

Race for Rembrandt

Race for Rembrandt



Elly Linger

*Dedicated to Alessa, Maita,
and seventh grade of
primary school Trifolium
in Purmerend, the Netherlands*

Author: Elly Linger © 2016 / 2019

Editor: Brave New Books

Dutch edition: In rep en roer voor Rembrandt, 2016

ISBN: 9789402187519

Translators: Jan H. Boer and Frances Boer-Prins

Edited by Book Helpline

Illustrator / cover illustration: Akkelien Zijlstra

Cover design: Lilly Scheffer

Digital process illustrations: Lilly Scheffer; Pickup International

INDEX

1. Journey through the Smartboard	7
2. Near the Montel Lane Tower	16
3. In Rembrandt's House	24
4. At the Magistrate and His Constables	33
5. An Evening on the Limemarket	44
6. Fear in the Night	57
7. Learning from a Louse?	68
8. Searching in the Market	81
9. The Tunnel	89
10. On Course	105
11. To the Stock Exchange	115
12. The Polder Birds	126
13. It's Urgent	136
14. Back to 2019	147
Appendix - Place Names and Addresses	154

1. Journey through the Smartboard

It is sticky warm in the classroom on the second floor. Alessa is doing everything she can to pay attention to the history lesson. The teacher, Mr. Eelco, is usually very good at telling a thrilling story, but today, the afternoon seems to be taking longer than usual. Is this because the story of the Golden Age is so complicated?

Alessa's thoughts wander off like little clouds in the sky. She's thinking about what she will do when school is over. She's planning on playing a new game—something much more interesting than this history lesson. How much time left before school ends? She takes a quick peek at the clock. Still an hour and a half. That seems like a long time to her.

What is Mr. Eelco talking about anyway? About trading. Her uncle has a job like that, but things have not gone well with his business lately. That's because of the crisis.

Would there have been a crisis in the Golden Age as well?

But, no, Mr. Eelco isn't talking about that. Everything seems to have gone just right at that time. It's not called the *Golden Age* for nothing. People had enough money and enough to eat. And not as many people were out of work then as now.

Mr. Eelco talks about the growth of the cities at that time and about distant sea journeys by large sailboats. Such sailing trips seem like fun to her. She enjoys sailing during the summer when the weather is nice. The sailing camp she attended last year was fantastic. Of course, she would not want to sail the ocean during storms like they did during the Golden Age. They could be shipwrecked, according to Mr. Eelco. But why didn't they have motorboats in those days? Wouldn't that have been much easier for those long journeys to the other end of the world? She would have done things differently. She would have invented those motorboats earlier!

Mr. Eelco uses difficult names in his story: East and West Indian Company, Fort Elmina in Ghana, all kinds of herbs and spices and seasonings. Alessa tries hard to copy those words correctly from the smartboard into her notebook. When she does that, it is easier for her to pay attention to the lesson. She's never heard some of these words before, but she does know some of the spices like nutmeg and cinnamon. She's seen those in the kitchen cupboard at home. Her dad often sprinkles nutmeg over the veggies he cooks. When her mother cooks fresh

applesauce, she often sprinkles it with a bit of cinnamon. So, these are called seasonings.

That's not very difficult to remember.

Oh, now Mr. Eelco is talking about Rembrandt, that famous Dutch painter of the time. And he is also talking about a fight on Old Fort Street, in the middle of Amsterdam, the capital of the country. She likes this story better than that of the East and West Companies. The picture of this fight in the textbook seems funny. In the picture, a tall boy is almost pushed into the canal that runs along the street. So, school kids in those days were not all that peaceful either!

Alessa looks around and notes that she really likes her class. But what if her classmates had lived in the Golden Age? Would they have also fought on Old Fort Street? Would they have had rich parents and lived in fancy houses along the canals? Maybe they would also have sailed on those huge vessels to the far East Indies. Imagine if they had been caught in a heavy storm. Would they have survived?

