

opening extract from the book of everything

written by

guus kuijer

published by pan macmillan

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In 1951, when this book begins, the Netherlands was still struggling with the consequences of its occupation by Germany during the Second World War. Germany invaded the Netherlands on 10 May 1940 and dominated the country for almost exactly five years, surrendering on 6 May 1945. In that time, some Dutch people collaborated with the Nazis and assisted in their operations; many others fought bravely in the Resistance, to shelter Jews and thwart the Nazis' repressive regime.

Before the Story Begins . . .

I think it's OK to tell you: this business with Thomas was quite unexpected for me too. I had really wanted to write quite a different book. A book that was moving, but also made you laugh. It was going to be about my happy childhood. About my father, who played his violin for me so beautifully before I went to bed. About my mother, who sang so sweetly. So touchingly! About my brothers and sisters, who worshipped me. About my friends, who came to share the cake on my birthday. It was going to be called *The Adventures of a Happy Child*. I imagined how it would be a favourite Christmas gift. Not just children, but fathers and mothers, grandparents and even the Prime Minister would read it in a single sitting. Preferably by candlelight, in front of a crackling wood fire and accompanied by a mug of hot chocolate.

But then I received a visit from Mr Klopper. I didn't know him. He didn't know me either, but he knew who I was because I am a world-famous

writer of children's books. I say this in all humility.

Mr Klopper was exactly the same age as me. His hair was white and the top of his head nearly bald. But Mr Klopper, too, had once been a child.

When we were sitting together in front of my crackling wood fire, Mr Klopper produced a thick exercise book from his bag. 'I know you as a writer with a great feeling for your fellow human beings,' he said.

I nodded, because that was true. I have enormous feeling for my fellow human beings. I could do with a bit less, actually.

'That is why I wanted you to read this.' He handed me the exercise book. 'I wrote this when I was nine,' he told me. 'I reread it lately. I think it is worthwhile. But I think you should read it first, because it may be too disrespectful.'

This shocked me. 'Disrespectful?' I said.

'Yes,' said Mr Klopper. 'I had an unhappy childhood, and that makes one disrespectful.'

I stared into the crackling wood fire. Disrespectfulness is a problem, especially in children's books. 'I'll have a look at it,' I said. 'I'll let you know.'

I saw Mr Klopper out. 'Are you still disrespectful these days?' I asked him in the doorway.

Mr Klopper nodded.

'At your age?'

'That's how it is,' he said and disappeared into the thickly falling snow.

That same day I read *The Book of Everything* in one sitting. It was indeed disrespectful. I myself am a very respectful person, but it is easy for me to talk. I had a happy childhood. That wonderful school, every day of the week. My teachers: Mr Sawtooth! Miss Knitpin! Every evening, my father's dulcet violin and my mother's sweet soprano! I don't have a single reason to be disrespectful, but unhappy children have their rights too, I think.

I rang Mr Klopper, and we arranged a meeting. Together, we spent many an evening in front of my crackling wood fire, and that is how this book came to be.

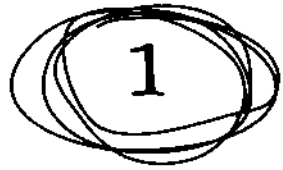
'Well, Thomas?' I asked on the final evening. For by this time we were on first-name terms. 'Did you manage to do it?'

'What, Guus?'

'Did you become happy?'

'Yes,' he said.

And we drank a mug of hot chocolate.



Thomas saw things no one else could see. He didn't know why, but it had always been like that. He could remember a violent hailstorm one day. Thomas leaped into a doorway and watched the leaves being ripped from the trees. He ran home.

'It's autumn all of a sudden,' he shouted. 'All the leaves have gone from the trees.'

His mother looked out of the window. 'Of course they haven't. What on earth makes you think that?'

Thomas could see she was right. The trees were still covered in leaves. 'Not here,' he said. 'But in Jan van Eyck Street all the leaves are on the ground.'

'Oh, I see,' said his mother. He could tell from her face that she didn't believe him.

Thomas went up to his room and took out the book he was writing. *The Book of Everything*, it was called. He picked up his pen and wrote, 'It was hailing so hard that the leaves were ripped from

the trees. This really happened, in Jan van Eyck Street in Amsterdam, when I was nine, in the summer of 1951.'

He looked out of the window to think, because without a window he couldn't think. Or maybe it was the other way round: when there was a window, he automatically started to think. Then he wrote, 'When I grow up, I am going to be happy.'

He heard his father coming home and thought, 'It is half past five and I still don't know what my book is about. What are books about, anyway?'

He asked this question during dinner.

'About love and things,' giggled his sister Margot, who went to high school and was as dumb as an ox.

But Father said, 'All important books are about God.'

'They are about God as well as about love,' said Mother, but Father glared at her so sternly it made her flush. 'Who reads books in this family?' he asked.

'You do,' she said.

'So who should know what books are about, you or I?'

'You,' said Mother.

