

Hoi Maya

An Ongezellig Fan-fiction

by wormzg

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June 26

Hoi Maya!

It's Coco; I'm writing to you just to – you know – check up on you and let you know how things are going. You know how much I love my dear sister!

I've been doing well, all things considered. Mymy and I have been talking about taking a small trip together, but we're not sure where to just yet. I brought the idea up to her initially. I feel like I should spend more time with her, what with everything that's happened; I just think it would be good for us. Mymy also seems to be doing well, by the way. Although, she doesn't seem to be so passionate about The Netherlands any more – at least outwardly. It's as though she's become a bit more withdrawn, or, perhaps, self-aware? She doesn't have as much of an acid tongue any more, which, to be honest, I'm quite thankful for. Gosh, she could be such a handful sometimes.

Also, the band that I'm in – Running in the 60's – is still going strong. Zoey's been bringing along her laptop to our practice sessions, coupled with this strange red device she calls an "audio interface". I'm not sure how it works, but it allows us to record our music onto her laptop! Cleo is, as expected, over the moon – although, as a side-effect, sometimes I think she's now become a bit overbearing. She is adamant that we should create an album and release it to the world, but – as I'm sure you're aware – I'm not entirely confident about the quality of our music. Is it really up to scratch? But, honestly, I do admire Cleo's passion! In fact, she declared a few weeks ago that we were giving up "folk-eurobeat" because she was growing tired of it (with no input from the rest of the band, of course). She wants us to go more into a "gothic" direction, as she described it. To be honest, I'm easy with whatever we do, as long as I'm with my friends! I must admit though, Maya, I felt a strong sense of relief after this announcement. I did, in the deepest recesses of my heart, feel that this "folk-eurobeat" idea was – how would you put it – unconventional? And probably not in the good way, either. But again, I admire her passion, and I'm sure it's going to take her far in this world.

I do often think, though, that I'm letting the band down. I mean, I'm quite sure I have the least musical ability out of the four of us. Sure, I practice my drumming, and I think I'm alright, but – you know – the others are just so good at what they do. And I often just go with whatever they want to do, floating along, like a lily pad on a rushing river. Can I live up to Cleo's ambition? Don't get me wrong, Maya, I still enjoy being in the band, it's just sometimes I do wonder if they would be better off with another drummer. Someone who is better than me.

I do think a lot about that time I invited you to play the triangle in our band. I truly only wanted you to be happy, to be included. But, of course, I was blinded by my bubbly optimism; I should've known that I was pushing you, that I was inadvertently humiliating you. I can't believe I was so stupid. I'm so sorry, Maya, for being so careless. Often times, a searing hot deluge of shame and embarrassment will engulf my head like a tidal wave when I think back to moments like that. I should've known better. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me for being such a bad sister.

Liefde,

Coco

July 3

Hoi Maya!

It's your darling Coco again! I'm writing to you from a hotel room in Bruges, Belgium, with Mymy wrapped snugly in her thick blanket on the bed to my side, snoring away like our Grandpa used to. And yes, you've read this correctly: I convinced Mymy to take a trip with me to Belgium. Gosh, it took some convincing, though.

I had remembered seeing pictures of Bruges in a brochure that I leafed through in the dentist's. I was captivated by it's quaint beauty: the crooked brick houses that seemed to sink into glistening canals; ancient towers that sprung out of the skyline; green, twisting vines that wrapped around rustic stone walls. I had made up my mind that, one day, I would go.

Now, I know that Mymy's proud, beating heart for the Netherlands has slowed it's pulse recently – but convincing her to go to Belgium was still a herculean effort. She accused me of being a traitor, unworthy of the “Schoppenboer” name. I did that thing where I narrowed my eyes at her – gave her the ‘Coco stare’ – and she straightened up, a bit. She would still insist, though, that Belgium was off limits. We argued back and forth a while. I tried explaining to her that it wasn't moral to hold such a strong prejudice against a whole country's people. She would riposte with “Belgians aren't a race – it's the *country* I have a problem with”. You know Mymy – she is stubborn! So, eventually, I had to play along with her silly game: I explained to her that Bruges, specifically, was a glorious, historic city built by Lowland hands; Bruges didn't know the name ‘Belgium’ until the late 18th century. Now, I'm not sure how accurate that was – I'm not a history buff after all – but it seemed to spark something in Mymy's mind. She bit her lip, lowered her gaze, and told me that she'd think about it. A day later, and she agreed! I wonder if she must have done some googling in her own time, or something. I must admit, Maya, I was quite proud of myself.

