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First printing, March 2017

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ISBN: 978-90-828038-1-5

NUR: 402

Publisher: Hired Help at Smashwords

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The Lone Pine

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Eerste druk, maart 2017

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Uitgever: Hired Help bij Smashwords

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THE LONE PINE

A token of honour to 46 men
who left their country
to fight in a place far away from home
and never came back

... and to the man who found them

Annemiek van der Ham & Nannet van der Ham

In 1981, Dutchman Gerry van der Ham came upon the War Memorial in Bridgetown, Western Australia.

Because of a chance encounter with one of the residents, he decided to make it his lifework to find the final resting places of the 46 men whose names are on the memorial statue. His quest took 25 years and was finished a week before Gerry died in 2006.

Gerry van der Ham is our dad and this is his story.

True to facts, although with Gerry, you never knew whether he added a pinch of salt to cook up a good story. Thus, we will never know for sure if Betty the emu guided him to Bridgetown. Neither will we know if our father ever was a soldier in the Great war and if so, who.

What we do know is that Gerry van der Ham treated his mission like a search for his lost brothers.

The patience, perseverance, audacity and love that he displayed shows what a special, big-hearted man our father

was who called his work a token of honour to 46 men who gave their lives for our tomorrow.

Annemiek van der Ham - Nannet van der Ham - January 2018



*Then the soldiers came.
I heard their voices, their language.
While the sun set, they moved in, through the soggy
earth, searching for the enemy, still alive...*

*I laid there in the mud and did not dare to move. Not
even groan or they would know I was not dead yet.*

But the pain was too much.

My leg hurt, and I cried.

Suddenly he appeared above me.

*He pointed at me and attacked. Not once, but many times
I was hit in my chest and I knew I was going to die...*

OCTOBER 13, 1981

‘You are my sunshine... my only sunshine...’

Gerry van der Ham put down his pen and took off his reading glasses. ‘You make me happy...’ He couldn’t help singing to himself. Looking out the window, he saw the Swan river deep below, sparkling like a diamond. Another sunny day in Perth. Gerry sighed with content and thought how lucky he was to be working here. Temporarily all right, but that was just the way he liked it. By the time things became a bore and office politics would start playing a role, he would be out of there, on to the next project. As an engineer with the rare combination of management AND technical skills, he never had to worry about assignments. Grabbing his sunglasses and lunch box, he

headed for the door, softly repeating the catchy tune of the song his father used to sing to him when he was a small boy: 'You are my sunshine... my only sunshine...' The Pine Ridge Boys. Suddenly he remembered the name of the group who made the song famous in the late 1930's.

'Goin' out for a lunchtime stroll?' Elly, his secretary, looked up from her typewriter and threw Gerry her widest smile. He knew what she was thinking. She had told him so.

'God, you are good-looking,' she had gasped cheerfully when they had first met nearly two months ago. 'You look exactly like the actor in *The Saint*, no, you look even better! Roger Moore, move over! Oh my, I'm going nuts!'

Gerry liked to please the ladies. He knew his good looks made heads turn and his vanity always got the better of him when he flashed his sexy crooked smile. One eyebrow raised, a hand through his lock of thick dark blond hair and a gaze of the eye that lasted just long enough to make the girls nearly faint.

But that was the furthest he would go. Okay, a boogie woogie dance maybe at a party, but the last dance was always for his Gretha, mother of his two daughters and his sweetheart since he was nineteen years old.

'O, Gerry...?' Elly's voice was soft yet demanding. Demanding attention, which Gerry did not mind giving. He

turned around on his heels, his arms wide, as a sharp turning fighter jet.

‘Yes, my dear?’

‘I got something here that Gretha needs to sign. It is her application to transfer her overseas driver’s licence. She only needs to take an eyesight test. Will you bring it back to me after? Then she is all ready to go. And Gerry...’

Elly looked up to her boss who stood hovering over her like a giant. She usually fell for younger men. At the moment she had a bad crush on the young actor Mel Gibson, with his 25 years almost twenty years her junior. She did not dare tell anybody that she had cut out photos of him from her New Weekly magazine looking very sharp in a soldier’s uniform in a role for a war movie, called galli-something. She had to go watch it soon.

Her eyelids fluttered. The smell of Gerry’s Old Spice aftershave made her dizzy. She planted her hands on the armrests of her chair and pushed herself up slowly. She just had to. With her eyes closed and her mouth touted, Elly came closer and closer to Gerry’s neck.

She could already feel the warm skin and the rough texture of a half-day beard on her lips.

Then, with a flash, her brain woke up and made her realize what she was doing.

She plopped back in her chair.

