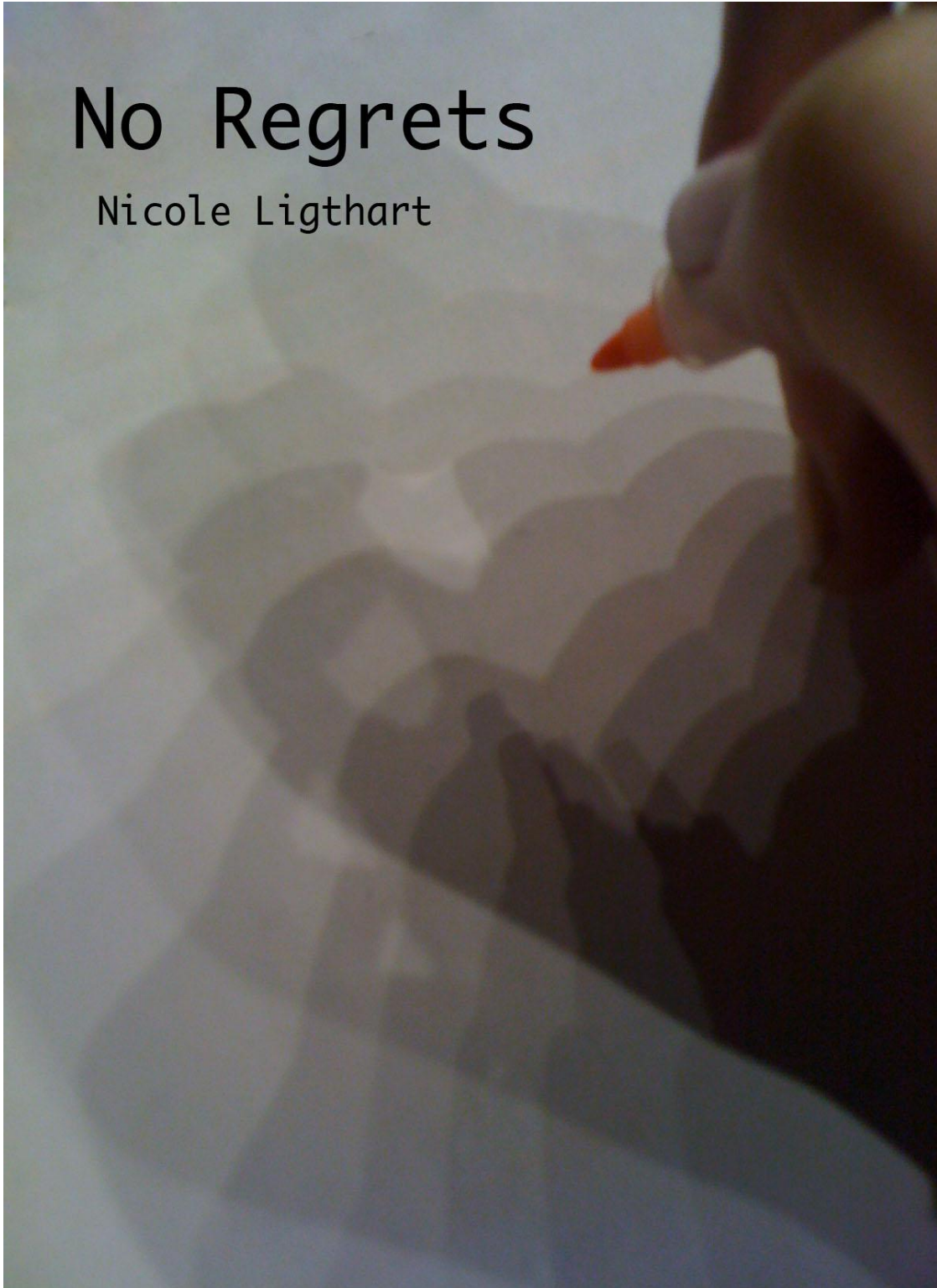


No Regrets

Nicole Lighthart



I want to thank, first of all, my parents, Rick and Paula for giving me a life I will never ever forget. My sister, Sabine for simply being my sister. I want to thank Rena Mirkin for being my supervisor during this project. Tricia Rummel for editing my short story. Ellen Gruter for proof reading and helping.

For Rick, Paula and Sabine

My daughter looked at me angrily.

"No I am not moving with you and Dad! I like it here. I was born here and all my friends live here!"

"But sweetheart, you are going to love it. It is a once in a life time opportunity. And you will make new friends. That isn't something you have to worry about." I told her as I knew from my own experience that it was true.