So we got the train from Amsterdam Centraal, bound for Brussels first. We watched the polders whizz by the windows and the clouds gradually open up to reveal a beautiful blue sky. I sensed a slight melancholy from Mymy as we approached the Belgian border, which I admit, I found a bit funny. I just don't understand how you can have such a passionate hate for one country! We passed a barn house that looked a bit dilapidated, and Mymy didn't hesitate to point it out, no doubt insinuating that it was occupied by lowly Belgians.

Her tune would change once we arrived at the city – gosh, Maya, that first impression of the main square: we were surrounded by these magical medieval buildings with the belfry looming titanic over the market. It was just like the brochure. It was quite obvious to Mymy that no matter how hard she might try, she couldn't deny the beauty and grace of this place – despite it being Belgian. She would,

though, begin to complain – almost incessantly – about her aching feet. I mean, admittedly, we did walk endlessly around town. But she would whine constantly that her toes are burning: “Coco! They’re blistering! I’m pretty sure I’ve got blisters, Coco. Please, can we just sit down somewhere?” I don’t mean to write to you just to complain about Mymy. I love her too, obviously. Just – you know how she can be sometimes.

But we needed this, truly. It’s good to leave the weight of the world behind for just a few days, to hang your aching, racing mind at home and escape to where the air is fresh and no thoughts can bother you. I just wish that you could be with us, Maya. I think, despite your reluctance to step outside, you would’ve loved being here with us.

Liefde,

Coco

July 8

Hoi Maya!

Mymy and I are relaxing back at home now. We decided, in the warm comfort of the evening, to play *Mens erger je niet*, just to pass the time. Every time I think about that game, it reminds me of you. I remember, a while ago now, asking you if you’d like to join Mymy and I, and your pupils sort of constricted in horror and you croaked out a stern “no.” It did, in truth, break my heart to know that you just didn’t have it in you to spend time with us.

Of course, as you know, you did warm up to the idea eventually. It was a few months later, wasn’t it? I offered you the chance to join us again, and our gazes locked. Your face flushed red and I saw you shaking, but you parted your lips and with great strength whispered “yes, I’d like to, this time.” Oh, Maya, you didn’t know how happy I was. I buried it, of course, so as to not be overbearing or embarrassing – I knew you wouldn’t have liked that saccharine show of affection. But a warmth took over me deep in my veins. Right in front of me, evidence that my sister was getting better, finally opening her heart to the world.

We sat under the golden light of my bedroom, on my bed, and I remember Mymy slightly teasing you for deciding to join us. I can’t exactly remember what she said – something to the tune of “look who decided to come out of her cave” – but I returned some chide remark her way. I saw your eyes dart to the floor and you hid your face from us. I distinctly remember that familiar wash of sorrow passing over my forehead – it’s a feeling that’s hard to forget. I didn’t want you to feel ashamed for spending time with us. I knew that it took you so much effort and deliberating to finally push out a “yes” to my offer.

You didn’t say much as we played. But that didn’t matter to me. I am being completely honest, Maya, when I say that your presence there was enough. To have all three Schoppenboer sisters in the same

room getting along – it was like a blessing to me. I thought to myself that this was it: the starting point, a new beginning, the family would come together, be united, like we used to be all those years ago. Remember? Like that one time a rare snowfall came over the Groene Hart and dusted the ground – a beautiful blanket of glistening winter white inviting us, calling out to us – and we ran outside, all three of us together, laughing. Papa came to the door and leant against the frame to watch over us carefully. We wanted to build a snowman, and I remember you and Mymy joyfully rolling up snow, puffing white steam from your lips into the cool air as you giggled. When it was done, the snowman seemed to stand as proud as Mymy did. You looked to me and blinked, your eyelashes brushing against the chill air, flakes of snow clinging on to them, marking your eyes with flashes of crystalline light, and you smiled. A bright, beaming smile. It could've melted all the snow surrounding us. And that smile has stayed with me forever. It is a particularly vivid memory, one that has made a nest in my heart.

When we were playing that game in my room, it reminded me of those times. It was a lovely, warm sensation. And I remember – distinctly – I caught Mymy once again trying to trick me by swapping the pieces around on the board, and as I caught her, I looked up, and there it was: your smile. It returned. It was a guarded, repressed smile, one that shrank almost immediately as I met your eyes. But I saw it, Maya. And it made me very happy indeed.

Liefde,

Coco

July 17

Hoi Maya,

I was thinking about you again. I do that a lot. I really, truly can't help but feel that I've been an awful sister to you, Maya. It's a guilt that permeates my entire being. And I know admitting it won't make things right – but I just want you to know how terribly sorry I am. I really feel awful about it – I really do.

