

Behind my front door

Truusje van Zanten

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*Dedicated to all victims of domestic
violence*

2001

introductions

Why does my phone keep vibrating? Who could possibly need me so urgently? I have been working as a pool cleaner for the past three months, and the last thing I want is to jeopardise this job by constantly checking my phone. It's ten o'clock now, just one more hour to go. Meanwhile, my phone keeps vibrating in my pocket.

Finally, it's eleven o'clock. I quickly head to the changing room to grab my things and walk to the smoking area for a cigarette. I take out my phone. I'm astonished; my jaw drops. 175 missed calls and messages? What's going on here? Whose numbers are these? I don't know any of them. I've read the first few messages, and I'm shocked by their content. These messages are from people looking for sex! I decide to delete them all and not respond. Once the break ends, I resume my tasks as normal, even as my phone continues to buzz in my pocket.

At the end of a tiring workday, I sink onto the couch. My mother sits beside me and notices me busy with my phone. 'What are you doing, Truusje?'

'Well, I've been getting weird messages all day and missed countless calls. I don't understand. I don't even dare let you read a message. I'll just delete them. Hopefully, I'll get rid of them quickly if I don't respond.'

I begin deleting all the messages except one. It says: 'You're on TV, what's the deal with that? Are you really looking?' WHAT? My heart jumps to my throat. How am I on TV? In disbelief, I grab the remote and start searching on Teletext. Sure enough, my number is listed on the chat page. How is this possible? Who did this? Almost immediately, a name comes to mind. Pim, my ex. Furious, I call him, but there's no answer. I send him a message. 'Why did you put my number on the Teletext chat page?' Within five minutes, I get a reply: 'Haha, got you good.' What a jerk! I'm furious with him! There's no point in reacting more; the damage has already been done. Still, I decide to respond to the message

from the person who alerted me to the personal ad. 'No, my ex put my number there, the bastard. Thank you for letting me know!' A minute later, I get a reply: 'Well, that's not cool. What a jerk.' And with that, slowly, an exchange of messages and calls with Ricardo begins.

For two and a half weeks, we have intensive contact. We get to know each other better, and a friendship gradually develops. He confides in me by telling me his relationship with his parents isn't going smoothly. One day, while we're talking on the phone, I hear his mother say, 'Then just pack your stuff and get out!' I can't believe what I'm hearing. On impulse, I say to him, 'Then pack your stuff and come to me.' There's a brief silence on the other end of the line. 'Yes, I'll come. If you're okay with that.' 'Of course I'm okay with that. Otherwise, I wouldn't suggest it.' He tells me he has to come by train since he doesn't have a car and will text me when he knows when he'll arrive at the station. We agree that I'll wait for him on the platform with a red rose.

After a while, I receive his message: 'Hey Princess, I'll be at the station at half past seven.' That's in half an hour! I grab my things and hop on the bus to the station. There, I buy a red rose and look at the information boards to see which platform the train will arrive at. Slightly nervous, I light a cigarette as I wait for him.

After fifteen minutes, his train pulls into the station. I look out for him. Why, though? I don't even know what he looks like, I scold myself. Then a slim young man in a blue and white jacket, with short blond hair and golden earrings, approaches me. In his right hand, he holds a large sports bag. A smile appears on his narrow face. This must be Ricardo, I think; it can't be anyone else.

'Hi, are you Truusje?' He looks at me kindly but a little shyly. 'Yes, don't I have a red rose? Do you see any other woman with a red rose?' I reply rather briskly. 'Shall we go then?' We walk to the bus station and are soon engrossed in conversation. We talk about his parents' situation and how relieved he is to be away for a while. Throughout the bus ride, we discuss various topics, such as our home situations and childhoods. We're so immersed in conversation that we almost forget to press the stop button. Luckily, we are just in time, and with laughter, we get off and walk the last three hundred metres to my house.

'Welcome to my little abode,' I say enthusiastically as I open the door for him. 'Make yourself at home.'