"But I don't speak the language Mom!" Jamie said to me as her eyes filled with tears.

I looked at my daughter and said "Don't worry you will learn very quickly. Let me tell you something about my life, my story, my moves and the best years of my life.

When I was eight-years-old my own mom taught me three sentences in German: Ich heisse Nicole, Ich bin acht Jahre alt und ich komme aus Holland. At the time I did not fully understand why she was teaching me these sentences. She did tell me that my dad was applying for a job in Germany but what that truly meant, I wasn't sure. When my dad got the job it all went really quick. In a couple of months we were moving to Kleinmachnow the place that I now always refer to as the place near to Berlin. No one knows where it is.

The day that we were leaving many of our neighbors and friends were at our house. My best friend Nina was there too. We hugged and said "See you soon!" We had no idea what my moving really meant. The only thing I had to hug besides my family was my Minnie Mouse. I had bought her when I was two years old when I went to Disneyland Paris for the first time. I brought her everywhere. She had a certain smell and I loved her.

I remember sitting in the car on our way to Kleinmachnow. We were all pretty nervous but excited. Whenever we would drive anywhere I would always get carsick. This trip went pretty well until we got near to our hotel. I threw up on the side of the road.

Very soon I had to go to school. My first day at my new school was nice. I had a very nice teacher. The first day we were saying the alphabet as fast as we could in one minute. I had no idea that it was in English so I said it in Dutch, and scored really high. The building my school was in was old. It was formally used as a building where Hitler designed things to do with Science. Now there were all these international people coming together every day to learn new things.

We had all sorts of different, special days. International Day was the best thing I had ever experienced. There was food from every country and people wore outfits I had only ever seen in pictures. In Grade 5, I went to a workshop of France. What I didn't know was that we would be painting ourselves on the wall of the tunnel that connected Elementary school, Grade 1, 2, 3 with Elementary School grade 4, 5 and 6. It was a very proud moment for me. I would be in that school forever, well my painting would be.

After living in Germany for some weeks my father went back to the Netherlands. After he had told us he would go there for one week, my sister stood up from the table and walked away. My dad called her back and said, "Where are you going and what's wrong?"

My sister was very calm yet you could see her frustration when she answered, "Wasn't it your dream that brought us here in the first place? Then why are you the first to go back to Holland? That is unfair and it doesn't make any sense."

After that she walked upstairs and went to her room to play with her toys. In the first summer, after Grade three, we visited both Holland and Paris. In Holland I only saw Nina for one afternoon. With the rest of my friends, I had lost touch. I saw my grandparents again and we had fun talking about our experiences that were mostly about our yearbook. We were so proud to be in that book. I don't believe that my grandparents fully understood the concept but they were simply happy to see their grandchildren again, yearbook or no yearbook.

In Paris I wanted to buy my Minnie Mouse a husband, Mickey Mouse. When I went to one of the stores I didn't see the one for Minnie. They were all too fluffy, too new. None of

the animals were made of the cotton fabric my Minnie Mouse was made out of. I decided to buy her a new and weird smelling husband anyways because I thought she needed one. I loved her and I thought I would love the Mickey Mouse just as much as her. I would have two special teddy bears. But when I got home Mickey ended up on a shelf in my room. He was no Minnie.

On my sister's seventh birthday, she had invited her entire class over for a party. One of the boys in her classroom had gotten her a new and fluffy bear. It was incredibly soft and my sister was in love with the bear. She named it bear. I don't know if she simply couldn't think of another name or if she just thought it was the right name. My mom thought I wanted a bear like my sisters, new, soft and fluffy. So for Saint Nicholas I got a dark brown teddy bear, it was new, soft, and fluffy. It could have been the perfect teddy bear, but I had Minnie. No stuffed animal was better than the Minnie who had travelled the world with me. Teddy got a spot next to Minnie's husband on one of my shelves. It never even moved from that spot until we moved a few years later.

The years went by and my journey would have a great ending, camp. It was my Grade 5 camp and I was really excited. But a week before my Grade 5 camp I broke my arm. It was supposed to be the best camp I would ever have at this school. I was not allowed to go because I would need a new cast during that week and it would be dangerous. My arm could start swelling and there would not be a possibility for me to go home early. I didn't care about all this safety stuff I just wanted to go on that trip. I was furious. I kicked a ball around the yard for a while and then stomped into the forest behind our house. As angry as I was I returned to the house and watched my "Friends" DVDs. I had gotten it from my aunt and uncle when they heard I broke my arm. I watched the entire season with Minnie Mouse in my lap. She was dirtier than she ever was before but I loved her with all my heart.