I know how much you don't trust others. I know how much it pains you to put yourself out there. I know how much it makes you anxious to talk to others. And yet, knowing these things, I still seem to push you too hard.

Valentine's day flowers – gosh, what was I thinking? I just thought – naively – that it would make you happy. I think a lot about that one Valentine's day that I completely ruined for you; that day I gave you two roses. I'm such an idiot. I should've known that I was humiliating you. And it must've seemed like it was on purpose, too. It really wasn't, Maya. I really, truly, would never do such a thing to you on purpose. I'm writing this to you, not to make you feel guilty – I'd never want that – but to tell you that I really do love you. There was never any malice in what I did. I just wanted what I selfishly thought was best for you, not taking into consideration your own feelings. How you might want it to be approached. Whether you wanted my help at all.

And the worst of all – the death threat during the history presentations. Maya, that wasn't me. I don't know what possessed me in that moment, but please, I assure you, it wasn't me at all. Gosh, how much I hate myself for what I did to you that day. I really am a terrible sister, aren't I? I think about that moment a lot. It invades my mind every day. My throat tightens and I feel like I'm choking every time that vision appears before me. I start to shake. I want to cry. Maya – this will never be enough – but I am, from the complete depths of my soul, from the bedrock of my heart, truly, awfully sorry. I don't expect you to forgive me. I understand. Please, open your heart to the foulest hatred you can possibly conjure and direct it to me. Perhaps it would finally set me right.

Liefde,

Coco

July 21

Hoi Maya,

It's the time of the year again where storm-clouds come and loom over the family, projecting a melancholy darkness onto the days.

I didn't really do anything today. It's unlike me, as you know. I sat in my room this afternoon, and watched the walls until patterns seemed to shift and turn in the dry paint. The walls then seemed to inch forward, closer and closer, slowly, my pulse raising, my heart knocking on its cage. They crept up menacingly like they wanted something from me. My room shrank and I seemed to be suffocated there. I felt like I couldn't breathe any more. I lifted up my hands and saw the artificial light rays from my lamp take form between my fingers and delicately thread between them. I saw the form of my hands silhouetted before me against the light – blank, description-less, only an outline, something that moments before was full of colour and skin and blood and muscle; I saw them dark and black and realised that my whole soul had been turned dark. All the air inside me had been sucked out into the vacuum of my constricting, claustrophobic bedroom. My eyes began to water and I felt the floor beneath me collapse. I was falling, but I couldn't scream. I just let it happen. I fell into a deep, blackening void. I was falling, falling.

And then my room snapped back into place. I heard my name being shouted. It was Mama. She had been shouting for a while. She reminded me that I was to go to rugby practice soon, and asked if I was ready. I silently shook my head and whispered I wasn't. I was sweating and breathing heavily and my eyes were probably wide open. Mama saw and asked if I was okay. I said no. I skipped rugby practice today, Maya. Its the first time I've ever voluntarily skipped it. I had to.

I don't know what that was, Maya. I don't know what overcame me this afternoon. It scared me. It was like I was having a nightmare, but I was awake. I was trapped. There was nothing I could do about it. Mama looked exasperated and stern when she came into my room. It's not like me to be like this, to be so unprepared.

I feel like I'm slipping. I never used to be such a mess, spending afternoons doing nothing but sitting in my room. I used to do so much. Last week, I met with the band again. Of course, they were eager to start recording a new song. And, well, so was I! But – I don't know what happened, Maya. I just faltered. We were going through the song, then Cleo told everyone to stop, looked back at me, and told me I was rushing. I said I was sorry. It happened again. And again. I remember Zoey looking me right in the eyes and in a piercing tone asking me what was wrong with me that day. I just broke down, Maya. I just cried. I told them I didn't know. I told them I was a terrible drummer and they'd be better off without me. I don't know why, it just came pouring out of me. But there was a slight bit of truth to it, don't you think? Surely, I'm not good enough for them. Yfke came and hugged me and in that warm embrace whispered that it was okay, that there was no pressure. Cleo called off the session and said I should probably get some rest. And that's what I did. I just came back home, laid down in my bed, and slept.

I'll stay strong though – at least for you, Maya. I must.

Liefde,

Coco

July 28

Hoi Maya,

It was me, wasn't it?

I did this to you. I made you withdraw. I took Noga away from you, the thing you loved the most. I didn't even think about you. I never thought enough about you. I truly thought I was doing what was best, but clearly I didn't actually know what that was. I'm so selfish, Maya. It truly is all my fault, isn't it? I don't know what to say. I don't think an apology is enough. What could I possibly do? What actions could possibly remedy what I did to you?