Starting from that day in November 2001, we live together in my tiny studio, where the living room, kitchen, and bedroom form one space, and the bathroom stands alone. Furnished with just a few pieces and inhabited by my two pet mice, it had truly become a place I could call home.

beers

'Shall we go grocery shopping together?' Ricardo asks the following day. 'You probably haven't yet realised we're now living and eating here with two.'

'Uh, no, indeed. I'll tidy up the breakfast stuff, and then we'll go.' And so we go to the village together to do some shopping. 'I'll push the cart if you grab the items.' Well, that arrangement works fine for me.

'Let's grab a crate of beer, Truusje. I like to have a beer every so often in the evenings. How about you?'

'Yeah, a beer now and then in the evenings is nice.' I actually never keep beer at home. Except for maybe a birthday or something. At the checkout, Ricardo puts the groceries on the conveyor belt and pays for them.

Back home, we put away the groceries together. I'm amazed that there are still such helpful men! Since Ricardo has yet to find a job, he takes care of the household while I'm at work. I have to admit, living with Ricardo feels pretty good. He takes good care of me and compliments my cooking skills. 'This is really delicious, Princess! I've never eaten so well.' We've only been living together for a week now, but I must admit I'm starting to fall in love.

When I come home from work in the evenings, we have a beer together on the couch after dinner. I struggle to keep pace with him, but I suppose that's alright. Perhaps men simply drink faster than women. One evening, we're sitting on the couch watching TV, each with a beer in hand, and I notice Ricardo slowly edging closer to me. I wait anxiously, trying to ignore the excited feeling in my body, which is very difficult. He puts a hand on my knee and looks

at me with a penetrating, loving gaze.

'Do you know how beautiful you are?' he whispers, leans forward, and kisses me - a kiss I gladly return. Slowly, the kiss becomes more intense, and we explore each other's bodies. He gently pulls away from my grasp, looks at me with fierce love, and takes my hand. He leads me to the bed.

'You're so beautiful,' he whispers between kisses. I melt completely...

I wake up startled. Wow, was that a dream? I look beside me, and Ricardo is sleeping peacefully. No, that wasn't a dream. With a broad grin, I settle back onto the bed. What a wonderful evening. The sex was tender; he took his time to please me. Well, if it continues like this, I wouldn't mind if it lasted forever.

An hour later, I get up and start preparing breakfast. Not long after, Ricardo also wakes up.

'Good morning, Princess.' He wraps his arms around me and kisses my neck. I'm making coffee, and I've just set the table.

'Good morning, love.' I kiss him back. 'Shall we visit my parents after dinner tonight? I'll have to introduce you to them at some point, right?' I look at him, waiting for his reaction.

'Yeah, sounds fun! I'm really curious about your parents. But I'll crawl back into bed for a bit. See you tonight, darling.'

That evening, we walk together to my parents' house. They live just around the corner from me.

'Mom, Dad, this is Ricardo.' Ricardo shakes hands with my parents. 'Hello, sir and madam. Nice to meet you.' With a warm smile, my mother takes his hand. 'Please, just call me Adriana. My husband is Cobus.'

Only now do I realise I was actually a little nervous about my parents' reaction. Now that I see them warmly greeting him, all my nervousness disappears.

'You really like him, don't you?' Mom whispers in my ear, looking at me with big, inquisitive eyes. I blush a little and nod. The rest of the evening flies by. After coffee, we enjoy a beer and some snacks together. I'm so glad Ricardo gets along well with my parents and vice versa. Ricardo has even promised to help my parents around the house. My father had a stroke not long ago and can't do much around the house anymore.

'I'll help you guys; at least I'll have something to do in my free time,' Ricardo says.

The first thing Ricardo does when we get home is grab a beer. 'Want a beer too, Princess?'

I thank him for the gesture and say I want to go to bed. I have a busy day tomorrow. 'Are you coming too?' I try to gently coax him into bed; maybe this time he won't drink beer because, at this rate, that crate will be empty in no time, and we really can't afford to keep buying his beers.