She sees Matthew gazing at the board. Sam seems to be totally immersed in the history textbook. Ishmael hangs on the teacher's every word. Yes, they would love to live in that old time. But what about herself and her friend Maita? Would they like to wear clothes like the children in the picture? And what would it be like to live in those tall houses with their beautiful facades?

Mr. Eelco displays paintings by Rembrandt he found on the internet on the smartboard screen. Mr. Eelco points out the beauty of the interplay of light and shadow in these paintings. It's as if a spotlight lights up the most important persons in the paintings.

"You can find these paintings by Rembrandt everywhere in the world," Mr. Eelco tells us. Especially in the National Museum, which is nearby."

Just at that moment, the classroom door opens quietly. The principal enters. *Does she have something to say to the class?* Alessa wonders.

No. Ms. Else simply sits down on a stool near the instruction desk. She probably just wants to sit in on the class and listen. She does that occasionally, but usually, she will first explain, "I've just come for a visit."

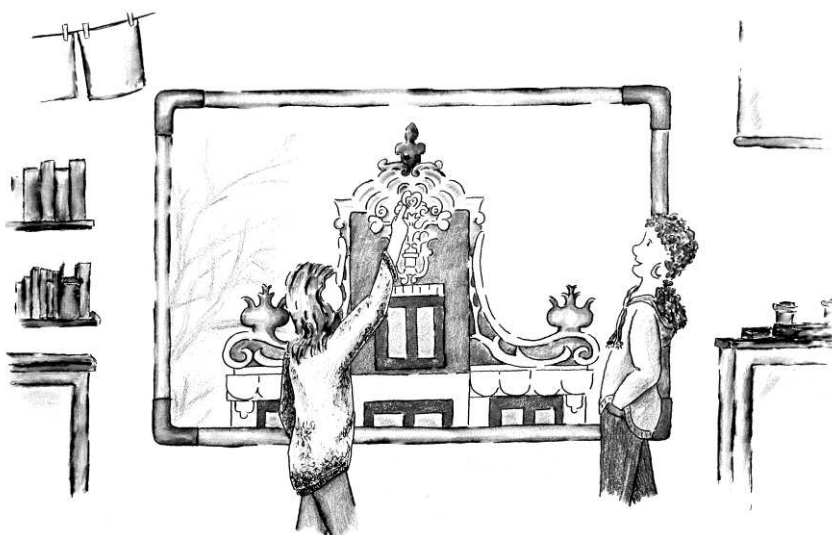
Mr. Eelco continues with his lesson as if nothing happened. He is now talking about those rich canal houses and how those rich people

earned the money to have such beautiful houses built. He shows many pictures of Amsterdam’s canals on the smartboard.

Suddenly Ms. Else stands up and says, “Why, that’s an interesting subject! I also have something to tell you about it. As a child, I lived in such a canal house, at 7 Limemarket, right next to Old Fort Street. Mr. Eelco, look for that house on the internet. It is a designated heritage building. You should easily be able to find it.”

It doesn’t take Mr. Eelco long to find it. Ms. Else goes to the board to tell us about this house where she grew up. She points to the long marble hallway. *Wow! Did Ms. Else live in such a large canal house?* Alessa is impressed. She can see from the corner of her eye that Maita is also paying full attention.

It looks as if you can just walk into that hallway, she thinks.



Alessa is suddenly startled. Ms. Else asks her to come to the board in order to point out the family’s coat of arms hanging in the hallway. She’s always a bit nervous when she is asked to come to the board. Luckily, the coat of arms is not difficult to find. After a few moments she points with her finger to the faint lines on the white wall. She sees a swan, two deer, and some angels.

“Well done,” says Ms. Else. “Please stay there for a moment.”