I'm sorry Maya – I truly don't know what to say. I love you. I really do. Please believe me.

Liefde,

Coco

August 1

Hoi Maya,

The day has come, once again. It's been exactly two years since you took your own life. Today is an immense struggle to get through, for all of us.

Maya, I will never forget that night that fell on us, two years ago. The images have been seared into my mind, the memories continue to pierce my soul. I was the one that found you first. I knocked on your door, keeping in mind your request for privacy, and heard no answer. I knocked again. An empty silence emanated from your room. Normally, a silence wouldn't be too alarming. It wouldn't have been unusual for you to be napping, or for you to be wearing your headphones, engrossed in your music. But this was a silence that ate at me, a silence that shook my bones and churned my stomach. Maya, I will never forget what I saw when I placed my hand on your door handle and creaked the door slightly ajar. My heart was ripped from my chest. The world collapsed around me. A thousand flames lit in my head. Oh God, Maya, it was the most awful feeling I have ever felt. I screamed; I belted with the force of a million furnaces, my throat aflame, my knees buckling. I couldn't stand straight any more; I fell immediately to the floor, my bones shaking, on the verge of turning to dust. I felt sick. I felt I was disintegrating. The world seemed to zoom out and spin violently and I couldn't see straight. Maya, when I saw your body hanging limp, your skin pale and livid, your face drooping, your eyes devoid of all life – I have to be honest – I wanted nothing more than to join you in that moment. I wanted to plunge a knife deep into my own heart.

The worst part was Mama. Oh, poor Mama. She bolted up the stairs after hearing my scream and burst into your room. The wailing; I can still hear it today. Maya, it was truly, truly awful. I have never seen Mama's face so twisted and distorted. Her screams pierced the walls and shook the ground beneath us. They never seemed to stop. She clutched and squeezed your lifeless body and screamed your name over and over again, as if the intensity would reanimate you. She clawed at your face, in a desperate denial of the scene that beheld her. I can still see it all so clearly. The sun streamed through your window in a cruel irony. Mama's tears – there were so many – flooded her cheeks. She howled and howled, a hurricane from inside her ripping through the room. "My baby! My baby's gone!" on repeat, over and over again.

I had never seen in my whole life Mymy cry up until that moment. It sounded like her throat was going to rip apart, Maya. She couldn't bare to open her eyes. We held each other tightly and cried into each other and felt our rapid heartbeats against our skin. Our tears pooled together in an intense, passionate solidarity. Mymy didn't speak a word – only cries of raw anguish. Language was useless. How could you squeeze the raging storm within us through the limiting paradigm of Language? We wailed uncontrollably like a spectre possessed our bodies. Papa rushed past us and held Mama. We were catatonic; words meant nothing any more. Our cheeks were crusted with tears. To see you in your room, not only among the chair and the table and the computer and the carpet, but equally as lifeless – as an object, a cadaver – nothing made sense any more. The devil himself must have cursed our home, that day.

Last night, I had the most wonderful dream, Maya. You and I were riding horses along this prairie; it stretched infinitely into the horizon in all directions. The grass was a soft gold and swayed peacefully in the breeze, and that breeze tickled our cheeks and flushed them red. There were flocks of birds dotting the great blue canvas of the sky, punctuating the thin white clouds behind them. I remember I was somewhat anxious of falling; I was bouncing and rocking around and didn't feel secure on the back of

my horse. I looked across at you – on top of your steed – and you had tears in your eyes; but when your gaze met mine, you beamed the most beautiful and radiant smile. I could see the sunbeams dancing off of your wrinkled cheeks. In that moment, all anxieties immediately evaporated away. You said to me – in that calming, raspy voice of yours – that you were so happy. You told me that you loved me. I reflected your smile back at you and I said I loved you too, and that I wouldn't want to share this wonderful moment with anyone else. The breeze picked up and there was a gush of cold wind that tangled our hair and smacked it against our foreheads and we laughed. It was so perfect. That image of your face, reddened and laughing, with your hair twisting and flicking against it, with the bright and golden sun luminous behind – it was like a gorgeous, transcendent painting that nestles itself in your heart and stays with you forever, one they would hang up in the Rijksmuseum. When I woke up I wailed; I clutched my pillow and cried into it for what felt like hours. The dream was so vivid; it felt so real. Why did it have to be ripped away from me, so carelessly? The things I would do, possessions I would give up, awful acts that no one would ever think of doing – least of all me – to be riding those horses across that prairie with you, Maya. I clutched my pillow so tightly and intensely wished it was you. God, I wish that I slipped into that deep sleep forever and that pristine dream carried on endlessly, completely enveloping and replacing the life that I currently know. I will always think of you, every single day. I will never forget you. You will always be loved as long as I live. You are my beloved and amazing and beautiful and perfect sister – blood be damned – and nothing will ever change that, Maya.

