack Fuite to discuss prospects overseas. "Come with us to Canada," Fuite urged him, "You want to work, don't you? And you can work, there! You have good insights, Rijk, and a good brain."

Fuite painted a glowing picture of Canada. It was a frontier of opportunity, he told my grandfather. The population was sparse, land was plentiful, and there was abundant space to expand.

Rijk pondered the notion, asked more questions, and probed the what-ifs, seeking answers. Yes or no? Stay or go? Finally, despite nagging trepidation, he became convinced it was the only choice. He needed to provide for his family, and that was nigh impossible in the Netherlands. How was he – or anyone – to foresee the dismal decade looming ahead for North America?

Once my grandparents agreed to make the journey, Jack Fuite sent off a letter to his brother back in Canada to finalize the arrangements. Upon their arrival, it was agreed, the Visschers would rent a piece of land adjoining the Fuite farm. And Rijk would work for the Fuites, at least until he was able to establish a farm of his own.

And so it was that Rijk and Rika Visscher and their brood joined the throngs of *Nederlanders* who emigrated to Canada in the late 1920s. Along with a party of friends and relatives – eighteen or twenty in all – the Visschers bade farewell to their Netherlands home on April 3rd of 1929. With heavy hearts, they turned their sights toward an uncertain future. As wrenching as the prospect of separation from home and country was, it seemed the only way to survive the ever-worsening economic downslide. If all went well, the overseas move would offer salvation for their family, and give them a fresh start after the misery of the Twenties.

The emigrant party in Holland, April 1929
Back row, L to R: Mark Coppenol, Jack Fuite, Arie van de Clay, Rijk Visscher, Henry Kampjes
Front row, L to R: Nies van Dalfsen, Peter Visscher, Hendrika (Sis), Henry Visscher, Baby Jennigje, Hendrika (Sr.), Dirk Visscher, unidentified woman, John Visscher

In preparation for the trip, my grandparents had auctioned off most of their belongings. Horses, wagons, farm implements, livestock and furniture had gone on the block, and were carted away by the highest bidder. By day's end, all that remained was clothing, bed linen, kitchen utensils, personal effects and keepsakes. Rijk had taken hammer and nails in hand, and set about building three sturdy wooden crates. Once packed to the brim, these held all the worldly goods they would take to the "new world."

A portion of the auction proceeds had paid off the bulk of my grandfather's debts in Holland; he'd promised to pay off any outstanding debts later (and did). He spent the rest of the auction purse on ocean passage to Canada for the entire family.

In a letter written to Henry some fifty years later, just prior to the Visschers' 1979 "*50 Jaren Canada*" (50 Years in Canada) celebration, *Oom* Harm Post spoke from the heart of this emotional time:

Gentle into the Darkness

"The step to leave country and family caused much sorrow and agony … I saw the struggle. I saw the tears that flowed at the parting in (Rika's) parents' house, the farewell of families, of brothers and sisters … that last Sunday in Genemuiden …

"I brought them to Zwolle, to the train. I saw them going into the train, crying, to meet an unknown future, leaving behind the trouble of Holland during the 1920s. I gave them a last handshake, and off they went. I saw some waving and some handkerchiefs, and then the train disappeared out of sight. The (extended) family remained behind.

"Airplanes, radio, T.V., and flying to the moon weren't here yet. Out of sight meant that you would never see each other again."

Onward, into the unknown, the small Dutch group journeyed. Reaching Rotterdam on the coast, they left Dutch soil behind and ferried across the English Channel. From the eastern British Isles, another train bore the travellers cross-country, to Liverpool on the west coast.

There, on April 5th, they boarded the oceanliner *Montrose*, which would carry them across the Atlantic. Besides the Visschers, the emigrant party included Rika's sister, Niesje van Dalfsen, who planned to work as a housekeeper; Hendrik (Henry) Kampjes, who had worked for Rijk in Holland and would work as a farm laborer in Canada (and who later married Niesje); Jack Fuite, who would act as guide and interpreter on the trip, and a couple of other men who had been hired to work on the Fuite farm. Including little Sis, there were six Visscher children, all under the age of ten. Four more would be born in Canada.

As the children ran shrieking about the deck, the *Montrose* slid slowly away from the British coastline. Windblown adults, their faces grim, leaned over the railing, watching the landscape recede until it became a tiny speck in the distance. Yet behind the uncertainty of their leaving flickered a spark of

optimism, even as endless ocean opened up before them. Untold adventures lay ahead. Sis was barely six years old then, on her way to a life she could only imagine. Certainly, what fate held in store for the little girl and her family was far beyond what anyone could have guessed that April day.