Now Maita is called to the board. Mr. Eelco wants her to point to the statue at the peak of the roof. While Alessa stands near the operating

buttons of the board, Maita soon finds the right picture: a large white statue of a man's head at the highest point of the decorated roof frontage. Is it a hidden button that Alessa touches with her shoulder at that moment? She doesn't know, but suddenly she feels a kind of energy surge through her whole body. She experiences a shock that lifts her up from the ground. What's going on? Is this an electrical shock? Isn't that dangerous? No, she's still alive... She can still vaguely see the board with its images of the canal house.

If I can see all that, then I must still be alive.

But her heart suddenly beats a mile a minute within her.

What's happening? How is this possible?

She feels something from the smartboard pulling at her!

Before she can say anything or grab the edges of the board, she is sucked into the long hallway at 7 Limemarket. After a quick float through the air she finds herself standing under the family crest she had just pointed to. She feels another strong gust of wind.

When she looks around, she sees to her amazement that Maita, who just a moment ago stood next to her at the board, has also been sucked into the old hallway. Now what? Where did they end up?

They look around in surprise. It is cool in the high hallway. The walls and the crest high above their heads are sparkling white, just as in the picture from the internet, but the marble on the floor is a bit grayish. Alessa stoops down to touch the floor. A bit of dust sticks to her finger.

"It looks like stoop chalk," she comments. "White stoop chalk. How strange that we are standing here in that hallway in Ms. Else's house. How is that possible?"

For a moment there is dead silence as if time is standing still. But, no, not really. They hear quick footsteps coming down from a stairway. The door right in front of them swings open and two boys come running down the hallway straight toward them!

The girls are frightened and retreat a little.

"Hey, what do we have here? Who are you guys?" the tallest of the two asks. "Where do you come from?"

Alessa's throat closes from fright, but Maita is able to answer. "We come from Purmerend. We are in Trifolium Elementary School in grade seven."

It's only now that both of them take a good look at the two boys. What strange old-fashioned clothes they wear! Coats with white collars, puffy pants, strange-looking shoes... Who on earth wears clothes like that?

At the same time, the boys look with amazement at the girls' gym shoes, blue jeans, and bright T-shirts.

The oldest boy asks, "Where did you get those clothes? From Antwerp or perhaps from the West?"

The girls can't help but laugh.

"What's so special about this? We bought them in Purmerend," explains Alessa. "Why go to Belgium to get these clothes? And what do you mean by the *West*?"

The youngest of the two boys laughs. "How can you wear pants? Aren't you girls? Or perhaps not?"

Maita and Alessa look at each other and laugh. "Ha, ha! Don't all girls wear pants?"

The boys shake their heads decisively. The oldest continues, "So, you come from that small city where there's that castle *Purmersteyn*? But how did you get here then? Did you come with the tow barge or with the stage coach?"

Now it's the girls' turn to look surprised. Travel with a tow barge or stage coach? What are those? They've never traveled that way. And Purmerend is not that small a city, is it? It's an ordinary city of some 80,000 people and without any castle! When Maita tells the boys, they burst into laughter.

"Our Uncle Cornelis lives there," the tallest says. "Only fishermen and farmers live there. They're not even up to 2,000 people. Amsterdam is a lot bigger. My dad says that at least 160,000 people live here."

The girls look amazed once again. Only fishermen and farmers in Purmerend? Their fathers work in an office and in a lab. And they do have high-rise apartment buildings in their city! And many Purmerend people work in Amsterdam. No, they are not fishing or working on a farm every day!

But strange, the boys have never even heard the words 'high-rise apartments' or 'lab'. A flat, they explain, is a kind of boat or barge. You can't live in it. Neither do they understand why you would want to pile houses on top of each other to make apartments out of them. No, all this is just nonsense!

After Alessa has overcome her shock a little bit, she tells the boys about their history lesson with Mr. Eelco, about how Ms. Else came into the room and about the smartboard. But Jan and Hendrik—for those are the boys' names—have never heard of a *smartboard*. Neither have they heard of a *computer* with which you can find houses. They're totally bummed out.

“But Ms. Else really did live in this house as a child and she asked Mr. Eelco to look for it on the internet,” Maita insists.