Liefde,

Coco

August 3

Hoi Maya,

Remember – when we were very young – that playground we used to go to all the time? The one where in the summer months the vibrant hawthorns would hang over it and scatter the sunlight across the ground as we played? You, in particular, loved playing there – back when all of us got along, before I had ruined everything...

Well, Mymy and I decided to revisit it today. We wanted to reminisce: to revivify your soul, even for just a temporary moment. As we wandered over, it was exactly how we remembered. The sun streaming through those hawthorns, and that calming summer breeze swaying the leaves and cooling our cheeks. The clouds rolled through the sky peacefully like a daydream. No one had yet claimed it; it stood solitary, as if it were waiting just for us.

Mymy rushed immediately to the monkey bars. Even after all these years, they're still her favourite. She climbed up and gripped the first bar, dangling there, slightly helplessly, and yelped like a frightened cat. She wriggled her legs back and forth and swung her head towards me: "Ah! Coco, help!", and from her face she cracked a wide smile and laughed. Her cheeks flushed red and so did mine. I chuckled as I wandered over, arms outstretched, ready to hold her if need be. "Looks like you're not as nimble as you

once were!” I chortled. Mymy’s freckles seemed to dance across her cheeks, basking in the golden light of the afternoon. She looked up, bit her lip, and swung with a mighty force towards the next bar, stretching her arm out and grasping it with her hand. She said: “Look! I did it! Looks like I’ve still got it in me”, and a prideful, smug grin crept across her face. Suddenly, she lost her grip and fell, crashing to the floor, toppling me over in the process, resulting in both of us in a heap on the floor. “Oh my gosh! Are you okay!?” I exclaimed – admittedly smiling and through slight bursts of laughter.

I caught a glimpse of Mymy’s face and saw a glistening tear pouring from the side of her eye, and I panicked. “Oh- Mymy! Where are you hurt?” I said, brushing the hair out of her face and looking into her eyes.

“Maya,” she said. “Why isn’t Maya here?”

Her reply stung me. Then the floodgates opened. Mymy’s shell burst open and a cascade of emotions poured out like a violent storm. She gripped my body tightly and wept uncontrollably into my shoulder. “Maya should be here and she’s not! She should be running around and laughing and playing with us and swinging on the bars too, but she isn’t! Why!?”

Mymy seemed to choke on her tears. She wailed and sniffled and continued to hold me as if her life depended on it. I couldn’t reply. I couldn’t offer any words to her. I have to admit, Maya – I wonder the same thing. I held her head in my chest and buried my face in her hair.

Maya, I will never forget these words Mymy cried to me: “I did this to her. I teased and mocked her ruthlessly. What fucking sister does that? I made her feel unwelcome in her own home. In her own family. Her own *blood* family. And for what? This!? What the fuck is wrong with me, Coco? Why? Oh God – Coco, I want to die. It should’ve been me. I want to die.” They pierced my heart like a spear and turned its intricate ventricles and atriums inside out. My mind whirled. Mymy’s fault? How could it be Mymy’s fault? It’s *my* fault that you’re gone, Maya. Not hers. She continued after a while: “She wouldn’t be gone if it weren’t for me. I could’ve helped her. I could’ve done something. I could’ve- I don’t- I..”

I cried and whispered it’s not her fault and it never was her fault while brushing her scalp and delicately threading my fingers through her hair.

We must’ve sat there, collapsed in each other’s arms, for hours. The shadows bent and lurched sideways, traversing our bodies, as the day began to fade. We could’ve disintegrated there, Maya. We could’ve let our bodies fade away into the air, there, the trees and leaves bending and arching above us. We could’ve drifted soundly into Mother Nature’s bosom and become one with the endless natural tapestry that wrapped around us. We could’ve become a solitary shrine to your parting with this mortal coil. A signal of our unending grief. Worn smooth by the weather.

You're a delicate flower, a blinking star, a lakeside breeze, a wave lapping against the stones, a sentinel evergreen, a drifting cloud, a beautiful angel – wings stretched, glowing white, unlike anything else – and I want nothing but to see you again, Maya.

Liefde,

Coco

August 4

Maya.