When camp was over and everyone was back school started again. One afternoon I came home from school to find my Minnie Mouse downstairs. I was certain I had left her upstairs that morning. When I picked her up I knew what had happened immediately. I did not need a second glance.

"MOM! How dare you! She is my Minnie and I said you were not allowed to do that! No she doesn't smell like she is supposed to smell and her ears look weird. There is cardboard in her ears, Mom! She feels weird too! She's cold like she died in there!"

"But honey, she was extremely dirty," my mom said in a calm voice. She didn't seem like she agreed with me at all.

"It was not your decision Mom. She's mine and now we need to bond all over again!"

I started crying then. And it took a while for me to agree with my mom. She had put my Minnie, MY Minnie, in the washing machine. We had agreed she wouldn't do so. I didn't care that she was dirty. But now she had been washed and she would never feel the same, so I thought. After a week she felt normal again and I had forgiven my mom. She promised never to do it again without my permission, but she had said that the last time so I didn't know if I believed her.

In one of the last weeks in Germany, my home at that point in my life, I had to take some tests to determine what grade I would be placed in when I returned to Holland. I was in Grade 5 at that point but because High School starts in Grade 7 in Holland and Grade 6 is the grade where everyone has known each other for a long time I wanted to know if it was possible for me to go to Grade 7. I did the test and I could be placed in Grade 7.

Grade 7 was a weird year in my life. I went to a local Dutch school that some of my cousins had gone to as well. The first day my homeroom teacher asked if there was anybody that didn't know anyone in class. I raised my hand and was the only one that did so. It was slightly embarrassing and it got people to wonder who I was.

In the beginning, everyone was interested and people wanted me to speak a little German. I

did and always said those sentences my mom taught me three years ago: "Ich heisse Nicole, Ich bin elf Jahre alt und ich komme aus Holland." They would be happy and be done with it. No one would care about the rest of my story. All they wanted to know was that I was strange.

In my English class my teacher asked everyone what Elementary school we had gone to so that she would know on what level they had taught English. Everyone said regular schools that most of my classmates knew. When it was my turn I had no idea what kind of affect those four words would bring to my first few weeks at this school. Without knowing what it would do I said it. "Berlin Brandenburg International School." Even my teacher looked at me like I was crazy and she said:

"What?" I was surprised she didn't know so I said "I went to an International School in Berlin." She laughed and said "I will just write down International School then, not like I would contact them anyway."

I was in shock, I had just been humiliated by my own teacher and I decided she was not nice at all.

In one of the first weeks at my new school I became ill for a week. I had the flu. When I got back to school everything seemed normal. I remember it very clearly. It was a Wednesday and it was Biology class. Five girls walked up to me. I had seen them before but I had never really talked to them. One of them said,

"When you were ill we overheard the girls you hang it with talking about you. Well we didn't exactly overhear they were practically shouting it in the changing room. They were making fun of you and the way you said your old school's name. We thought you should know what they did so you can decide if you want to be friends with them." I had no idea that the girls who I had hung out with for the first few weeks thought I was this weird.

"Thank you for telling me. Would you mind if I sat with you guys for lunch?"

"No problem" A dark haired girl said. "My name is Gina and this is Jessica, Marjolein, Suzan and Denise."

We walked down to the cafeteria and we had lunch. It was the first lunch of many lunches I would have with them in the following years.

When Saint Nicholas came we wanted to do secret Santa. But because not everyone celebrated Saint Nicholas but they celebrated Christmas we celebrated a mix. We all picked a name out of the hat and celebrated our new tradition a few weeks later.

In the meantime I was having some trouble with my Dutch. We had to write evaluation reports for my Art classes and that was horrible. I wrote everything and then had it checked by one of my parents. They would sit down with me and we would rewrite everything that had gone wrong in the translation system in my head. My grammar would not be correct and some words didn't even exist. It would take us two hours for every report that year but my grades ended up being really good.

In English class I would be extremely bored. They were doing things I had learned in a few weeks in grade 3, and it would take them the entire year. I barely paid any attention and hardly studied for tests and got 9/10 for every test. My friends would compare their grades with mine until I told them not to. I said it was ridiculous for them to compare my grades with theirs when they hadn't spoken English every day for the last three years and I had. It would be the same if I compared my grades for Dutch with theirs and I had stopped doing that after a while.

I passed the first year with high grades and a set of new friends. This was the first year I started to feel a bit too old for Minnie. But I still needed her when I needed comfort. She was just as important as before. I had become a bit more serious. I would stress a lot about school. But when I hugged Minnie I normally calmed down a bit.