Below deck, Sis shared a sleeping berth with her infant sister for the duration of the crossing. They were, after all, the only girls in the family, and besides, Sis could keep an eye on her baby sister. Insignificant at the time, this became a telling piece of future events.

Sis and her brothers were fascinated by the novel sights on board. Coming from rural Holland, they'd not run across the new breed of city folk. "It was the first time I ever saw women smoking, on the boat," Henry, then eight, reminisced later, "and the first time I ever saw women wear pants … "

Several passengers, unaccustomed to ocean travel, suffered its ill effects. "Mother went down with sea sickness the first day," recalled Sis's younger brother Dirk, "and did not get out of bed again until ten days later when we arrived in Halifax, so Dad was responsible for the six kids on the boat."

It was a long, tedious journey for restless youngsters in cramped quarters. Between mischief and mishap, they proved to be a handful for their vader. "I remember tumbling down the stairs on the boat," Uncle Dirk continued, "and my wooden shoe flew off, and missed the open porthole by a few inches." After meals, the kids raced around the dining room tables filching leftover soda crackers, a prized delicacy.

Communication posed its own challenges, since English, still a foreign tongue, was the dominant shipboard language. Money was a puzzle, too, for Nederlanders accustomed to Dutch guilders. "We had little books of interpretation," Henry explained, "and there was a place where you could buy apples and things … and apples were a delicacy for us. I had read it in the book, and (Dad) gave me some money – I don't know

what it cost, a nickel or something like that – and I went to the little store, and I said I wanted 'oh-nah apple, oh-nah apple' … one apple, you see?" He erupted in laughter, telling the story. "It's written 'o-n-e', you see. Well, in Holland, we pronounce words the way they're written!"

After more than a week on the ocean – and that much wiser in the ways of the world – the immigrants docked on Canadian soil. The date was April 14th, 1929, and they'd been on the move for eleven non-stop days. But they were not home yet.

Once they'd cleared customs, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, they steamed west by rail. "The train was kind of a settlers' train," Henry said, "great big passenger cars, converted … there was a stove, and we could cook some meals if we wanted to."

Past the Great Lakes, they chugged on toward the prairies. How endless the cross-country journey seemed to young Sis and her brothers. And how splendid! After the tiny Netherlands, Canada's vast landscape was breathtaking, unbelievable.

For those settlers who'd rarely been beyond their own Dutch province, let alone outside the country, apprehension was all too real. They sought the safety of their own ranks, and dared not venture far. "In a lot of places, we'd stop long enough so some of the braver Dutch men – the older Dutch men – would get off and walk around with their wooden shoes," Uncle Henry recalled, "and people would look (and think): What the heck kind of people are these?"

At long last, the Visscher family crossed the Alberta border and arrived in tiny Throne, near Coronation. There, finally, they laid eyes on what was to be their first home in Canada. By that time, Rijk had only thirty dollars in his pocket … and the worst was yet to come.

On the rental farm stood a rickety old frame house, bare of furnishings except for an ancient cook stove salvaged from a

neighbor's scrap pile. Given no other choice, my grandparents improvised. The shipping crates, emptied of their meagre contents, made a servicable table and chairs. It was a start. And it was not long before Rijk put his hammer to work once more, turning out bunkbeds for the children and crude furniture for the shack.

As the family settled into their new home, Rijk went straightaway to work for the Fuite brothers. In lieu of wages, he bartered work for necessities. One day he came home with a horse, another day a pig or a milk cow. Other days it was a bedstead, a better stove, or some other precious item of furniture.

The first Visscher homestead in Canada was weeks and miles distant from all that was dear and familiar to them. Each day was a struggle to survive, and there was little time to yearn for home. For years, letters were the only connection with loved ones back in the Netherlands.

Continuing his 1979 letter to Henry, *Oom* Post described the family's early years in Canada:

"After some years, we heard in Holland about the birth of Jacob (Jimmy) in 1930, a son Lambertus (Bertus) in 1932, and then Jenny in 1934. The birth of these children on Canadian soil – new life – was for us in Holland as balm on a wound.

"In Holland, we started to laugh again. We heard of the improvements in the new land, and in the old country, things were also improving …

"Men started to have new hope, especially (Rijk), I think. During his visits back to Holland, he told us, in tears, how God had been with him in Canada. He erected a monument in a church just as Jacob did in the Old Testament. He knew that God was with him."

Before the dawn of "new hope," however, death and calamity awaited the newly-arrived Dutch settlers. The ensuing months would change my mother's life forever.

Gentle into the Darkness