Please come back. Please, please come back. It's been two years – two whole years – and I want nothing more than to see your face, to hear you breathe, to lay on your stomach and feel it rise up and shrink back down, to see you smile, to see you cry, to feel your soft, tan skin, to hold you again, to tell you it's going to be okay, to stroke your hair, your beautiful, long, black hair, to play games with you, to ride bikes with you, down our street, next to the canals, to go to school with you, to help you with your homework, to laugh with you, to cry with you, to run with you, to eat dinner with you, to live life with you –

Please, for the love of God, come back to us. Come back to me. I'm sorry, Maya. I'm so sorry. It's all my fault. I'm sorry. Maya, life has no meaning any more. It's hollow. It's empty. It's silent. Maya, please. I love you, I love you, I love you. I never meant for this. I'm so unbelievably sorry – for how I treated you, for all the times I humiliated you, for all the times I made you angry, for all the times I pushed you over the edge. I love you, Maya. Please.

I can replace you. I can take myself out of this world if it means you come back. You deserve life much more than me. I can plunge myself into that deep, dark oblivion, Maya. If it meant you came back – floating down from heaven like an angel, caressing the soil with your grace, colouring this gray Earth with your presence – I would do it without a second thought. Please.

Oh – my apologies. I'm making the paper wet. I'll wrap this letter up now, so I don't ruin it further.

Liefde,

Coco

August 5

Hoi Maya,

The Earth, in its cruel indifference, continues to rotate. The sun rises and falls – dawn choruses continue to graze my ears and wake me from my deep slumbers. I continue to live; I breathe, my

diaphragm rising and falling, my arteries pulsing, my muscles contracting and relaxing, my bones shifting and my tendons curling. I feel the cool air rising up my nostrils and settling itself in my lungs.

It never goes away, grief. You sort of hope that it will, that one day you'll just get over it, as they say. But you don't. Maya, your absence is a permanent scar. There is a chasm deep within my body. We tend to think of grief as this beautiful thing, some sort of rite of passage where you grow as a person and there's a light at the end of the tunnel, like a melodramatic scene in a movie where the main character reminisces about his long lost love and a single tear forms from his otherwise stoic eyes and rolls down his cheek. It's not like that at all. My heart labours to keep me alive; I feel a deep, hollow pain in my chest every day, especially when I'm thinking of you, Maya. My blood flows coarsely. Still, I live on – I know that's what you want. I know you want me to keep going, to lead a normal life. I'm sure you don't like the fact that your leaving has had such a profound effect on me. But it has, Maya. And I simply just can't deny it. I'm not telling you this to make you feel guilty, of course. That's the last thing I want to do. I'm trying to make it clear to you just how much I love you, how much my soul aches for you, like I should have done years ago, while you were still here. I can't forgive myself. I know I did this to you, Maya. I killed you – I know I did. I know it's my fault, and it plagues my mind every day; it gnaws at my neurons and often leaves me paralysed in the cold darkness of the evenings. Another evening spent without you. God, fuck, I'm so sorry. I walked past your room recently and the door was left slightly open. I spotted Greg, your plushie; I saw his eyes, and they seemed tired. He has been left in your room, alone, standing guard – or perhaps, sleeping softly in your bed, dreaming of you. I welled up at the sight of him. His plush body sank into your bed and he seemed like he missed you. I miss you, Maya.

Your absence has inhabited me, fully. When I'm in the supermarkets running errands, and the I hear the hum of the fluorescent lights, when they flicker and illuminate the aisles that stretch across the cold, gray interior – nothing matters. I don't register the hundreds of products stacked on the shelves. All I think about is you. All I can feel is the hole that has been bored into my gut. My throat tightens and dries up. Swallowing becomes painful. My lips tremble. When I'm doing homework, writing essays, cooking meals for Mama and Papa, watching TV, playing in my band, putting on my shoes, walking parallel to the canals, sleeping, eating, blinking, breathing – the grief looms and hangs over me like a dreadful cumulonimbus, its unrelenting rainfall weathering my body, carving your soul into my skin. God, Maya, I just don't know what to do. The world feels so bleak and colourless without you here any more. And I know you would scoff at me saying this; you would never believe it. But it's true. By God, it's true. And it pains me so much to know that I did this to you. That I contorted your pure, innocent soul. I ripped from you the things you loved – Noga, your parents, friends... Maya, I hope you know how much I'm sorry. It feels like a thousand hot daggers stabbing me in the stomach, slashing and twisting my intestines. I know I deserve it, truly.

Liefde,

Coco

August 14

Hoi Maya,

As you know well – I’m no stranger to grief.

