

Summary of “On a Day in October”

The story concerns a family with three children. The youngest is twelve-year-old Maarten, who has been staying with his grandpa since his birthday. Sometimes the old man repeats that one sentence: “When I was twelve, boy, it happened here.” Maarten would rather not know what his grandfather wants to tell him. Then a new girl comes to school, the cheerful Jessica from Amsterdam. She doesn’t know any of the history of her new town, Putten. When she becomes friends with Maarten, he takes her to meet his grandfather. In Grandpa’s back yard there is a duck brooding in its nest. Grandpa takes care of Maarten when he’s sick, so that his mother can go to her job. The boy’s father is away from home these weeks because he drives a tour bus. Naturally Jessica comes to visit Maarten. When he is sound asleep Grandpa tells her that after the death of his wife, he wrote his life’s story. Jessica, who is half Indonesian and whose grandma was a prisoner in a Japanese camp during World War Two, is curious about what happened in Putten during the war. Finally Grandpa has the chance to read his story to her.

The narrative begins on Gerrit’s (Grandpa’s) twelfth birthday, shortly after D-Day, when everyone is waiting for the liberators. The front is thirty kilometers from Putten. These events are all written in the first person. Eight members of the resistance lie in the bushes along the side of a road between two villages. They plan to attack a German car in order to get maps and other information to pass to the Allies. The attack fails, and the Dutch group must flee. They take a wounded German officer with them. Christiansen, commander of the German troops, is furious when he hears that one of his officers has been wounded and another has disappeared. He gives a command to kill all members of a village and burn it to the ground. But which of the two villages? He chooses Putten. Soon two thousand soldiers arrive at the town.

Gerrit is playing in the living room when he hears his parents whispering about the rumors of an upcoming roundup. Suddenly he looks out the window and sees a soldier with a rifle. The men must report to the church, with their I.D. papers. Gerrit warns his parents about this, and in a few minutes his father and eighteen-year-old brother are on their bicycles in an attempt to escape. Soldiers storm into their house, and everyone in the house must join the rest of the village citizens and report to the church. All the men between the ages of seventeen and fifty are assembled in the market square while the women, children, and elderly men are locked up in the church. After a few harrowing days, the people in the church are allowed to return to their homes; the men in the square (and that includes Gerrit’s father and brother, who were caught as they tried to flee) are put into freight cars and deported. The next day about one hundred homes are burned by the German soldiers, but luckily Gerrit’s house remains intact. Thirteen of the six hundred sixty-one men escape from the moving train and return to Putten. This gives the villagers hope that perhaps more prisoners will escape, but the months of tension and waiting begin now. The Allies’ advance is temporarily halted and fifty thousand people die during the winter of 1945, the “Hunger Winter.”

The prisoners from Putten are transported to Amersfoort, and from there some are sent to the Ladelund concentration camp near the Danish border. In the camp they live under terrible conditions; there is little food and the prisoners are forced to dig

deep trenches. The pastor of the local church buries the dead from the camp and makes a note of their names and towns of origin; one hundred ten are from Putten.

In May Putten is liberated by the Canadians. There is joy in their new-found freedom, but there is great sorrow as well, because the lists of the dead from the camps begin to pour in. Gerrit and his mother and sisters learn that his brother Johan is among those who will not be coming home. They have not yet heard about his father, however, and they wait anxiously for news about him.

The citizens of Putten organize two trips to the concentration camps to bring home the survivors. Only forty-four survived the hardships of the camps, and their families are shocked to see these sick, broken men. Gerrit soon learns that his father has died at the Neuengamme camp. Most of Gerrit's friends have lost their fathers, too. The town is full of widows and fatherless children, but little attention is paid to the tiny village of Putten. All of Holland has suffered; the land is now under reconstruction. The women and children of Putten must suppress their sorrow; they must be strong. They are not given the chance to grieve.

The pastor of the church at Ladelund sends letters and photos of the graves to all the families of the victims. Five years later busloads of women and children visit Ladelund to remember their dead and to lay flowers on their graves. It is the beginning of a reconciliation.

Gerrit tries to work through his grief as he makes friends with Maarten Verhey, one of the survivors. Gerrit grows up and marries Betsie, a neighbor of his grandparents. They have a daughter, Hanneke, named after his brother Johan. Later Gerrit becomes the proud grandpa of Maarten, who was named after Maarten Verhey.

Betsie often advised Gerrit to write about his wartime experiences. After her death, he begins reading about World War Two. He finally decides to visit Germany. Accompanied by Maarten's older brother, Ruben, he travels to the camp at Neuengamme. By studying the past and visiting the "land of the enemy," he is able to ease the sorrow of his losses and come to terms with his grief.

While Grandpa is reading aloud to Jessica, Maarten awakens. He listens to the story, too. From this day on Maarten sees the old man in a different light. Gerrit lets the children choose a title for his journal. They decide to call it "On a Day in October." The sound of the duck in the back yard brings them back to the present. The eggs are hatching. Maarten stays at his grandfather's house for a couple of days. In that time he discovers that his grandpa is accustomed to cutting out articles from the newspapers. He has many items about World War Two, and also articles about the war in the former Yugoslavia. Grandpa shows Maarten a photo of a village in Yugoslavia that experienced exactly the same fate as Putten.

On May 4, Remembrance Day in Holland, Jessica, Maarten, and Grandpa visit the municipal park, where there is a statue to commemorate the loss of the six hundred sixty-one men and boys of Putten. Now Grandpa knows that his story and his warning to protect peace have been handed down to a new generation. In the meantime, Jessica's parents have become friends with Maarten's grandpa and mother. Jessica's family invites Maarten's family over for an Indonesian meal, where

they try to “fix up” Gerrit with Jessica’s grandmother. And there is a chance that they have made a match!

About the Author

Else Flim (born in 1947) was six years old when she began hearing stories about her uncle, who was one of the victims of the retaliation against Putten. She knew from an early age that she wanted to be a writer. She has worked as a producer for radio and television. Since 1985 she has written novels, short stories, poems, and children’s books. Two of her books, “De helft nadert of is allang voorbij,” and “Niet zomaar een dorp,” deal with the events in Putten. “Op een dag in oktober” (On a Day in October) was published in 2001 to excellent reviews.

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