



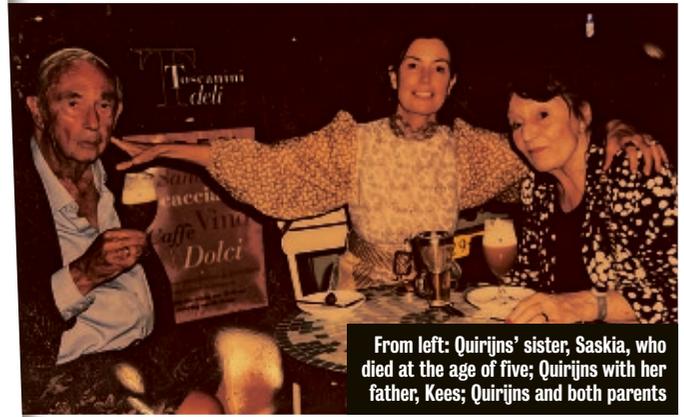
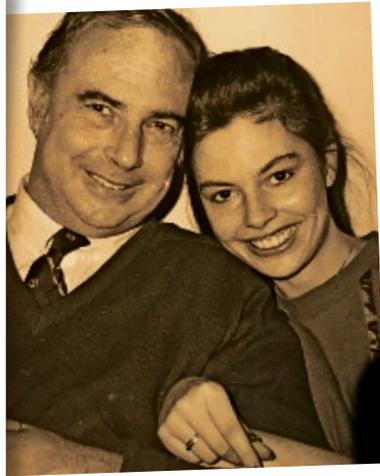
Klaartje Quirijns, 54, at her home in north London

MY FAMILY, OUR SECRET AND THE SISTER I NEVER KNEW

When the documentary-maker Klaartje Quirijns made a film about the tragic secret at the heart of her own family, she knew it would force her parents to confront what they'd spent decades avoiding. Does she regret turning the camera on the people she loves the most?

INTERVIEW Julia Llewellyn Smith PORTRAIT Kate Martin





From left: Quirijns' sister, Saskia, who died at the age of five; Quirijns with her father, Kees; Quirijns and both parents

When Klaartje Quirijns received a phone call saying she'd finally been awarded funding she'd been chasing for years for a documentary – working title, *Your Mum and Dad* – her reaction wasn't delight, but dismay. "Normally, I'm really happy to get money to make a film," she says. "But in this case I remember so well feeling, 'Oh, no!'"

Her dread was because Quirijns, 54, was planning to make a film that dredged up her parents' long-buried secrets. "All my films arise from the same question: 'What are the deceptive worlds we don't get to see?' This was a painful, silent wound that had lingered a long time under the surface. I was worried about my mother and how she'd react to me opening it up."

So anxious was Dutch-born Quirijns that it took her another three years to pluck up courage to interview her parents about the tragedy that overthrew their young lives and altered them ineradicably. This was the death in 1965 of her eldest sister, Saskia, aged 5.

It happened on a winter's day when both parents were out, leaving Saskia with babysitters. She wandered onto a frozen pond, the ice broke and she fell in. Quirijns' father, Kees, as she's always called him, returned to find a crowd of around 60 people gathered.

"They could have saved her," Kees, now 87, tells his daughter on camera. He glances at the scars on his hands, from when he broke the ice himself. Saskia's body was floating, buoyed by her shiny black jacket. "I thought she was just unconscious. She didn't look pale or grey; she had colour in her face." He pulled her out and gave the tiny corpse the kiss of life, but without success. "I could not believe that she was dead. I still can't."

Kees' face is etched in agony, but he can describe the incident and pull out a photo of Saskia, a cheeky-faced child who'd now be in her sixties. "I hadn't known the details and it made me really emotional. It still makes

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me emotional," Quirijns says. But when she turned the attention to her mother, now 83, who was 25 and pregnant with Quirijns' older sister at the time of the tragedy, she initially refused even to utter Saskia's name.