‘Holy smoke, that was darn close,’ Elly gasped and shoved the form on her desk towards Gerry who, wisely, pretended not to have noticed what just happened.

‘Thank you, Elly, you are the best secretary I ever had. Gretha will be so excited to start her left side road driving. Will you put the paper on my bureau?’

Gerry’s English was good but with an obvious Dutch tongue, and with occasional literally translated words that made everybody around him laugh. Cloudscratcher instead of skyscraper was a favourite in the high-rise Woodside building where Gerry worked as an engineer with his North-West Shelf Gas Project team.

‘Will do. And give my love to Gretha, will you?’ Elly had composed herself, straightened her back and professionally planted her fingers with long pink painted nails on her type writer. She did not dare to look up at him and started to type feverishly.

‘Will do,’ laughed Gerry as he turned to walk away, noticing that there was no paper in Elly’s type machine.

In the elevator that took Gerry from 21 to ground floor level, Gerry thought of Gretha. He was so proud of her.

Who would have thought that at 43, she would be driving her car through the streets of a busy city in *Australia* of all places,

on the left side of the road and with new traffic rules that even he, the math guy, often found hard to understand.

She had insisted on getting her Australian licence.

‘Ger, how else am I going to get to the beach with the girls, and to the supermarket and to the shopping centers in a city that is not built for a bicycle and even if it was, would be too hot to be doing *anything* outdoorsy in?’

Gretha continued her knitting and added without looking up, ‘If you can do it, I can do it, too, don’t you think? If you will please ask Elly how to go about it, I am going to start driving as soon as I can. Elly promised to take me with her to her fitness club and I can’t wait to start working out again.’

However ‘what you see is what you get’ Gerry’s character was, so the opposite was Gretha’s.

With her blonde curly hair, blue eyes and slender figure she looked the typical Dutch ‘girl-next-door’ who, as a true Libra, saw beauty in the simple things in life and who had a talent for making any place cozy and a home away from home.

But contradictory to the general Libra trait of hesitating about virtually everything, Gretha knew *exactly* what she wanted and what she did not want.

After she married Gerry more than twenty years ago, she had never worked outside the house a day in her life.

Her calling was to raise a family, a wish that came true with their two daughters, and she managed her household with a strong hand.

Gretha was born in the northeast of Holland, where the saying 'Just do normal, that's crazy enough' meant that any extravagance in any form was considered exaggerating and unnecessary.

Gretha's style was that of quality and simplicity. She wore no make-up, had just a few small pieces of jewelry and spent her money rather on clothes for her two girls than on herself.

She could be carved out in beautiful sweaters and vests with complicated patterns that she knitted herself.

The role of expat wife did not really suit her even though, bubbly/outgoing as she was, she made friends easily. Usually women from different backgrounds whom she met in the school yard while waiting for her daughters.

With great regularity, Gretha sent letters and post cards to relatives and friends in Holland. She was faithful, not only as Gerry's wife but also as a friend, daughter and sister and treasured the relationships with her loved ones.

She loved to talk, voice her opinions and went shopping almost every day to, as she tongue-in-cheek motivated as 'to support the local shop owners.'

In her own steady way, Gretha was the wind under the wings of her husband whom she met at dancing school when she was eighteen. There had never been anybody else than her Ger.

‘Blechynden... Leslie T. Blechynden... what a strange name.’ Gerry was talking to himself as he strolled through Kings Park and passed a big tree with a small black plaque at its foot. He stood still.

‘In honour of Leslie T. Blechynden. Died of wounds. July 1st, 1917. Aged 19 years. Planted by his mother.’

Gerry chewed on his fourth pastrami sandwich that Gretha had prepared for him this morning and shook his head. What a young man. A boy still.

As he continued his lunch break walk, Gerry passed many more trees with plaques. He had seen them before but never given them as much attention as today.

Impressed, Gerry looked along the path and saw that every tree had its plaque. He shook his head again and did not see that a large man in a light grey suit approaching him from behind lifted his arm.

He did feel the slap, however.

A big slap on his shoulder.

He turned around with a jerk and looked into the grinning face of Brian, one of his colleagues.

‘God, damn it, I was shocked rotten,’ he didn’t care if this was proper English nor if it was appropriate. For a born and bred *Amsterdammer* and in Dutch, it was, and that was all that came to Gerry’s mind as he was suddenly pulled from the vision he had had of all the men and women who were killed in World War 1 and were commemorated in this park.

‘G’day, Gerry!’ Brian planted his feet wide and crossed his arms over his chest. ‘Sorry to scare you!’

‘Yeah, right. As if you mean it,’ Gerry tried to look hurt as he touched his slapped shoulder.