My memories of my distant past often fade in and out like passing phantoms – back on the farm, in Bloemfontein. Certain feelings are still clear and vivid to me: the pale orange dust that blanketed the vast South African plains that stretched into the horizon; the warm, gentle breeze; Mother and Father’s faces, every so often; the way the sun would make them glow. I was very young back then. Fragile and innocent.

I can’t honestly say I know much about Mother and Father. Ever since I came to the Netherlands, I’ve tried to repress that part of me. You, Maya, are my family now. Mama and Papa – Mymy too. At least it feels like that’s how it’s always been. We’re not linked by blood, but I feel a deep, spiritual, transcendent bond between us. Of course, this doesn’t mean the passing of my – well – *old* family didn’t leave a permanent scar.

I remember Mother telling me about her new child. She broke the news to me that I would have a new sibling: someone to play with and to grow up with. I was taken aback, slightly stunned, but naturally, mostly happy. I remember beaming at Mother and telling her sternly that it had better be a girl. She laughed and had to explain to me that it was out of her control – that it was up to the forces of nature whether or not I’d be getting a little brother or a little sister. I remember being slightly frustrated at this. But the wonder of new life being incubated within Mother’s own bosom was instilled in me.

I remember waking up most mornings, in that old house, and running down the stairs, meeting Mother – who was usually bleary eyed and standing beneath the old grandfather clock – and looking at her stomach, ever-growing, holding behind that membrane the promise of a new consciousness. I remember asking her every day, over and over, when will it come out? She would always answer: “Not yet, Coco – not yet, my little bokkie”. I remember asking: “Is that how I got here?”, pointing at her stomach, and her answering, with a lilting laugh: “Yes, my little liefing, you grew inside me!” I remember being somewhat disgusted by this, but at the same time feeling a pleasant warmth from this information. The fact that I was so naturally and physically tied to Mother made me feel safe, warm, and at home.

Maya, the accident ruined me. It completely ripped from me the world I knew. The Earth had folded inside out. My home was no longer my home. The worst of all – my sibling. Gone. They didn’t even take their first breath, they didn’t smell the fresh air, they didn’t have the light of the sky brush their eyes, they didn’t know what it meant to smile, what it meant to laugh, what it meant to cry, what it meant to love. They never saw my face. They never knew me. I never knew them. The cruel and unforgiving spirit of this Earth had bared its predator teeth and killed that beautiful baby in it’s cradle. All belief in a good, just world shattered immediately – and I was so young, too.

Maya: thank God, thank all the Gods who may inhabit the heavens, that I had the opportunity to see your face. I saw your smile. I saw you breathe. I've held you in my arms. I've felt your heartbeat. Thank you, thank you, thank you so much for this blessing, Maya. I will never forget each contour of your face, each strand of your hair, each dancing, glistening shine in your eyes. They will forever occupy my mind. Your memory will live on as long as I live on. I will never, ever forget you. You truly are the sibling I was meant to have. You really are my sister. Thank you so much.

Liefde,

Coco

September 21

Hoi Maya,

Happy Birthday.

You would've been nineteen, today. Mama, Papa, Mymy and I gathered to bake you a birthday cake together. It was slagroomtaart – one of your favourites. I helped Mama with the baking; Mymy and Papa decorated it. Papa bought those candles shaped like the numbers one and nine, and when we lit them, they melted almost immediately, and we scrambled to blow the flames out. We looked at the wilted candles and laughed; all of our cheeks flushed red and our smiles were vibrant, breaking open like wounds, and we all broke down cry-laughing. Grief had rushed in and tangled itself with our joy. It was a strange mix of emotions. We all folded into each other and felt the warmth of each other's bodies. Of course, there was a distinct feeling of emptiness: you weren't there. I couldn't feel the warmth of your body. I couldn't grasp on to your arms. I couldn't see the beautiful red bloom across your cheeks or your beaming smile. Your absence weighed on me greatly.

But then it happened: I felt a rush of radiance flowing brilliantly through my arteries and into my extremities, tingling my fingers and whispering across my scalp. I knew, in that moment, that it was you. You decided to grace us with your presence right there and then, bridging the veil between worlds, passing through the membrane that divides us. I felt it, Maya – your efforts aren't wasted. Once I finish writing this letter, and walk under today's dying autumn sky to your headstone; once I lay this letter by it – as I have done with all the other letters – I'll smile into that gathering dusk, knowing that you're perceiving me, that these words aren't futile. That nothing between us is futile.

