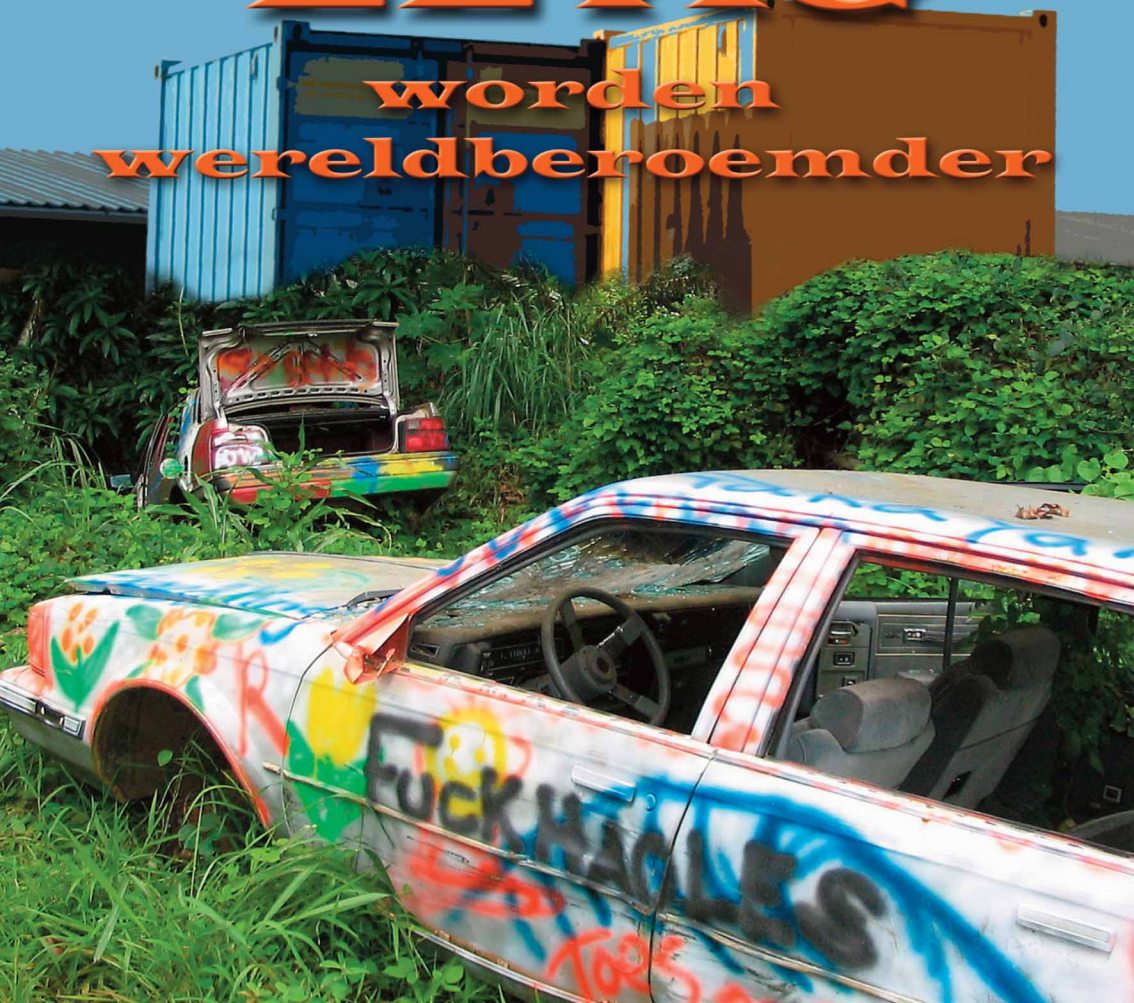




HERMINE LANDVREUGD

CASPER EN ELVIG

worden
wereldberoemder



HERMINE LANDVREUGD

Casper and Elvig
become famouser
than famous

PYRENEES? PY-RE-NO! PY-RE-YES!

It's the first day of the summer holidays – loads of kids love the holidays, but Casper's not so sure this year.

He's at the airport, seeing off his mum. She's going on holiday to the Pyrenees for three weeks – and he has to stay with his Grandma and Grandpa.

'Three weeks!' thinks Casper. 'It'll never end. It's almost an entire lifetime!'