'No, I'll have a beer first and then come to bed later.' Hours later, I wake up to cold hands on my body. Ricardo has crawled into bed. I smell his alcoholic breath, and I suspect he's had more than just one beer.

'You're so delicious, so beautiful. Be intimate with me, Truusje,' he says, half-drunk in my ear.

'No, Ricardo, I want to sleep.'

'But I want you, Princess, I crave you so badly.' I try to push his hands away, but he holds them firmly on my body. Something inside me tells me I better not oppose him. I don't want any trouble because he doesn't deserve that either. He's trying his best to help with the housework and find a job. It's not his fault he hasn't found work yet. I turn around and smile at him. He starts kissing me, and his hands roam all over my body.

'That's it, Princess. You're so fine,' he whispers. I resolve to talk to him tomorrow about his drinking habits, and I then give in to him.

The following day, I'm having coffee, and Ricardo sits down next to me. 'I think I'll call my mother. She might be worried. That argument has been going on for too long now.'

'If you want to, love, then you should,' I reply. While Ricardo is on the phone, I realise I don't dare mention his drinking habit.

And so, contact is restored between Ricardo and his parents. From that moment on, they have daily phone calls.

'Truusje and I will come to visit next weekend, Mom. I'll also pick up my stuff because I'll need that here from now on.' Ricardo winks meaningfully at me.

I wonder what they'll think of me and hope I'll get along with them well. But something is nagging at me, the events of the

previous evening. I'll have to tell Ricardo how I feel about his alcohol use. I make a suggestion.

'Darling, how about next time we go shopping, we first see how much we have left and then buy a six-pack or crate of beer with that? You know we're not well off, and having a beer in the evening is fine. But you actually drink much more than just a beer. Sometimes, we go through two crates a week. Don't you think that's a bit much?' He looks at me, surprised.

'Princess, I cherish being able to have my beer every evening. That's not something we'll cut back on; you enjoy it too, don't you? I'm not an alcoholic if that's what concerns you.' He gives me a comforting kiss. Actually, he's right. It's not as if he drinks excessively every night like he did yesterday. And he does have a point. I do join him for a beer occasionally. Maybe if I stop doing that, he'll drink less, too. He's such a sweetheart; I feel at ease, safe, and secure with him. I love him. Perhaps I shouldn't complain so much.

Today, we're taking the train to his parents. I must say, I'm really looking forward to meeting his parents, brother, and sister.

'Dad, Mom, Vera, Gerrie, this is Truusje,' he says, looking at me affectionately. We exchange handshakes.

'Just call me Sien. And this is Cor,' his mother said warmly. Instantly, I feel at ease. After coffee, Ricardo suddenly took my hand.

'I want to show you something, Princess, my greatest hobby.'

'What's that?' I asked curiously.

'You'll see. Hopefully, you'll like it too,' he laughed led. He leads me through the backyard into the shed.

'Tada!' he says as he opens the door.

I'm greeted by the smell and feathers of numerous pigeons. My eyes widen, and my mouth falls open in surprise. He's a pigeon fancier!

'How cute,' I say with feigned enthusiasm. I'd rather not immediately upset him by saying I consider them filthy creatures that will never set foot in my home.

'I take care of them here with my father; it's really a shared hobby,' he says proudly. As long as it's here, I'm fine with it, I think to myself.

After dinner, we say goodbye to his family and walk back to the station. On the way, we encounter a group of three guys and two girls. The guys give me a strange look and stare at me as they pass by.

'What are you looking at?' Ricardo asks one of the guys.

'I'm allowed to look at a hot chick, aren't I?' he says.

'No, you're not,' Ricardo responds.