But Jan and Hendrik know nothing of an internet. Neither have they ever heard of a Ms. Else who is supposed to have lived here. Alessa takes another good look at the boys. Their wide pants, their powerful build... Where has she seen them before? Surely this cannot be true? They look like the two boys in the picture in their history textbook! They look like the boys who tried to push each other into the canal!

Carefully she asks, “Do you guys sometimes fight with each other near the canal? And do you ever fall into the water?”

Hendrik laughs, looking at Jan, and says, “Of course, we fight sometimes. And we love to play around with each other. I'm usually stronger than he is.”

Jan laughs like a farmer with a toothache, but it must be true, for he does not deny it.

Hendrik goes on, “But some time ago Jan had a fight on Old Fort Street with an annoying kid who wanted to push him into the canal. I was petrified and wanted to help him. It was almost too late...”

Jan remembers this fight near the canal only too well. Fuming, he says, “Yeah. That was that nasty Rinus. He's always picking on me. He finds me annoying, he always says. I get angry every time. This time I went and fought with him, for I easily get the best of him. Then he began to push me to the edge of the canal. If Hendrik had not helped me, I would really have fallen into the water. I can't even swim!”

Tears fill Jan's eyes now as he recalls that miserable afternoon. They're all quiet for a moment. The girls don't know what to say. They are simply perplexed. It looks as if that picture in their history textbook has come alive!

“How scary for you,” Alessa says. “Yes, really. From now on you better be very careful with this Rinus. But listen, you guys, we must go back. We're in the middle of a history lesson and Mr. Eelco will be

worried. We disappeared when we pointed to this house on the board. Ms. Else won't understand this either. We really have to go now."

But how do they return to the class? The girls look around. They don't see a smartboard with a special button anywhere that might suck them back in. Alessa was hoping that might be how to return to the classroom. Instead, they only see the high white walls of the hallway. At the side there is a green door. Behind it they hear footsteps. They hear men's voices in animated conversation. Where on earth have they landed?

"Let's phone the school," Maita suggests. "My cell phone's in my pocket."

They both look at the screen as Maita turns on the smartphone. The boys look on with their eyes wide open in amazement. She finds the school's telephone number in her contact list. Just a simple call and then Mr. Eelco at least knows where they are. But it doesn't work; the phone screen says *No service*. How can that be? She charged the phone last night. She definitely didn't exceed her monthly call time allowance, for she has used the phone very little this month.

"Let's check the internet to make sure you have the right number for the school," Alessa suggests.

But when Maita attempts to access the internet, she receives a notice that Google can't find anything. So, it looks like she cannot reach either the school or her parents from this hallway.

"Is there perhaps an ordinary landline phone?" Maita asks the boys. "Then we can tell our school where we are."

Hendrik and Jan shake their heads, their eyes betraying many questions. A telephone? They've never heard of such a thing.

"How do you call your friends?" Alessa asks, equally amazed.

"We just go to their house," the boys reply. "How else could we reach them? And if we need to send a letter to our Uncle Gerrit in Utrecht, we take a letter to the postal coach."

The girls have never heard of a postal carriage. They only know about the letter carrier on the bike and the package delivery service in a small postal car. How confusing all of this is!

Alessa and Maita look at each other. What can they do now?

"Let's look around a bit," Alessa suggests. "The cell phone will probably recover and work an hour from now. When we return to school, at least we will have a story to tell."

"That sounds like a plan," Maita replies with a shrug.

The boys are enthusiastic about taking these strange girls for a walk. They want to show them the house and the canal. Where shall they start? The girls are especially curious about what all is out there, but the boys first want to show them how they play in this hallway. Jan has a hard leather ball in his hand. He throws it to Hendrik, who keeps backing up and returns the ball with ever greater force. Bang! With a loud bang the ball lands against the door underneath the family crest.