His mum's standing at the check-in desk with her big backpack on. She's tied a saucepan to it, because she couldn't squeeze it in. And she's wearing her new mountain boots. For the past couple of weeks, she put them on every day when she came home from work. Then she went stomping around the living room. 'Breaking them in,' she called it. It was so she wouldn't get any blisters when she went mountain walking. 'They can be really uncomfortable and give you loads of trouble if you don't break them in properly,' Casper's mum told him.

'I'm dead good at mountain walking too,' Casper had said. And he showed her just how good he was. He didn't even need new, expensive mountain boots – he could do it in his socks. Casper went mountain walking around the room, swinging his arms, left, right. Around the table, four times, down the hallway to the kitchen, into the laundry room, where he climbed over the washer-dryer. And quickly back to the front room, because he doesn't like the laundry room – it's always colder than the rest of the house and it smells really weird.

'I can mountain walk for three weeks in a row. No problem!' said Casper. 'Ea-sy.'

'I'm sure you can,' his mum replied. But she didn't say he could go with her.

Casper's not allowed to do anything, not even walk to school on his

own. Mum takes him in the car every day, because she has ‘tailored her work schedule to fit his timetable.’

‘I could go mountain walking for three thousand weeks,’ said Casper. ‘Without eating or drinking. And without watching any TV.’

‘Yep, you’re incredible,’ his mum said. But she still didn’t say he could go with her.

Maybe it was because what he was doing didn’t really look all that much like climbing. So he climbed up onto a chair and then onto the glass table. The glass was so smooth and slippery that it actually felt like ice or snow beneath his socks. Casper was a bit scared of heights and even the table felt too high for him. He wobbled and nearly knocked over his glass of pomegranate squash.

‘Be careful, Casper!’ his mum said. ‘Get down off that table right now! We don’t stand on the furniture in this house!’ So Casper took a very big step, off the table and onto the old-fashioned wooden cabinet with the lions’ feet. Grandma and Grandpa had given them the cabinet when they went to live in a smaller house in what-was-it-called, that town that was named after an animal. He could just about reach the cabinet, but it was slippery, because the cleaning lady had just polished it. He put one foot on it, but he only had his sock half on his foot and there was a long flap at the toe and he went and stood on it with his other foot, which made him fall over. His mum only just caught him in time. She picked him up and deposited him safely, with both feet on the floor.

‘Casper,’ she said, ‘now you listen to me. You are not going to the Pyrenees. You are going to Grandma and Grandpa’s. And when I get back, we’re going to do something fun together, just the two of us. We’ll go to the zoo or to a theme park or something, whatever you want.’

‘What I want,’ said Casper, ‘is to go to the Py-re-nees,’ and he tried to kick his mum with the flappy bit of his sock. ‘That’s what I want.’

‘No, you’re not going.’

‘Yes, I am! Yes, Mum, I’m going with you to the Py-re-nees. Py-re-yes, Py-re-yes, Py-re-YES!’ His mum laughed and gave him a hug, nuzzling his curly head. And even though he was angry, he still put his arms around her, because it felt so nice.

‘Look what I’ve got for you.’ Mum handed him a book. *The Great Big Holiday Book of Fun Facts and Fantastic Things to Make and Do!* With an exclamation mark. ‘It’s for when you’re at Grandma and Grandpa’s and you get a bit bored,’ she said. ‘Then you can just go and get your book.’

‘And when you’re bored in the Pyrenees, you can just go and get the next plane home,’ Casper replied.

‘It’s a singles holiday, Casper Curlytop,’ his mum said. ‘I might even come home with a dad for you.’

‘No need,’ Casper replied.

He’s never met his dad, but he knows he’s a fireman in America. Casper’s going to go to America to look for him one day and he’ll be easy to find, because all he has to do is watch the TV news and see where there’s a fire and that’s where his dad will be. Anyway, if his mum’s going to look for another dad, she’ll have to ask his real dad for permission first. You can’t just do whatever you want when there’s an American Fireman involved!

‘So you can just stay at home, can’t you, Mum?’

‘No. And I don’t want to hear another word about it.’ Casper saw that his mum had screwed up her eyes. And you knew you had to watch out when she screwed up her eyes into mean little slits and lifted your chin so she could look you straight in the eyes and then said, ‘am I going to have to grrrrrowl at you?’ Maybe growling didn’t sound so bad, but if you heard that thundering rrrrr, you knew better. It was worse than a huge storm.