Suddenly, '*Ricardo is jealous!*' crosses my mind. There's a brief exchange of words, and before I know it, Ricardo gets punched in the face. His nose starts bleeding, and my boyfriend lunges at the guy, who, of course, immediately gets help from his friends. I want to help Ricardo, but then the two girls come charging at me. Fortunately, they both have long hair, and before they realise it, I've tightly wound their hair around my hands and smashed their heads together. They're knocked out. Suddenly, someone comes running out of his house to help us.

'Ricardo, let go!' this man shouts. And as quickly as the fight started, it was over. Ricardo takes me by the arm, and we continue walking to the station.

'Who was that?'

'My cousin,' Ricardo says curtly.

When we're back home, I take care of Ricardo by washing the blood off his face, immediately putting his clothes in the washing machine, and cooling his nose. He looks at me somewhat guiltily.

'I don't want other guys lusting after you. You're mine,' he says.

I melt a little at these words; he wants to protect me. 'Could you grab me a beer?'

With some reluctance, I give him his beer. Actually, I want to sleep and forget about this miserable evening. Still, I realise he deserves to relax after such a violent fight. I'm just afraid that it won't stop at just one beer...

Sure enough, not long after, he comes over to me and begins his exploration with his hands on my body. I simply give in; he's had such a hectic evening, and I really don't want any arguments right now.

2002

pregnant

The new year has only just begun, and I notice that we're falling into a routine of sorts regarding our daily rhythm. I go to work, and Ricardo stays at home. When I come home, I prepare dinner, we clean up together afterwards, and then it's time for a beer on the couch. If Ricardo is in a good mood, he genuinely seduces me into bed, but if he's in a bad mood, I know it's better not to argue with him. He can be very demanding for his satisfaction. I'm stuck in a rut. Our daily routine drains a lot of energy, leaving me tired all day. My appetite disappears, and so does the desire to do things. After work, at home, I prefer to go straight to bed to sleep. Unfortunately, Ricardo disagrees. To keep the peace, I give in because I don't want to waste my last bit of energy on arguments. And why should I? Ricardo is an angel; he supports me where he can and still helps with the household chores. He often helps my parents with various tasks, too. I'm actually quite lucky to have a guy like him. So, I should probably do something for him in return, even though I'm not always in the mood.

Mid-January, as I'm brushing my teeth in the evening, I suddenly feel such intense nausea that I vomit everything. Where is this coming from? Why am I so nauseous? Paired with a panicky feeling, a lightbulb suddenly goes off in my head. When was I last menstruating? I can't seem to remember. With an uneasy feeling, I go to bed. What should I do now? There's nothing else to do but to take a pregnancy test; then, I'll know for sure. I hear Ricardo mumbling as he gets off the couch. He comes to bed. I hope he wants to sleep right away, but to no avail. His alcohol breath grazes my neck, and his hands seize my body. Reluctantly, I turn on my back. As long as I lie still, it'll be over soon, and he'll go to sleep.

The next morning, I get up early to go straight to the drugstore. Various thoughts race through my head. 'Please, let it not be true.' But secretly, I'm also hoping for it; I've always

wanted children. I purposefully enter the drugstore and go to the shelf where the pregnancy tests are. There are so many different ones, which one should I take? I just pick one randomly and pay at the counter. Daydreaming, I continue my stroll and light a cigarette to calm down. My thoughts go in all directions.

On the one hand, I deeply feel like I don't want this. Still, on the other hand, the thought occurs to me that Ricardo might stop drinking and take more responsibility for our life together. Before I know it, I'm back home at the doorstep. Now, it's time for me to take the pregnancy test. Ricardo is still asleep. He had a lot of beer the night before, so I leave him be and go to the bathroom. I open the packaging and read the instructions. It says I have to pee on the stick and wait two minutes for the results to show. I set a timer on my phone. Restlessly, I pace around, from the bathroom to the kitchen, from the kitchen to the room, and back to the bathroom. I just can't find any peace, and my head is spinning. Two minutes have never felt so long. To pass the time, I smoke a cigarette. I jump in surprise when the timer on my phone goes off. I hurry to the bathroom and pick up the stick. To my shock, amazement, and wonder, I stare at two beautiful blue lines. I'm pregnant.