When Quirijns tries to get her to talk, her lips quiver, eyes dart agitatedly and a tear rolls down her cheek as she firmly shakes her head. Only later, in a heartbreaking conversation, does she tell Quirijns how, for nearly 60 years, she'd never spoken to anyone about her grief. "I was paralysed," she says. "There's so much sadness, disbelief, that she died," Quirijns says. When her mother saw Saskia's body in hospital, one of her cuts was still bleeding. "That was so traumatic for her.

"I felt horrible doing it; it felt so cruel to basically force my mother to talk about it," she continues. "But when I was sitting there, trying to have a conversation with my mother, I was also sitting there as a film-maker. Having a device between us helped, because I didn't see the reality – I saw it as a scene in a frame. Without a camera, I don't know if I could have done it. It gave me distance."

Quirijns says her aim in making the film was to explore the question, "What are the wounds among an apparently successful and normal Dutch family?" Certainly, entering her flat in Belsize Park, north London, you have the impression of a pretty perfect life. The living room's tastefully furnished with black wooden floorboards and fabulous art on the walls, including one black-and-white portrait of her and her daughters, now 18 and 21, taken by Dutch film-maker Anton Corbijn, the subject of her 2012 documentary, *Inside Out*.

Quirijns is tall and slim with extraordinary bone structure. "I was asked to be a model when I was young," she says – not boasting but in the context of a conversation. "But I am far too impatient to do that job."

Indeed, Quirijns is an empathetic, warm but also adventurous character – the reasons for which are clear once you watch *Your Mum and Dad*. The film, whose title comes from Philip Larkin's *This Be the Verse* ("They f*** you up, your mum and dad"), was first conceived more than 20 years ago, when – living in New York with her Dutch lawyer partner and pregnant with her oldest child – she'd started a film about therapy, recording people's sessions with psychologists.

"In New York, therapy is like going to the gym – everyone does it. I wanted to know what goes on beneath people's deceptive surfaces." She began filming three people. "But then I thought it was not interesting enough. I was attracted to more dramatic, bigger stories."

While heavily pregnant with her second child, she made a film about an Albanian-American roofer smuggling American guns into Kosovo to arm the Kosovo Liberation Army. "It was about how easy it is to start your own army – you just buy old weapons in the US, very high-calibre rifles you can shoot helicopters down with," she says.

"The therapy always was in the background, but I never felt I'd found the right angle on it."

But then, in 2012, when the family had relocated to London, Quirijns was found to have pre-cancerous cells in her breast, which were removed after three operations. "I felt a new urgency to look into my own family."

She remembered the words of New York-based clinical psychologist Kirkland Vaughans, whose session with her friend Michael Moskovitz – who had a wretched relationship with his mother, a Holocaust survivor – also features in the film. "There is no such thing as just this individualised unit; this unit we call self is made up of portions of everyone who has meant anything to us as we develop." ➤

Still, for two more years she dodged tackling the subject. "I avoided it until I really couldn't avoid it any more. If you're a filmmaker you're an observer and I didn't have the inclination to observe myself. But then I began to wonder if I'd been hiding behind those people. I thought, 'Well, maybe it is time to look at myself.' But it still took me two years to write [the script], then another two years to find the courage to film it. Every step I had to force myself, put myself in a position like getting funding, where I couldn't get out of it."

She knew her parents would be happy to talk about their parents and each other, but also knew the key to everything lay in discussing what had happened to Saskia. She'd found out she'd had another sister when she was about eight. "I came downstairs and my mother was crying quietly on the couch with a photo of a small girl in her hand, so she told me. But it was the only time she talked about it. She always said, 'It's better sometimes to cover something with a really thick layer of cement and never go there again.' But I felt the sadness of my mother all the time and I also felt responsible, that I needed to be the person who was going to make my mother happy."