During Christmas in the second year at this school I participated in the theatre

performances. I decided to go to the auditions and I got one of the bigger roles. I had originally gone there for the choir, but that was for the older kids. During the rehearsals I met a girl named Sanne. She was fun and had already participated last year. From Marjolein I had heard that her mother was very sick. The performances were fun but it also gave me another aspect of being different. People laughed a little during the play but I ignored it because I had been having the time of my life that week and they had been in class.

A few weeks later I looked through Marjolein's homework journal and saw something about a funeral. I asked her who it was and she told me it was Sanne's mother. I felt really bad for Sanne and I wrote her a card saying that if she ever wanted to talk or get some distraction she could always come to me. We hadn't been great friends until then. A few weeks after the funeral she called me and we went to a movie. Our friendship grew and she became one of my best friends.

During this year some of the boys that had been in my class last year continued calling me Bratwurst, a German food. It was the only thing they could think of apparently and it annoyed me very much. I tried to ignore it though and after a while they had gotten busy with other things. Except for one boy in Sanne's class who had heard of this German girl in grade 8b. During lunch I would start to hear someone speaking German. It was extremely short sentences but I thought it was strange. Until one day he sat next to me and started talking to me and my friends, he wasn't sure who the German girl was. He started calling my friends names and that made me very angry. I started talking to him in German and I could see the confusion on his face when he had no idea what I was saying. He left and I heard him and his friends laughing. I didn't care, he had been annoying and put his arm around my shoulder and I didn't like that.

A week later he had community service and had to walk around with a small bin for people to put their trash in. He tripped on purpose and the inside of his bin fell over my friend Jessica. He had been talking in English then thinking he was extremely cool. I did the same thing I did a week ago and talked to him in English. After that he left us alone probably realizing we were not impressed.

This year went by and in the summer my family and I went to Germany again. It was very strange being back but I loved it, until we got to our school. There had been so many changes it wasn't our school anymore. There was a fence around the school, a sports field and a swimming pool. We didn't see our school only the old buildings that once used to be our old school. It was closed so we never went inside. We never went back there but held on to our memories.

Grade 9 came along and I was getting more used to everything. My Dutch was getting a lot better and my class routine was a routine now, boring. This year I was ill a lot but I still passed that grade. One summer afternoon in our backyard I started crying all of a sudden. I felt strange and after talking to my mom I discovered what it was. Three years ago I had moved to Holland after having lived in Germany for 3 years. It felt weird that we were not moving somewhere. I didn't really want to move anywhere, because I had great friends but I'd never had the sense that I fitted in. I had always wanted a bit more than this boring routine life. I had ordered brochures from different companies about a year abroad after high school. I was obsessed with the brochures for a couple of weeks and then I realized I would have to wait a long time anyway and I was going crazy just thinking about it. But secretly I still dreamt of going away as soon as possible after High School.

Minnie became a normal thing in my life. I didn't appreciate her as much anymore. I was getting a bit older and I had forgotten just how much I loved her. I stopped bringing her on holidays and she mostly just lay at the end of my bed.

Around December of the year 2009, I was in Grade 10 then, my dad said he had gotten an email. He said:

“So I got an email the other day about a job in Turkey. I don’t think it’s even an option. It doesn’t fit in our lives now, but I thought you guys should know.”

My heart started beating really fast like it had done when I read the brochures a few months ago. My mom didn’t even know about the email. My dad really didn’t think it was an option.

I was really happy but my parents said they had to think about it a bit longer. If it was up to me, my dad would have written his letter of application that very same day and we would be in an airplane the next day. Of course life doesn’t work that way and my dad thought about it and we all talked about it for about ten days. Then my dad said they had decided to apply. I was never happier then that moment. It was a nerve wracking three months of waiting. I had only told one friend. We didn’t want to tell everyone and then end up having to tell everyone we were staying after all. My dad had an interview and a week later we got the news. He didn’t get it. I cried and when my dad wasn’t extremely sad anymore he told us about another job opening in two days, China. I was happy again but didn’t have the same feeling as before. What if the same thing happened again? I would be happy and my heart would break only a few weeks later.

My dad got through the first round. He had a job interview and that went really well. On a Thursday evening my dad got a phone call. He was the last one left in the race and they wanted to talk to my mom as well to see if she wanted it too. My dad asked if we could assume that we were going and they said we could definitely assume we were going.

I remember my dad told me this in the kitchen. I jumped up and screamed and started crying. My sister just stood there and she cried. My dad was in shock I guess but he also cried. My mom was calm but happy. We told our neighbors that same day and I told my friend Suzan, I had told her about the job applications as well. I called all my friends asking for them to come to my house because I needed to tell them something.