Slowly, a wonderful feeling envelops me. I'm going to be a mom. A smile appears on my face as I stare at myself in the mirror. I'm snapped out of my daydream by a noise from the room. Ricardo is awake. The nerves come rushing back; I have to tell him I'm pregnant. With a heavy heart, I walk to the room. I slowly push open the door.

'Good morning, honey,' I say cautiously.

'Good morning. You're up early,' he says sleepily. 'I went to the village for a bit.'

'So early?' He looks at me questioningly. 'What's going on, Princess?'

I sigh deeply, trying to gather the courage to tell him what I consider to be good news.

'I haven't been feeling well for a while, you know. Very tired and nauseous. That's why I went to the village for a pregnancy test.' Ricardo looks at me, surprised. He says nothing, patiently

waiting for me to continue. 'I took the test as soon as I got home.' I take a step forward, and cautiously and shyly, I hand him the stick with the two blue lines. He takes the stick, looks at it incomprehensibly, and then back at me.

'Does this mean that...?' His voice trails off. I nod, tears now welling up in my eyes, unsure whether to be happy or cry. Ricardo remains silently staring at the stick, then back at me, and then back at the stick. Slowly, I see a smile appear on his face, and a great relief washes over my body. I cry and laugh at the same time. We're going to be parents! While unplanned, this baby is incredibly welcome! We decide to inform our parents of the good news the same day. Since my parents live around the corner, we go there first.

Feeling somewhat nervous, we arrive at my parents' house.

'Mom, Dad, Ricardo and I have something to tell you.' Suddenly, the living room falls silent. My parents look at us with wide eyes. I exchange a brief glance with Ricardo, who slightly nods, indicating that I should just say it.

'We're expecting a baby,' I say with a nervous smile. There's a moment of silence, and a slight sense of fear creeps over me. Then, both my mother and father warmly embrace and kiss me.

'Oh, how wonderful! A grandchild on the way!' We're all overjoyed.

When we're back home, Ricardo is eager to inform his parents immediately over the phone. Since we have to travel an hour by train, we can't visit them right away.

'Yes, go ahead and call them,' I tell him, 'but put the phone on speaker, I want to hear their reaction!' He picks up the phone and dials his parents' number. Nerves creep up on me again. His mother answers.

'Truusje and I have news we wanted to share with you right away.'

'Oh?'

'Yes, we're expecting our first child!' Ricardo smiles at me. There's a moment of silence on the other end of the line, and I feel nauseous with anticipation.

'Oh darling, what wonderful news!'

Phew, what a relief. Ricardo promises his mother we'll visit

next weekend to celebrate the good news.

The next morning, I immediately call my doctor for an appointment, and luckily, I can get in at half past eight. Feeling a bit nervous, I sit down in the waiting room and wait my turn.

'Ms van Zanten?' I enter the examination room. 'What can I do for you?' the doctor asks. I explain that I took a pregnancy test and hand him the stick.

'Yes, according to this stick, you are indeed pregnant. But you're not here for nothing, so we'll do another test.' He gives me a container to pee in. Once back in the examination room, the doctor dips another stick into my urine.

'Now we wait for the result to show up. Do you have an idea of how far along you might be?'

'I've been feeling exhausted for a few weeks now, and my appetite has decreased during those weeks. Reflecting on it now, I suspect I may have already been pregnant.'

Finally, the doctor retrieves the stick from my urine.

'Indeed, Truusje, you're pregnant. Congratulations.' He warmly shakes my hand, and I can't help but grin. He gives me the midwife's phone number, and I head back home. I immediately call the midwife and schedule an appointment for early March. The estimate is that I'll be twelve weeks pregnant by then.

In the following days, the nausea persists.

