

The Dutch once had (and probably still have) a wonderful tradition regarding annual gift-giving. They do it in early December, not on the twenty-fifth. There is a difference, another celebration, happening there. On the fifth of December, they give each other gifts, **but** the gift must be accompanied by a verse – a few stanzas written by the giver. The giver is allowed to sign the note “Sinterklaas” or “Piet” and, most importantly, share some insights into what sort of person you are and how the gift will help you become a better person.

Today I discovered a shoebox with some of these insights from Sinterklaas, created in the early 1950s by the first Dutch migrants in Kingston. These particular ‘letters’ were made in 1952, 1953, and 1954. One of these letters is dated December 1953 and reads:

Beste Rieks en Janny

Samen met mijn Pieter
Zat ‘k aan het strand der zee
Ik zat maar steeds te praten
Piet schudde steeds van ‘Nee’.

Wij hadden ‘t over jullie
En spraken tamelijk luid
Wÿ konden niets bedenken
En kwamen er niet uit.

Ik zeg maar zo ‘zei Pieter
Die lui die zÿn voorzien
Van alles wat ze willen
Dat heb ik zelf gezien.’

Op vrÿdagavond keek ik
Heel stiekum door het raam
Ik zag hun beiden zitten
Tevreden en voldaan.

Toen zei ik “zÿn geen kinder”
En Pieter zei toen prompt
‘W ee t j ij ni eto uwe ta ai e
Dat dat met twee maand komt?’

“t’kind komt in Januari
En ‘t is vast geen gerucht
De ooievaar die houdt dan
Een speciaal vlucht.”

Dat nieuws gaf mÿ te denken
‘t gaf mÿ veel perspectieven
en ‘k dacht “ik ga die kleine
Nu alvast maar gerieven.”

Ik fluisterde met Pieter
‘k vertelde mÿn geheim

En Pieter zei 'Die's voorlopig
Daarvoor nog veel te klein."

Hÿ doelde op dat kindje
En niet op het cadeau
En ik dreef mÿn zin door
En Pieter zei 'zo, zo'.

En hier is nu geliefden
't Geen ik voor jullie kocht
'k heb overal gekeken
'k heb overal gezocht.

Doch een ding wil ik zeggen
Tot Rieks dan speiaal
Indien ik 't ding voor jou kocht
Dan kocht ik een van staal.

Jÿ moet het hart niet hebben
Om dit ding te gebruiken
Je mag 't alleen maar zien
en er desnoods aan ruiken.

Ik hoop dat jullie kindje
Na ongeveer een jaar
't veelvuldig mag gebruiken
En dat het roept 'al kaar'.
(I suspect an / is missing here.)

Dus Riekus, nogmaals jongen
Laat jÿ dat ding nu staan
Want als jÿ er op gaat zitten
Is ie zo naar de maan.

There's a lot of information hidden in this rhyming note. People living in close proximity knew each other, cared about each other, and had fun together. One important detail revealed here is that my father was a very strong man. Secondly, this is the first public acknowledgment of my imminent arrival on the world scene – and I'm going to need a potty!

This document is a snapshot of a group of people who had lived through the cycle of Job. Like Job, they once thought they were blessed – life was good – but then a dark storm came, and life became bleak. They resisted arbitrary violence, risking their lives and their families for the hope of a better world. Together and individually, they endured the horrors, blunders, and tragedies of war. They were deprived of life's basics and liberty, hunted by a vicious political regime, and brutally incarcerated. With insufficient food, no sanitation or medical care, body and soul began to separate.

There were times when the thought of being reunited with wives and children seemed remote. It was easier to imagine flying to the dark side of the moon. Some came – not just once – to the threshold of death, holding onto life by the most fragile thread. Their only hope was that God would make everything good for those who loved Him, perhaps not in this life.

Then, suddenly, the nightmare was over, and evil was vanquished. Healing was slow, but it did come. They moved to a new land and became strong again. On this night, they counted their blessings – **all** of them – and celebrated each one with thankful hearts because God had been faithful and restored to them in abundance.