I went to Sanne’s house that evening to tell her. She cried and I cried with her. I told Marjolein the next day and she cried instantly and I cried once again. With all my other friends I didn’t cry, I think I was done crying, my tears had run out. That night I slept holding my Minnie in my arms and for the first time in a long time she was not simply lying on my bed. She was coming to Beijing with me.

I told my homeroom the next Tuesday. I went to the other two classes to tell them too, that way I had to tell it three times instead of 90 times. The mouths of my classmates literally fell open. Some thought I was joking and some were really excited and jealous. I had fun telling them and I loved their shocked faces. There I was four years after that first day at school and now I was going to experience an amazingly cool thing while they would be in the same school. Most of the people that had made fun of me were now in a different level so I couldn’t tell them. I didn’t know if they knew now but I hoped they did. My friends ended up being really happy for me. The guys in my class would hold their hands in front of their chest and bow and I would laugh saying that was Japanese.

When we had been selected to go to Beijing my parents had received a packet with books and magazines that gave them some information on what was going to happen now. One of them was a book about Third Culture Kids. I had never heard of this until my mom showed me the book and told me that it was so clear now; I was a Third Culture Kid. I read the book and I recognized a lot of the stories. They talked about being different and returning to their home country was hard for most TCK’s. It was a relief to know this and it explained a lot of what I had felt over the last few years.

My goodbye party was a lot of fun. I had a barbecue in my backyard. I ended up inviting 20 people. I first thought of only inviting my 7 best friends but then I wanted to invite more people. We roasted marshmallows and I got gifts to remember them. I wore a nice dress I bought a few weeks before and everyone hugged me at the end. When the first two boys were about to leave they looked at me and said:

“We’re going to hug you know”. And all I could think of was: “okay” I had never hugged them before and it was in that moment that I realized how many friends I had made in the last four years. A lot of times I had doubted myself and all that time there were these 20 people who thought I was really nice and I thought the same of them. I cried that evening and for the first time in a long time I hugged Minnie in my arms.

On the first of August Marjolein had her birthday. I was able to go but the next day we would be leaving. I was glad I was there even though we cried a lot. On the second of August Marjolein and Sanne came to my house to wave us goodbye. I hugged them and cried like a baby. I cried louder and with more pain then I had all the times before that day. I had to leave and with one last look I waved goodbye. I cried the entire ride to the airport and when we got there it got better. I think that was the first time I felt with my whole body that I was actually leaving.

We had brought our cats with us to the airport and they cried out of fear. The flight was long; I had become ill that morning and my carsickness came every time I travelled by airplane, bus, train or car it didn’t matter. I threw up twice and had none of the business class food that was served. It was a bad flight for me but it was the only way to get to my new home.

I ended up having the time of my life in Beijing. I went to the Western Academy of Beijing and had many friends. The first winter break I went back to the Netherlands. I saw all my friends again. I really wanted to go to them but I was also scared that I had changed. But when I saw them it didn’t feel like a lot had changed. With Marjolein I talked about her coming to Beijing. She had been planning a bit and she had decided that after her graduation a year later she would come.

And she did. We had the best time together. We had a taxi driver that drove us everywhere and I showed her around Beijing. She was one of the people I missed the most. Even though it was strange to see each other on the other side of the world, it felt natural. Our friendship even grew that one month she was there with me.

When I was around the age of sixteen I already knew I was going to move abroad when I was older. I had really already known this for a couple of years. I knew it was going to be hard but I also knew that if I wouldn’t do it I would regret it later.

I lived in Beijing for three years and just as the years in Germany I had a lot of fun. I enjoyed meeting people from all over the world and for the first time in a long time I didn’t feel that different. I wasn’t weird because I had lived in multiple places. I felt like I fitted in, I was normal.”

“Jamie you have nothing to worry about we might be moving to Germany now but you will, just like me, have the time of your life. It may be hard at first and you will end up being a different person than you were before. But you will be who you are and who you want to be. And you can bring the Mickey Mouse I bought for you in Paris. I know he is your Minnie. She helped me through a lot and he will do that for you.

The experiences are going to open many doors for you in the future and you will learn and experience things that others will never experience. And I am not saying it won’t be hard at some points and I am not saying you won’t cry but I promise you will experience some great things.”

“Okay but if anyone calls me Bratwurst when we come back I will kick their butt and think of you Mom.”

“Sounds good sweetie,” I said to her while I couldn’t help but wonder if her life was going to be anything like mine. If it was, it was going to be one heck of a journey.

- Nicole Ligthart