



Ineke Vander Aa

The Harlot of Loven

Original title: *De lichtekooi van Loven*

NOVEL

Ineke Vander Aa is a remarkable new talent and a born storyteller.



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About the author

Ineke Vander Aa (1984) grew up near Leuven, Flanders. Her history and psychology studies did not lead her where she had hoped. At the age of 24, the big wide world was beckoning. She left for the US, where she learned to train wolfdogs in sanctuaries. Vander Aa lives in Phoenix, Arizona. With *The Harlot of Loven* she is making her debut.



About the book

Halfway through the eighteenth century, the pubs and stinking back alleys in the bustling town of Loven – nowadays known by the name Leuven – are crawling with beggars and drunkards. A young girl, Louise, and her blind father barely manage to survive. When the man dies, Louise takes the last of the money out of his pouch, closes the door and goes onto the streets, the only way to survive being to offer oneself as a prostitute. Life on the streets is hard, but the self-willed Louise is determined to survive. Stubbornly, she tries to find her way and build up a better existence. Just as Louise finally seems to have found peace, her life takes a disastrous turn.

Ineke Vander Aa, *De lichtekooi van Loven*
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Excerpt from the book

I would seek out a way among the chickens and horse-drawn carts, so my father did not stumble, he listening in my wake to where my feet splashed in the rain. Now and then a passer-by would turn round to look at his eyes that stared upwards to such a degree that only the white remained. As soon as I stretched my hand out to them, they walked on quickly. I always led us to the Volksplaats or to the Groote Markt, places with lots of people. There I chose a dry spot and released his hand in order to kneel down. Then we stretched our hands out towards the jingle of coins in a purse, a sound that came closer and then died away with every passer-by. I would tuck the sporadic farthings and halfpennies into my father's coat pocket until hunger made our arms too heavy.

Whenever I asked him about the lead coin with the decorative letter L he always wore on his chest, he would answer: 'It's the L for Louise, my dear, and it's the most beautiful letter of them all.' I was sometimes allowed to hold the coin and then my thumb would glide over the L of Louise. It was only later that I understood the L was for Loven. It was a gift from the city, giving my blind father permission to beg within the city walls.

It was the L for Louise of Loven.

While my father warmed himself by the fire, I always remained by him, to keep an eye on him. Inside, I drew lines with my fingers on the floor to make vague drawings: a little girl with a head that was too large or a bird with feet that were too long. Whenever my father heard my hand brushing over the floor, he would ask what I was drawing. My answer would be: 'Dirty things.' Outside, I always looked deep into the waters of the Dijle until a water monster appeared under the surface. I then whispered bravely: 'Catch me if you can,' and ran until I was out of breath.

Sometimes I would steal other children's things, like pebbles they had collected in the main streets. I sometimes went for an apple from the basket of a woman who was not looking, or a potato that I could grab from a pile without being noticed. To avoid being caught, I ate up the fruit quickly, and the pebbles I skimmed over the water. There was only one time during those naughtinesses that I felt like a thief and that was during the winter that people in Loven will not have forgotten quickly. Food was scarce and expensive. It was said the coachmen's fingers stuck to their reins, that cows froze to death in their meadows and that the ink of writers congealed in their pens. More graves were dug that winter than ever before, mainly for people in plain garments who were lowered into common pits. In the neighbourhoods where people like us lived, the population became depleted. I remember the screams of a neighbour who lost a second child to the cold, and the hollow cheeks of a man who was carried out of his house.

One of the old ladies who did not survive the winter was Marieke, who lived in the house next to us. When she died I was just a child, but I can still see her in my mind's eye. She always walked bent over with a fully laden basket on her back, wearing her cap and an apron I never saw clean.