

AMSTERDAM 1899 - 1953

Chapter 1

LITTLE GIRL IN COFFEELAND

That Saturday afternoon, the 12th of August 1899, the sky was overcast. Noises from the street waved inside through the open window: the clattering of hand carts and the chatting of passers-by. At the nearest stop the horse tram tinkled to let passengers on and off. Inside, the expectant mother groaned in labour pains. "In the early afternoon, at one o'clock" the birth cries finally sounded in the narrow house at 113 Utrechtsestraat. Johan Herman Rudolf Hatterman was 38 and his wife Elisabeth Hendrika Christina Verzijl 32 years old when after a marriage of almost eight years a child was born. Somewhat dishevelled after two wakeful nights, but filled with pride, the father went to the Registry Office on Monday morning to register the birth of his daughter Nola Henderika Petronella Hatterman. The family album shows a darling little girl in a white dress with dark eyes and rosy cheeks. A little princess. Named after her two grandmothers: Hendrika van Dokkum and Petronella Stoerhaan. Nola, also her forename, must have been a find of her parents. No other children were born. She was to be an only child.

In the bridal portrait of her parents, a man with a moustache and his brand new wife, a small bouquet of flowers in her hand, gaze seriously into the camera. "The family in which I was born has nothing to do with how I live now," says Nola in an interview at a later age, herself with a rippling laugh in almost every picture. It is striking that journalists accepted the vague answers Nola gave routinely, used as she was to always being asked the same questions. She was sparing with information about her personal life. In a rare open-hearted interview in 1978 she says: "I was born in a colonial environment. My father worked for a coffee firm in Amsterdam. There you ran into everything that is colonial. That has been the cause of my rebellion."

She was horrified by the thought of people like "Droogstoppel" whose hands she had had to shake as a child. The reference to Multatuli's novel *Max Havelaar* is clear. In it, the narrow-minded, miserly coffee broker Batavus Droogstoppel is the symbol of the

man who does not care a straw for the exploitation of the inhabitants of the Dutch colony. Nola's father, his forename was John, worked as a bookkeeper for the firm of Mirandolle, Voûte & Co. Around 1900, Amsterdam was alive with companies with an interest in the Dutch East Indies. The capital of our country was the very heart of colonial trade. The harbour on the IJ was not only a staple market, but also specialised in shipbuilding and had a regular service on the East and West Indies. The whitewashed merchant building which served as head office of Mirandolle, Voûte and Co. was situated at 591 Heerengracht. Just around the corner of Utrechtsestraat. When he overslept, John ran to the office. The firm imported and exported sugar and tobacco, but most of all coffee. In addition they managed companies in the East Indies. There were establishments in Batavia, Semarang, Makassar and Surabaya.

The question is to what extent Nola held her father, who probably did not have a prominent position, accountable personally for the continuous exploitation and neglect of the native population by the Dutch government. When this state of affairs began to be criticized more and more, the government opted for a different strategy. In 1901, more than a year after Nola's birth, the government introduced the Ethical Policy, which promised better education and living conditions for the natives. The Christian heart spoke. "As a Christian nation we have a duty to make the entire government aware that The Netherlands have a moral obligation towards the people of those territories," young queen Wilhelmina read solemnly from the Queen's speech from 1901. The Ethical Policy did not mean at all that Dutch imperialism had come to an end. Under the guise of "pacification" The Netherlands had entered into combat with the province of Atjeh. The "small" Atjeh war alone, under the leadership of general Van Heutsz, cost 21,865 Atjeh men their lives. This "small" war – a euphemism for ten bloody years - ended in 1909, when Nola was nine years old. Veterans who visited her parents bragged about their martial exploits in the Atjeh war. She remembered them with horror.

For colleagues of Nola's father who visited them at home, the East Indies were always a subject of discussion. Employees posted abroad sometimes brought their Indonesian wife and children during their "European leave" or when they returned to The Netherlands. Nola was enchanted by these brown-skinned boys and girls. She thought they were beautiful, but she pitied the children of white fathers and their native housekeepers who were sent to The Netherlands on their own.

“The native housekeepers parted with their children. Then the children could come to The Netherlands for a better education. Many of them had the feeling that they were Dutch. These children had a difficult time. They were not white. “Shrivelled up,” we would say. Today we would say: “frustrated.” They were not legitimate. They lived with uncles and aunts.”

With “they were not legitimate” she meant that the father had not deigned to marry their mother. That the natives of the East Indies were spoken of so badly, Nola could not reconcile with her admiration for their beauty.

In retrospect she analysed: “Of course, how can you repress a country when you value its people?” As a teenager she cried herself to sleep at night. The little girl in that coffee world as Nola described herself dramatically when she looked back on her life, pitied the repressed dark skinned people she liked so much. Her parents worried about her attitude. She in her turn felt like the cuckoo in the nest.