Casper’s mum gives him a big hug and the saucepan hanging from the backpack swings to and fro.

‘When I get back, we’ll do something fun together.’

‘You already said that.’ Casper doesn’t hug her back, but keeps his arms down by his sides. Now his mum’s standing in the queue waiting for her hand luggage to be checked. Casper hopes the man in the cap will say, ‘Oh, no, no, no! Stop! No, you can’t go! Not under any circumstances! You’re forgetting your son! That little lad with the lovely curls.’ But it doesn’t happen. Mum picks up her backpack, hangs it over one shoulder, gives Casper one last wave and then she’s gone. He catches a glimpse of the saucepan disappearing into the crowd.

Casper saw a list on the table a few days ago, which said ‘Don’t forget!’ at the top, with an exclamation mark and a thick line underneath. *Matches*, it said, *roll-on deodorant*, *thermal socks* and *elastic bands*. At the bottom of the list, he added: *Casper*.

Grandpa is standing behind Casper and he puts a hand on his shoulder. ‘Come on, Casper, best be off home, eh?’ Casper doesn’t reply. Mum says Grandpa’s an intellectual. That means that he works with his brain. ‘He thinks about everything so logically,’ Mum says. ‘First A, then B.’ Whereas Mum works with her imagination. ‘And, lucky for me, I don’t work at all,’ thinks Casper, because when you work you have no time to lounge around. Grandpa has very big ears, but he still has problems hearing what you say sometimes. Casper doesn’t understand how anyone can have such big ears, but still not be able to hear very well. Grandpa has also started to shrink. He can imagine what Grandpa might look like in a few years’ time, the same size as Casper, but with huge ears dragging along the ground and a nose that touches the floor.

Time always goes so slowly at Grandma and Grandpa’s. Much more slowly than at home. There’s a big, old wooden clock on the wall in the living room, with a gold pendulum and gold hands. You can hardly see the hands moving at all. That’s because the hands are old too and they have to move across the face of the clock by themselves. His mum has a plastic clock that runs on batteries, and it works automatically, so the

numbers change quickly, hophophop and the day's over. At Grandma and Grandpa's, above the door and beside the clock, there's a lamp in the shape of a cross with a skinny, naked man on it. Casper really likes the lamp. Grandma says it's a famous man from a book. She calls him Our Light. Casper thinks that's a weird name, but maybe it's not such a bad name for a lamp.

Grandma and Grandpa are walking to the train station at the airport. Grandma shuffles along slowly with her walking frame.

'We're so pleased you're coming to stay with us,' says Grandma, gently squeezing Casper's arm. 'You too, sweetheart?'

'Yes,' says Casper, even though you're not supposed to lie to your grandma. They do have some fun together. Sometimes. Like when they go bowling. But first they actually have to get out of the house! Grandma always has to get out her laptop and check to see if the bus is running or if there are any route changes. And then there are all those naps! A nap before eating, a nap after eating, a nap in the chair, a nap on the sofa, a nap in front of the telly, an accidental nap and a deliberate nap. A short nap, a long nap, a snoring nap and an open-mouthed nap, a nap where your false teeth fall out, a nap where you fart, a nap that goes on and on and on. After the nap, they have a coffee. When Grandma's not napping, she's going to internet forums about plants and flowers or looking at supermarket websites to see if they've got plant food on special offer. 'Because it's a crying shame to pay too much,' she always says. Or Grandma shuffles into the living room with full coffee cups – careful not to splash any coffee over the edge and onto the saucer – and then shuffles back again with the empty cups.

Grandpa reads. Casper's not allowed out of the house on his own, because Grandma and Grandpa say it's too dangerous. And he doesn't feel like going on the computer or watching TV – he can do that at home.

Grandma sometimes asks if he wants to play Super Mario. She thinks

it's such a funny game. She laughs the entire time when she's playing it – and she's already reached level 98.

One thing that's nice about Grandma and Grandpa is that they love getting up early. Usually at about six o'clock. Then Grandma and Casper go out to water the plants in the front garden together. If Casper stands on tiptoe, he can just about dip the big metal watering can into the rain barrel. The rainwater is always ice cold – it feels so good, the way it makes him shiver. He only fills the watering can halfway, so it doesn't get too heavy, but he still has to use two hands to lift it.