'When I grow up, I'm going to be happy,'

Thomas thought, but he didn't say it out loud. He looked at his mother and could see that she was sad. He wanted to get up and throw his arms around her, but he couldn't do that. He didn't know why, but it was simply not possible. He stayed where he was, on his chair.

Margot giggled again. That was because she was so dumb.

'It was hailing so hard in Jan van Eyck Street that the leaves were ripped from the trees,' he said aloud.

Mother looked at him and smiled. It was as if he had thrown his arms around her after all, she looked so happy.

'This is a secret message only Mama understands,' he thought. That must be true, because Father and Margot didn't look up from their plates.

When Mother was tucking him in she asked, 'Are you going to have wonderful dreams, my little dreamer?'

Thomas nodded. 'Do you still think I'm a bit nice?' he asked.

'You're the nicest boy in the whole world,' she said. She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him. Thomas could feel she was crying a

little. He went ice cold inside and thought, 'God will punish Father terribly, with bubonic plague or something.'

But later, when he lay staring into the dark all alone, he grew afraid that God might be angry with him. He said, 'I can't help it if I think things. And I don't mean it, so it's not really bad. I don't even know what bubonic plague is.'

Then he fell asleep.

It had been so boiling hot for a week that there were tropical fish swimming in the canals. Thomas had seen them with his own eyes. They were swordtails. He knew that for sure because he had swordtails in his aquarium. They're cute little fish who do a funny dance in the water when they're in love.

He saw them swimming past, dozens at a time, as he was lying flat on his stomach in the grass at the water's edge on Reijnier Vinkeles Quay, not far from the girls' high school where Margot went. Dozens at a time. As he was walking home he wondered if anyone was going to believe him. Then he met Eliza, who was sixteen. She was in the same class as Margot and lived around the

corner. She had an artificial leg made of leather, which creaked like a new pair of shoes.

'There are tropical fish swimming in the canal,' he said.

Eliza stopped, so her leg stopped creaking.

Thomas felt a kind of electric shock, because he suddenly realized how lovely she was.

'That's because people flush them down the toilet when they go on holiday,' she said.

For a moment Thomas could not think, because Eliza kept looking at him with her dark blue eyes. 'And because of the heat,' he stuttered.

'Actually, there are crocodiles living in the sewer too,' said Eliza. She walked on, so her leg started creaking again.

Thomas followed her. 'Really?' he asked. 'Have you seen them yourself?'

'One of them,' said Eliza. 'The size of my little finger. In the toilet.' She held up her hand.

Thomas was shocked, because the hand only had its fourth finger. The rest of the fingers weren't there.

'Oh,' he said. He waited till Eliza had turned the corner. He felt the shock deep in his stomach. But in his head merry bells were ringing. 'She is lovely,' he thought. 'And she understands what I

see. She understands that what I see is really there. So Eliza knows it too.'

He walked home wondering, 'What does Eliza know?' It was hard trying to think without a window to look through. 'I can't explain what Eliza knows, but I know it too: that there is something strange about me.' And when he was home, sitting in front of his window, he thought, 'Where could her other fingers have gone?'

'Sunday is the only day you have to push like a handcart,' Thomas wrote in *The Book of Everything*. 'The other days roll down the bridge by themselves.'

On Sundays they went to church. Not to an ordinary church in the neighbourhood, but to a special church a long way from home. It was a church in an ordinary house, without a steeple. During the service, you could hear the people upstairs doing the vacuum-cleaning. Hardly anybody went to that church, but his family all did: Father, Mother, Margot and Thomas. Mother wore a hat, and Margot a scarf over her hair, because they had to in church. You weren't allowed to see a woman's hairdo. For men it didn't matter, because they didn't have a hairdo.

They walked, because God did not want trams to run on Sundays. The trams ran anyway, and that was not very nice for God to have to put up with.

There were two most shameful things. One was having been on the wrong side in the war. The other: riding in a tram on a Sunday.

Thomas simply thought the trams away. He thought away everything that was forbidden: the trams, the cars, the bicycles and the boys playing football in the street. The birds could stay, for they didn't know it was Sunday. Because they had no soul.

The church service was attended by about twenty ancient people who were deaf or blind or lame. And if there was nothing else wrong with them, they had at least two warts growing on their chin. Apart from Thomas and Margot, there were two other children. Two sisters. They were so pale under their headscarves they would obviously die soon. 'I give them till 1955,' Thomas wrote in *The Book of Everything*. 'By then they will be dead and buried. May they rest in peace for all eternity.' He wrote these words with a lump in his throat because it was so sad for those children. But unfortunately there was nothing to be done about it.

The service took a long time. The children of Israel dragged themselves murmuring through the wilderness and the pews were hard.

The good bit was the singing back and forth. That went like this:

A bald gentleman in a long black dress with lots of small buttons sang a line by himself. Then the people had to sing a line back all together. Again and again. Turn and turn about. The black dress sang something different every time, but the people always responded with the same line: 'Musical Lord, forgive our miserable singing.'