Despite Nola’s aversion to men like Droogstoppel, the family history shows how closely the family was tied to the colonies. John Hatterman grew up in the family of the corn merchant Theodoor Hart de Ruyter. After the early death of his father – John was eight – his mother married the very rich cousin of her deceased husband: a widower with seven children, and a large residence at the Neude in Utrecht. When he had grown up, John returned to Amsterdam where he found employment as a bookkeeper by the firm of Mirandolle, Voûte & Co. His stepbrothers, who were also second cousins on account of blood ties tried their luck in the East themselves. Gerrit Hart de Ruyter became a planter in British North-Borneo (now: Malaysia); Felix and Theodoor junior went to Java. Felix worked for a tobacco company while Theodoor crossed the woods on horseback as a forester. They kept in touch. Cream coloured cards of hand-made paper crossed the ocean when John was engaged and married to Elisabeth Verzijl.

Nola spoke proudly of the uncle who had gone to the East Indies and who had married an Indonesian girl. She pointed out his portrait to the journalist who interviewed her:

“I remember this cousin (...) that child came in. I was just his size and I approached him immediately, took his hand and showed him my toys. I was attracted immediately. I happen to like coloured people. Yes, why does someone like red and the other blue, there is nothing to be done about that. But I was confronted with the fact that I also heard how these people were spoken of, so that started to ferment in me, just because I liked them so much. And when you like someone and think they are beautiful, and they are spoken of badly, you stick up for them.”

The exact family relationship was not disclosed. The journalist did not ask and Nola did not volunteer the information. Was Nola's memory playing tricks on her? Did she feel ashamed? If Nola meant uncle Gerrit, she was mistaken in thinking that he had taken his pregnant housekeeper to the altar. Uncle Gerrit may not have married the mother of his illegitimate son, but different from many Dutch men, he did acknowledge the child. He baptised his son Hendrick Johannes Hart de Ruyter, forename: Henk. In a picture from the album of his descendants little Henk – his small arms crossed precociously – stands pertly next to his smiling father who has spread himself on a Thonet chair. The three men flanking him are almost clones of Gerrit: decked out identically in a white *djas tutup* and wearing a hat, a watch chain and a moustache. A typical colonial scene. When he was ten years old, Henk was sent to The Netherlands for further education. Nola will have pitied her cousin, who was never to see his natural mother again.

Not only Hart de Ruyters but also Hattermans sought their fortune in a colony. It turns out that Nola was not the first Hatterman to set foot on Surinamese soil. Her great-uncle Hendrik Antonie Hatterman preceded her by a century. In 1853 he announced in an advertisement in the paper that he had married the white Johanna Frederika Elisabeth Voet in Paramaribo on 17 August of that year. When their eldest son Johan Hendrik Frederik was born, the young couple lived at prosperous Waterkant with a view of the Suriname river, on which ships filled with goods sailed into Paramaribo and white officers were rowed to the plantations by slaves in tent boats. After the birth of their son, the couple was to have two daughters: Henriëtte Antonette, named after Nola's greatgrandmother – and Elisabeth Rosephina.

A juicy detail is that Hendrik Antonie redeemed a seven-year-old slave from the plantation Naccaraccibo in 1855, one year after the birth of the legitimate heir. Hendrik

Antonie came to Surinam as a merchant, but acquired this plantation at some time, where amongst other things coffee was grown. How this happened, history does not disclose. After his arrival in Surinam he may have been appointed a white officer – an assistant of the director of the plantation – to move up to being its owner. The redeemed little slave was probably a son he had by the slave woman Cato. Even though it was his own child, manumissions were possible only by permission of the colonial government. Hendrik Antonie baptised the boy Jacob Otterman. Hatterman. Otterman. The names of descendants of colonials were often corrupted. Jacob learned the trade of carpenter and would later have a house in the same street as Elisabeth Rosephina Hatterman. It was precisely in this street, Zwartenhovenbrugstraat, where Nola Hatterman would also come to live.

When Nola arrived in Surinam in 1953, the descendants of Hendrik Antonie Hatterman had all died. Elisabeth Rosephina, who survived her brother and sister, died in 1909 when she was fifty. At that time Nola was nine years old. Did Nola know Elisabeth Rosephina? Or had contact with this branch of the family so disintegrated that she was not aware of her existence? Probably the latter. Although she never really spoke about it, Nola did know that a Hatterman had emigrated to Surinam. She had not heard this from her parents, but from her uncle Piet [Pieter Hatterman]:

“If I try to remember what uncle Piet (my father’s brother) told me – who gave me a beautiful book about Surinam which had belonged to that Hatterman – I do suspect he had a plantation as his working space, but he died young.”

This is all she says about it. Was she embarrassed? She might have guessed that this Hatterman had taken a shine to one of the slave women. Did she ask uncle Piet about it, but had he not known anything? Who is to say. It is one of the many secrets that Nola took with her in the faded, blue en white tiled grave at Schietbaanweg.

At any rate, the knowledge she did have about the colonial milieu in which she was born, was the cause of “rebellion.” Her own words. Was this the reason she so often found herself on the side of the less fortunate?