I have, over these past few weeks, come to accept that you *are* here. That when the cold breeze outside kisses my cheeks – it's you. That when the wind whips the walls of our house and the grand oak tree's branches brush my bedroom window – it's you reaching out for me, commanding my attention. That when I gaze outside into the black, humming night and see the moon – bright and uncompromising, a solitary beacon amongst the dark infinite of the cosmos – I know it's you watching over me. It must be you. I can see your spirit rising and dancing and twirling along the blinking stars that arc silently across the firmament. I can feel your apparition warmly passing through me and your ghostly fingers

threading through my hair and your hand against my chest and your whispers passing through your lips and into the air telling me that it's okay, that everything will be fine, that you love me. Sometimes I swear I can feel you clutching me tightly and I try with all my might to return the embrace. I know you're here, Maya. I know you can see me. I know you read these letters I write. I know it's your essence that powers my heart and pumps my blood. I know you love me. I'll live my life to the fullest – I'll do you proud – and I'll see you again soon, Maya, on the other side, amongst the twilight, twisting through the universe, falling together faintly through the unending nebulae and galaxies.

I love you.

Liefde,

Coco

June 26, 20 years later

Hoi Maya,

It's been a while, hasn't it? I just wanted to remind you how much I love you.

A lot has changed. I moved up to Groningen with my husband. I have a family now. My career as a counsellor is going strong. As part of my job, I meet so many lovely people. And the fact that I get to have a tangible, real effect on their well-being just fills me with a beautiful, comforting warmth. They remind me of you, sometimes, but none of them, absolutely no-one, can compare to you, Maya.

I was sat, this evening, at the table with my husband and kids, the meal I prepared laid out before us. The clouds above had shrouded the dining room in a melancholy dullness. I looked up and saw that picture of us: the one of us at Efteling. I still have it, Maya. But I realised, at that point, that I hadn't actually looked up at it in a long while. It broke me. All those memories: your face, your eyes, your cheeks, your voice, your hands, your text messages, your drawings, your smile, your tears, your irreplaceable presence... they came rushing back to the forefront of my mind, crashing in with all the intensity of a thunderstorm. I dropped my fork and cried. It was an intense burst of emotion. I did not weep gracefully. My husband and my kids, bless them, came to me and held me. I felt their warmth, but I did not stop crying.

I mustered up the energy to call Mymy. After she picked up, I initially did stand there for a few seconds, biting my tongue – I didn't really know what to say. She was confused and asked if I was okay. I just said: "I miss her." She understood immediately and replied she missed you, too. I cried. I cried and cried, Maya. We talked afterwards, after I composed myself, for what seemed like hours. We reminisced about everything we did together: Efteling, the snowman, the playground, playing those board games, the presentations... We truly do miss you.

I still think about you all the time, Maya. I love you so much. You were the best sister anyone could ever ask for. I miss you – and I'll never stop missing you. I should hope that Mymy, with all the strength and stubbornness she possesses, is still persevering. I can only hope. Once again, Maya, I love you.

Liefde,

Coco

Epilogue

In a heroic triumph against grief, Coco marches on through the marshes of time. She may spend evenings alone and cold; she may sometimes burst into tears, inconsolable; she may look into the never-ending tapestry of stars above, longingly, searching for Maya – but she continues to live on. She continues to bear wide smiles, stretching across her red cheeks. She continues to carry the memory of Maya with her, always at the forefront of her mind. She continues to write letters and place them at her headstone. She continues to love others unconditionally. She continues to feel the warm summer breeze whisper across her skin as the years go by. She returns, at one point, to Bloemfontein, and sees those vast South African plains stretch before her as they always did when she was a child. Memories may come and go, spring forth and fade, but Coco sternly makes sure to never forget Maya.

Coco Schoppenboer-Potgieter dies peacefully in her sleep aged 91, each wrinkle and contour and weathered crevasse on her face a tribute to Maya. Crows feet have cracked through the sides of her eyes, a symbol of her enduring smiling and laughter. The sky rolls sideways and the clouds project moving shadows onto the Earth. The sun streams its light and brightens the days as they pass indefinitely. The stars, freckling the night sky, continue to blink. Those spindly hands on the face of a clock, those hands that tick with every second, the gears that whirr behind them, the machinery that so precisely spurs them on, the intricate clockwork, all these things that designate the singular, present moment amongst the unstoppable river of time – they don't mean anything any more. Did they ever? Well, it doesn't matter anyway. Coco and Maya are together now in an eternal embrace, warmed by an incomprehensible, transcendent love which burns brightly beyond the living plane. How beautiful are the spirits that dance in the constellations.

The End.