At that moment, one of the other doors opens and a man in wide, dark clothes with a big white collar appears, looking angrily into the hallway. "Hey, boys, can't you do that a bit more quietly? We're holding a meeting here, but you're making so much noise that we can't hear each other. Go play outside!"

Just then, the man sees the two girls. He looks them over from head to toe with amazement. "Who are you? Where do you come from? I've never seen you in this neighborhood. How did you get inside?"

Maita's face flushes from fright, but she tells him as politely as she can about the lesson in her school at Purmerend and about the smartboard. The man can only shake his head in wonderment. He's never heard of such things.

"Dad, we'll go outside," Jan says. "These girls showed up just like that. I'm going to show them the canal."

Shaking his head, the father leaves again through the green door. Behind that door, they can hear voices.

"What kind of work does your father do?" Alessa hesitatingly asks.

"Our dad is the boss of the guild of lime sellers," says Jan. "He also has another job. He has shares in the ships that sail to the Baltic Sea and to Portugal. Then he has them bring grain, fruit, and some other stuff to our country. He sells them at the Exchange. He works hard. And then there's some work he does that others frown upon..."

Jan seems shocked at this last sentence of his. He puts his hand over his brother's mouth, his face flushing. Hendrik gives him a kick. Now the girls don't dare to ask any further about what's so special about their dad's work. They have no idea what a lime master might be. They can only imagine selling grain or fruit at the market and even that only vaguely.

"And your mom? What kind of work does she do?" asks Maita.

“She arranges all kinds of things for poor people and for orphans,” Hendrik explains. “We can go and check out that orphanage for girls in a little while. She’s there right now, though usually she is at home. She only goes to the poor house or the orphanage when there are meetings. She makes sure there is enough money to buy food and clothes for the children. Are you guys also poor?”

He looks with great curiosity at the girls’ clothes and especially at their long pants. The girls laugh. They certainly are not poor, but they do feel a strange contrast compared to these boys’ clothes. Should they perhaps ask them if they can borrow clothes for the time they’re here?

They don’t get a chance to ask them. The boys feel there’s been enough talk and are eager to go outside. The girls are curious about what to expect and agree.

2. Near the Montel Lane Tower

Hendrik unleashes a chain from the heavy, dark front door that takes all his strength to push open. The daylight comes streaming into the hall. It's cold outside—way too cold for the thin clothes of Maita and Alessa. They shiver as they stand in the doorway. Jan sees it immediately and runs up the stairs to get warm coats, for these unexpected guests. Before long, there they both are, wearing old wide, woolen coats that are much too long. But at least they are warm now.

“This way people won't notice your long pants,” Jan says laughing. “You really cannot wear these on the street, you know.”

The girls stand motionless at the top of the high stoop of the canal house. In front of it they see a wide canal with boats and barges going every which way fully loaded. Small sailboats are moored along the side. Where do these boats and barges come from? They've never seen such vessels in the Amsterdam canals. The only thing they know in these canals are the tour boats frequently seen there. How different all this is! Where have they ended up?

At the canal side, they see a wharf jutting far into the canal. It's very crowded and busy there with men scurrying all over the place.

“Let's go take a look over there. Then you'll understand why this here is called Limemarket,” suggests Hendrik.

They soon find themselves among all the hardworking men. Some are pushing wheelbarrows. Others carry sacks on their heads or roll brightly colored barrels along the quay. They all wear wide pants, but their coats, shoes, and socks look much poorer than those of the boys. They must be laborers doing heavy work.

On one large barge that is moored at the quay they see a mountain of white powder. There are men walking back and forth, shoveling this stuff up with an inverted hat-like shovel and then emptying it into a large barrel.

“What kind of stuff is this?” asks Alessa.

It is the same white powder she touched in the marble hallway. It turns out to be lime, used for making cement.

“These carriers still have a lot of work ahead of them,” Hendrik comments, while he smiles at a man he recognizes. “A lot of lime is needed here. Pretty soon you'll see how many new houses are under