Reluctantly, I have to call in sick at the swimming pool so I can rest well at home. Now that I know where it's coming from, I'll just have to accept it. However, the nausea worsens, and I feel that something's not right. I try to reassure myself that it's part of pregnancy and perfectly normal. I try to distract myself by focusing on what needs to be arranged for our baby.

To my surprise, Ricardo's behavior remains unchanged. He's still unemployed, and I don't think he's really making an effort to find a job. His drinking remains unchanged, as does his appetite for sex. But due to my pregnancy, I'm still fatigued and nauseous; I can't even think about sex! There are also so many thoughts running through my head. I'm very worried about our financial situation and how we'll manage – with a baby on the way – on just one income and benefits. Additionally, our

apartment is not exactly an ideal home for a young family. Where will our baby sleep? Where will we put the playpen, the baby bath, or the playmat? What items do we need to care for our baby? So many questions and so many worries about how we'll afford it all. But one thing I know for sure is that I will do everything in my power to protect the little human growing in my belly and give it everything it needs.

blood

It's Friday evening. Tomorrow, we're taking the train to Ricardo's parents to celebrate our pregnancy. Ricardo wants to have another beer, and that one turns into many more. I'm dead tired and nauseous, and I want to go to bed early to be well-rested for the train journey the next day. It doesn't take long before I fall asleep like a log.

Around eleven, Ricardo also comes to bed and holds me tightly. He plants kisses on my neck, and his hands start exploring my body again.

'Ricardo, no, stop. I don't want to. I'm so tired and nauseous, I can't do it. Please, stop.' I try to push his hands away, but it's challenging. He tries to hold me, but fortunately, the alcohol is working, and his reaction time is a bit slow. I wriggle out of his grasp and walk to the couch.

'Darling, come to bed now, I really want to make love to you. You look so fine right now. Do this for me.' Ricardo walks up to me.

'No, Ricardo, I don't want to. Can't you understand that!' I'm starting to get a bit irritated. Ricardo suddenly looks at me with a menacing glare.

'I want to make love to you, now,' he says in a commanding tone. I try to explain to him that I'm so tired and nauseous because of the pregnancy, and I need to regain strength for the journey to his parents the next day.

'I don't care about that. You're my girlfriend, and you're supposed to satisfy me. I want sex now.'

I get up from the couch and try to walk away from him. A fearful feeling comes over me. I don't know this side of Ricardo at all. This must be because of the alcohol. I don't know what to do except to stay away from him until he cools down. Ricardo approaches me. I'm cornered. I feel so suffocated that despite my fearful feeling, I push Ricardo away.

'No, I don't want to!' I shout in his face and try to get away quickly, but Ricardo blocks my way. With a fierce look on his face, he pushes me back. I slam hard against the wall; all the air is forced out of my lungs. I fall to the ground, right into the glass tank where my mice are kept. I feel the glass pressing into my lower back and buttocks. Ricardo looks at me with shock.

'Princess! I'm sorry, let me help you,' and he tries to grab my arms to help me up. I push him away.

'I can get up on my own,' I snap. But just as I stand up, I feel warm fluid running down my legs. I reach down with my hand and look at my fingers. Blood. Adrenaline rushes through my body. I look around and see blood stains everywhere. In a blind panic, I try to pull out as much glass from my buttocks as possible.

'Please help me stop the bleeding,' I ask Ricardo cautiously. He goes to get an old T-shirt and tears it into pieces. But to no avail; the fabric is too thin, and there is too much blood.

'Get my sanitary pad from the bathroom,' I say. Ricardo fetches it and also brings a roll of bandage. I hardly look at him. I'm angry instead of scared. How dare he? What possessed him to hurt me like this just for sex? I would kick him out the door right now; I'm so angry with him. But I'm too tired. I'll talk to him in the morning, I reassure myself.

'Ricardo, I'm going to bed now. And don't you dare touch me again,' and I look at him very intensely. With my lower back and buttocks wrapped in sanitary pads, strips of T-shirt, and bandages, I lie down cautiously on my side in bed. Ricardo quietly comes to lie next to me. I hear a sob. Is he crying?