‘Oh, you Dutch wimp! What are you up to? Admiring the view?’

Brian held out a roll of Red Band candy. Gerry took one and pointed at a plaque.

‘Unbelievable how many people from Perth perished in the war.’

Brian nodded. ‘Yes. There’s more than a thousand... no, more than 1500 plaques in this park, nearly 2000, all along the Honour Avenues as these paths are called.’

He looked down. ‘It is not only men and women from Perth, it is from more places around here. There must also be some relatives of my wife. It is all not that long ago, y’know.’

He was silent as if he was calculating the time between then and now.

‘Not even seventy years...’

Gerry started to walk slowly. His lunch break was nearly over, and he was sure Brian had to return to the Woodside building as well.

Brian walked alongside him.

The two men were quiet for a while.

‘In Holland, we always talk about World War 2, because the first world war luckily did not reach our country. But here... All these young men who went all the way to Europe to fight for... did they know for what reason?’

Brian answered him as they stepped into the cool air-conditioned office building.

‘Yes, they did.’ He pressed the elevator button.

‘It was for our mother country. They gave their tomorrows for our today.’



Kings Park, 1981

APRIL 11, 1982

‘Why don’t you take your motor and go for a drive?’ Gretha looked at Gerry who paced restlessly through the room. It was a Sunday morning, just eleven o’clock. The coffee machine made spurting sounds and gave off the cosy smell of a fresh brew.

‘Oh, Gretha, just let me speak. This is the only place where I can let it all out. You are the only one who listens! I am worried! It is not going to work out if they go on this way,’ Gerry combed his fingers through his thick hair to wipe it out of his face and looked at his wife angrily.

He was halfway his time in this faraway country, but not even close to half done with his work assignment. It made him nervous, especially because the big boss from England was going to arrive next week.

‘If I had sole power, I would know exactly what to do, which steps to take.’

He sighed and looked at Gretha. ‘But I don’t have that. I must deal with the ego’s and little minds of the men I work with every day. Ugh!’

‘Yes, ugg!! I really need a new pair of ugg boots!’ Gerry and Gretha looked around to see their younger daughter who stood in the kitchen doorway, hands on her small hips.

Her mouth was smiling but her eyes were serious and flashed from her father to her mother and back. ‘What are you two arguing about?’

‘It’s nothing, Miek, your father is just telling me about his work and...’

‘Of course, work. Again! Come on, *papa*, relax a bit! Come play Stratego with me and let me beat you at it...’

Gretha nodded. ‘Go on, Ger. Some distraction will do you good.’

Gerry’s face relaxed when he saw his younger daughter. His tomboy girl. With an unpronounceable Dutch name, Annemiek, her Australian classmates had decided to call her Mike. Which suited her fine. She was a strong and boyish, almost six feet tall 16-year old who, just like her father, had the rare quality of excelling at both alpha and beta studies in school. On top of that she was very athletic and, with the long legs, blonde hair, big blue eyes and fine, even traits of her face

beautiful, although she did not see the latter for herself, which made her even more likable.

Unlike her older sister, who seemed to blend effortlessly into new situations, Miek, as her parents affectionately called her, always had trouble switching between her new life in a new country and the old life she left behind. She never seemed ready for it. Whenever she was beginning to like someone, her family had to pack up and move on. Whenever she started to be good at something, she would have to quit. If it wasn't for her big sister with whom, ever since she could walk and talk, she had developed their own little fantasy world of two mothers with three baby dolls and a bear, who lived a happy life full of adventures, she would have been quite lonely.

Gretha, many years later, had said that she never had seen two girls who were so easy to raise, forever engulfed in their fantasy life of motherhood, animals and sport.

This time around, the foreign assignment was different. Miek was alone. Her sister, now a grown woman of nineteen, had gone back to Holland and was about to become a stewardess, the perfect job where she could use her chameleon qualities to the full.

It was the early eighties, the time of punk, drugs and sex. Miek shook off her natural shyness and jumped right in.

‘Yess. Set up the Stratego!’ a smile broke on Gerry’s face. He could never resist his youngest, the apple of his eye. She was as close as she could get to being the son he never had. In Holland, they would go out fishing in their little row boat, cycling in the polders and now to Miek’s delight, she could sit on the back of his motorbike and ride with him to the beach. Her favourite place was behind her father’s back, solid as a pine tree.

Stratego was their favorite game, stimulating their thirst for strategic thinking and competition.

Gerry sat down on one end of the table as Miek laid out the board.

He planted two fingers on the side of his face in a salute and barked: ‘Come on, men! Advance, attack and capture. We’ll conquer them all!’



Gretha and her two daughters, 1981