First thing in the morning is when you see most snail trails. Grandma walks the short distances in and around the house without her walking frame. She points out the different plants, the primroses, the lupins and the pansies, and she talks to them, because that makes them grow better. Sometimes the conversations go on way too long though. When he's finished all the watering and is back in the kitchen, Grandma's still outside, chatting away to the orange pansies.

'Stop that nattering. You're driving the plants round the bend. What are you talking to them about, anyway?' says Grandpa.

'I really can't tell you,' says Grandma. 'Top secret. It's just between the flowers and me.'

'As long as you're not saying anything bad about me,' says Grandpa and then he asks her what she wants on her toast. But Grandma prefers to do her own toast, because Grandpa always makes such a mess. He gets butter and strawberry jam over his hands and crumbs all over the table. He's no good at making coffee either – he always forgets to turn on the machine or to put coffee in the filter.

'Just as well I'm here,' says Grandma with a wink. 'Otherwise it'd be absolute chaos.' And she purses her lips and makes all these funny little wrinkles appear between her nose and her mouth. When the newspaper doesn't drop through the letterbox as they're having breakfast but later,

after coffee time, Grandpa always says, ‘that blasted newspaper boy!’ as he strides off down the hallway in his knitted socks to pick up the paper. Casper knows what that really means – that Grandpa’s happy the paperboy’s finally come.

HERMINE LANDVREUGD – *Casper and Elvig become famouser than famous*

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HEY, YOU! CHINESE PERSON!

The train's already in. Grandma and Grandpa live in a town that's named after an animal, but Casper can never remember exactly what it's called. He sometimes stays with them on Friday and Saturday nights, when his mum is 'out on the town.'

'Off out on the razzle yet again,' says Grandma, turning up her nose.

When his mum comes to pick him up the next day, she looks pale and she usually has a headache. 'It's your own fault,' Grandma always says.

'Go and find us a nice spot by the window,' Grandma says. Casper's already off – he dashes down the platform, past a group of teenagers who are sitting and lounging around on their backpacks. He jumps – one, two – up the steps and onto the train.

Inside the compartment, there's a girl with a mass of dyed black and orange hair that's standing up in spikes and has little plaits in it. She's wearing big military boots, which she's put up on the opposite seat. She gives Casper a very friendly smile.

Casper went to stay at Grandma and Grandpa's during the Spring holiday. His mum had promised they'd go to a theme park, but she was too busy at work because she'd sold so much peanut butter. And then she wanted to spend some time on her own.

Peanut butter all the time. Casper's sick of peanut butter. His mum says they're trying to sell peanut butter to the Chinese now, but it's not going well. It sounded simple enough to Casper – all his mum had to do was look at the Chinese people, lift up their chins and say, 'Hey, you! Chinese person! Buy this peanut butter! Now! Am I going to have to grrrrrowl at you?' When he suggested that to his mum, she laughed. And then she said it wouldn't be that easy, because there were over a billion people in China and that was a lot of grrrrrowing.

Casper looks out of the window. He can see his reflection and the

freckles on his cheek in the shape of a musical note. His mum sometimes says, when she gives him a big hug, that she can hear the note, a secret little tune. Suddenly, there's a shrill noise. A whistle. The train shakes and roars, the doors slam shut and the train starts moving.

Grandma! Grandpa! They're still on the platform! Casper leaps up, looks out of the window, with his hands cupped around his face, and then he starts banging his fists on the glass. There! In amongst the group of teenagers with their backpacks and sleeping bags and bulging plastic bags, he can just make out Grandma and Grandpa. Grandma's kneeling on the ground, with her hand on her thigh. The walking frame with Casper's going-away bag on it has fallen over.

Then the platform's gone, and so have all the people who were standing on it, and the train is whooshing down a dark tunnel. And Casper is sitting alone on the train. With a girl opposite him who has weird, but happy-looking hair.

'I'm travelling on my own,' Casper says to himself. And he doesn't mind. His mum always says: if you ever get lost, you have a mouth, so just ask someone for help. But he doesn't ask anyone for anything. When he looks at his reflection in the window, he doesn't see a nine-year-old, but someone who looks more like a twelve-year-old at least. He looks like a boy who's already going to big school.