'I'm so sorry, please forgive me, Princess. This shouldn't have happened.' I don't know what to say. I'm actually still very angry with him. Ricardo keeps apologising.

'It's okay,' I say at some point. Ricardo gives me a soft kiss on

the neck and gently puts an arm around me. My anger falls away. He didn't want to hurt me, either. It was just an accident.

As soon as the alarm goes off, I'm instantly awake. I try to turn off the alarm, but I can't stretch enough. Jesus, the pain! I can barely move; my body is so stiff, and it hurts so much. Carefully, I try to get up. Ricardo is also awake and looks at me with concern.

'Are you okay, Princess?' he asks.

'Yes, I'm fine, just feeling very stiff, and it's a bit painful,' I reassure him. 'Could you please get some band-aids for cuts for me? Then we can put clean dressings on the wounds.' Ricardo takes off to the village and returns a moment later with two packs of band-aids, especially for cuts. Together, we stick the band-aids on the wounds. Carefully, I put on my underwear. I realise I had better wear the new overalls I bought before the pregnancy. They lack a waistband that could rub off the band-aids.

After breakfast, we walk to the bus stop to catch the bus to the station. While waiting for the bus, I start feeling unwell; my legs feel like two strands of spaghetti. 'Ricardo, I'm not feeling well,' I manage to say softly before everything suddenly goes black before my eyes.

When I open my eyes again, I'm staring into the face of an ambulance paramedic. He gently taps my cheek.

'Ma'am, are you still with us? Can you hear me?' He looks at me assessingly. All I can manage is a groan, and instinctively, I grab my stomach.

'Is everything okay with my baby?'

The next moment, I'm laid down on the stretcher and pushed into the ambulance. I hear Ricardo calling my mother.

'Come quickly to the hospital; Truusje passed out at the bus stop. She's being taken to the hospital by ambulance.'

The doors close, and the ambulance immediately starts moving. I'm securely strapped on my back on the stretcher. Through the small rear windows, I see trees passing by. I smile.

'What's going on, ma'am?' asks the ambulance paramedic who

sees me smiling. I tell him exactly where we're driving at that moment.

'Haha, I think you've been to the hospital before, haven't you? If you can tell where we're driving by the trees.'

'Yes, I have indeed been to the hospital a few times, sir.' And before I know it, the ambulance ride is over, and we've arrived at the hospital.

Once inside, I'm wheeled into an examination room, and immediately, four doctors surround me. They fire their questions at me so quickly that I answer them automatically. Nausea starts creeping up again, and my head starts spinning. One of the doctors notices this, and within a few seconds, it's quiet around me. A moment of delightful peace.

'We'll first do an ultrasound of your abdomen to see how your baby is, Ms van Zanten,' says the doctor reassuringly. I relax and let myself sink back. As the ultrasound machine is brought in, my mother and Dineke, my sister, also enter. Suddenly, a kind of calmness comes over me. I don't know why, but the moment I see my mother and Dineke, I feel safe. A feeling I haven't had in a while.

Fortunately, the ultrasound shows that everything is fine with my baby. The heartbeat is perfect. What a lovely sound that is. And what a relief. I'm allowed to sit up again so they can examine my back. I feel ashamed when they undo my overalls and lift up my shirt. How am I going to explain what happened? With my mother and sister present! Before I know it, the nurse pulls a band-aid off my lower back, and immediately, I feel a warm liquid running down, and of course, I know what that is. My mother, my sister, and the two nurses all look at me questioningly.

As if the nurses suspect something, Ricardo is sent away to get drinks for everyone. One of the nurses comes close to me.

'You're safe here. You can tell us exactly what happened.' I look at her anxiously. What should I do now? If I tell the truth, Ricardo might be arrested, and I might lose him forever. That can't happen!

'I got dizzy and unfortunately fainted and ended up in the glass tank with my mice,' I lie, and at that moment, I realise that