Thomas joined in at the top of his voice. He tried to count the buttons on the black dress at the same time, but he kept losing count.

On the way home Thomas noticed that Father was cross about something. Father said nothing and looked straight ahead. At the table, after the prayer, he said, 'Thomas, stand up.'

Thomas was just about to put a forkful of potato and peas into his mouth. His fork stayed halfway up.

'Stand up?' he said.

'Stand up,' said Father.

'Why?' Mother asked, worried.

'Because I say so,' replied Father.

'Oh, that is why,' said Margot.

Thomas put his fork down on his plate and stood up.

'Hee hee hee,' Margot giggled, because she was as dumb as an onion. You couldn't understand how she kept getting eighties and nineties for all her subjects.

'Let us hear what you were singing during the litany,' said Father with a stern look on his face. The litany was the singing back and forth in church.

Thomas looked at his mother.

'Look at me and sing,' said Father.

Thomas took a deep breath and sang: 'Musical Lord, forgive our miserable singing.'

Then it became terribly quiet. Before his eyes, Thomas saw a black dress with more than a thousand little buttons. Two sparrows on the window sill were playing bright trumpets, because they didn't know it was Sunday.

Mother said, 'He is only nine. He doesn't do it deliberately.'

Father was silent. Solemnly he put his fork and knife down on his plate and stood up. He grew

taller and taller until his head was higher than the lamp over the table.

Every living thing on earth held its breath. The sparrows on the window sill choked on their trumpets. The sun went dark and the sky shrank.

'What are you doing?' Mother cried. She jumped up and pulled Thomas back.

'Go away, woman,' Father roared. 'I am speaking to your son.'

But Mother pulled Thomas further away from the table and put her arms round his shoulders.

Then Father's hand flashed out suddenly and slapped her on the cheek. She staggered back and let go of Thomas.

The angels in heaven covered their eyes with their hands and sobbed loudly, because that is what they always do when a man hits his wife. A profound sadness settled over the earth.

'Papa,' whispered Margot.

'Silence!' Father thundered. 'Thomas, upstairs. And don't forget the spoon.'

Thomas turned, went to the kitchen and pulled the wooden spoon from the spoon rack. Then he ran upstairs to his room. He sat down by the window and stared out, but he couldn't manage to think. The world was empty. Everything there had

ever been had been thought away by someone. There was only sound. He heard the slap smack into his mother's soft cheek. He heard all the slaps Mother had ever suffered, a rain of slaps, as if it was hailing in Jan van Eyck Street and the leaves were being ripped off the trees. He pressed his hands over his ears.

When Thomas had been looking at nothing for an eternity, he heard, right through his hands, his father walking heavily up the stairs. Thump, thump. Thump, thump.

'Everything is gone,' he thought. 'Nothing exists any longer. I don't either.'

Thump, thump. Thump, thump.

There he was. The man appeared like a tree in the doorway. He came up to Thomas and held out his hand. Thomas gave him the wooden spoon. Then the man sat down on the stool next to Thomas's bed. He did not say anything. There was no need, for Thomas knew exactly what he had to do. He took off his trousers. Then his underpants. He lay face down across his father's knees, his bare bottom up.

The hitting began. The wooden spoon swished through the air.

Thwack!

The pain cut through his skin like a knife.

Thwack!

At first, Thomas thought of nothing, but after the third hit, words came into his head.

Thwack! God . . .

Thwack! will . . .

Thwack! punish . . .

Thwack! him . . .

Thwack! terribly . . .

Thwack! with . . .

Thwack! all . . .

Thwack! the . . .

Thwack! plagues . . .

Thwack! of . . .

Thwack! Egypt . . .

Thwack! because . . .

Thwack! he . . .

Thwack! hit . . .

Thwack! Mama . . .

The sentence was finished, but the hitting went on. For a moment, his head was empty. But then they came again: terrible words, words he had never thought before:

Thwack! God . . .

Thwack! does . . .

Thwack! not . . .

Thwack! exist . . .
Thwack! God . . .
Thwack! does . . .
Thwack! not . . .
Thwack! exist . . .

When at last the hitting stopped and he pulled his underpants and trousers up over his fiery bottom, he knew that the Heavenly Father had been beaten out of him forever.

'"Merciful Lord",' said Father. 'Repeat after me.'

'Merciful Lord,' said Thomas.

'"Forgive us miserable sinners",' said Father.

'Forgive us miserable sinners,' said Thomas.

'You stay up here,' said Father. 'You'll repeat this sentence properly one hundred times and then you will come down.' He stumbled down the stairs. Thump, thump. Thump, thump.

Thomas stayed standing up because his bottom felt like a pincushion. He stared out of the window and whispered, 'Please, God, will you please exist. All the plagues of Egypt, please. He has hit Mama and it wasn't the first time!'

God was silent in every language. The angels tried to dry their tears, but their hankies were so soaked through that it started raining even in the deserts.