Casper has a tickly feeling, all over, even in his hair and on his earlobes, a really nice tickly feeling. This is something different than three your-whole-life-long weeks with Grandma and Grandpa, napping or Googling. The train races out of the tunnel and through meadows full of cows, fields of flowers in every colour, and windmills and pylons. But when he peers down the aisle and into the next compartment, he sees a train guard with a red hat on – and she's checking tickets. Luckily, though, Casper's very good at hide and seek. He lies down under the seat. And squeezes up as close to the wall as possible. The punk girl grins. She puts one finger, with

a black painted fingernail, to her lips and goes over to sit on Casper's seat, so that her legs, with the stripy tights and the big military boots, hide Casper from sight. Casper is so close to the thick soles that he can see the old chewing gum stuck to the bottom.

They're supposed to mop under the seats, but Casper finds a dented can, an apple core, some used train tickets and a ten-cent piece down there. He puts the coin in his pocket. It might be a special ten-cent piece, the sort that will come in really handy at just the right moment. He tucks it into the tiny little pocket in his jeans.

He sees the guard's navy-blue trouser legs approaching. She's so close that he could touch her without even having to reach out. The guard's shoes are laced with a tight double knot.

'Thank you,' Casper hears her say and she walks on, with her rubber soles squeaking.

Casper wants to get out from under the seat, but the punk girl keeps her boots close together and hisses something at him. He hears footsteps. The blue trouser legs with the sharp crease and the rubber soles are coming back. A door slides shut.

The punk girl hangs in front of Casper with her head upside down. Her plaits sweep over the dirty floor. 'Komm mal, du,' she says. 'Huh? That must be her name,' Casper thinks. And he slips out from under the seat. He politely shakes her hand. 'Thank you very much, erm, Kom-mal-du.' The girl's hand feels soft and is a funny orange colour.

The train slows down. A voice crackles through the loudspeaker: 'Final destination.' They are coming into a large city. Casper sees tall houses and buildings, trams and lots and lots of cars. And then on a wall he spots an advertisement for the zoo, in the shape of a real, life-size giraffe: 'We're open every evening in summer!' Great, there's a zoo!

Casper stands in the huge railway station and looks around. There are little shops and kiosks all over the place. People are running backwards

and forwards, up stairs, down escalators, carrying cups with white plastic lids in one hand and grabbing free newspapers with the other. A man with a briefcase elbows Casper aside and then a woman in a smart suit, carrying a little dog, shoves him in the back. He stumbles over a stewardess's wheeled suitcase. She says 'sorry', looks at her watch and quickly dashes off in her dark-blue high heels. The clicking of the heels reminds Casper of his mum, even though his mum's shoes are more pointed and have higher heels. Two boys in baseball caps run out of a CD shop and someone shouts: 'Stop, thief!'

Casper goes and sits down in a corner on a wide concrete staircase. He watches the pretty stewardess's bottom in her bright blue skirt as she disappears at the top of the escalator. A man in a torn coat and with a matted beard reaches his filthy hand into a rubbish bin and pulls out a half-eaten hamburger, which he stuffs into his mouth.

Casper could do with something to eat about now. His grandma always has a packet of peppermints in her bag. And at home with Grandma and Grandpa he has white rolls with jam. He always opens up the roll and licks off the jam. His mum won't let him do that, but Grandma does. His tummy's really rumbling now.

'Hey, you, look after this!' A fat boy with a crew cut, older than him, comes cycling through the station on a big, rattling bike. He's standing up to ride it, because he can't reach the pedals. There's a wooden box on the back, tied on with fraying rope. The boy jumps off the bike and leans it on its stand, right in front of Casper.

'And don't go riding off on it, eh?'

Before Casper can answer, the boy's run into the supermarket. Casper keeps an eye on him through the shop window. He heads straight for the machine that gives you coffee when you put a coin in. He looks around. Presses a button. Gives the machine a whack with his shoulder. He's strong – you can tell just by looking at him. He gives it another shove and

sticks his fingers into the hole. Then he comes back out. He walks over to the snack machine, puts a few coins in the slot and pulls out a packet of crisps and some chocolate bars. He unwraps one and bites into it, with the other snacks piled up on his arm.

Casper's stomach is rumbling like crazy now. The boy sees Casper's hungry eyes staring at him. He looks down at the snacks and beckons Casper over, his cheeks bulging with the big bites of chocolate bar.

Casper flies towards him. The boy signals at him to bring the bike. Pushing the big bike, Casper walks over to where he's standing.