Not everything about growing up with a secret was bad: Quirijns thinks it was the spur for her career. "From early on, around the age of seven, I was going door to door in my village near Amsterdam with a notebook. I would ring bells and say, 'I'm here to interview you.' I was always interested in unravelling things."

Her mother, who split from Kees when she was a baby and went on to marry and divorce again, was the one person Quirijns avoided quizzing. Having studied French literature, after Saskia's death she never read a book again. "She'd do anything to avoid stillness. It was her way of surviving," Quirijns says.

"I can stop my thoughts if it's too much," her mother says when asked how she coped with the pain. "I can focus on something else."

"She processed her own grief and so did I," Kees recalls.

"What's strange is in every other way, she's one of the most open human beings. She will tell you anything," Quirijns says. "My youngest daughter interviewed her for an art project and, because my father always had affairs, she asked, 'Did you have affairs?' and my mother said, 'Yes, I also had affairs.' I couldn't believe my ears. But Saskia was the one thing she refused to talk about. She could not even say the name without crying."

We don't hear about her affairs in the film, but we do hear about Kees, a mathematician who was a lothario before, during and after his marriage. "My parents would have divorced whatever happened. He had a second wife, then a third Russian wife. They all looked very similar, but every time younger. And he also had so many girlfriends; every time I would

see him, there would be a new one. I realised I had never really known him, never asked him who he was, what were his demons."

Quirijns discovered Kees had a fraught relationship with his mother, who believed he'd been swapped with another baby in the hospital. "We were given the junk," she said of her son. Therapist Vaughans is shaken when Kees tells him this. "That's an incredibly sadistic comment to one's own child," he says. He explains Kees had spent his life trying to woo his mother back, in the shape of repeating that trauma with woman after woman.

"But I'd never had a problem with his womanising. As a child, you just accept things as they are. And I did decide I didn't want somebody like him as a husband. My partner is completely the opposite of my father."

Kees would take Quirijns and her sister on holiday to exotic destinations places such as Colombia and the Sahara. In Paris, he asked Quirijns, then 15, to take the wheel of his sports car and drive them. "He was forever

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restless. I think that explains why I was jumping over fences in Kosovo when I was eight months pregnant. I was convinced nothing would happen to me."

Vaughans also saw another reason behind Quirijns' audacity: a subconscious attempt to reverse her mother's trauma. "Part of your 'recklessness', heroism, is trying to rescue your mum," he tells her. "Look, I can be there. I won't fall through the ice, I promise."

"When I heard that, it that made me really cry and I've never cried in my life. I know that's not normal, but it's just the way I am," she says. "I just hadn't seen things that way. But he was right. It was like I needed to prove danger didn't affect me and I was never afraid."

One of the few other times she cried was – like her mother – if her sister's name was mentioned. When her film premiered in the Netherlands, Quirijns felt ambivalent about putting her family on display. "I was almost hoping it wouldn't get too much attention. I still didn't like to pronounce Saskia's name. It felt so loaded."

Yet time's passing has made her more relaxed. It helped that Vaughans approved her making the film. "You intervened. You said, 'The rule of the house is not to discuss it.' But you punctured it. You said, 'This is... doing ourselves a great disservice. It's also holding us apart from each other,'" he tells her.

So did her parents f*** her up? "No, because I am not at all an angry person. I feel real love for them. There are some things... I wasn't allowed to be sad as a child, so it toughened me up. My mother was sweet to me, but she'd say, 'There's a war going on!' Once I saw somebody drive a car and kill a duck with ducklings and it really made me cry, and my mother was said, 'Come on. There are things that are so much worse.'"

Yet that attitude has been repeated by Quirijns, as her oldest daughter points out when interviewed on camera. "She says I don't understand her and I think she's right. Sometimes I'm not very patient, I don't allow sadness for nothing, and that's not ideal mothering. But these are things I wasn't allowed to feel myself."

And just as her mother never discussed Saskia with her children, Quirijns didn't reveal to her daughters she had pre-cancerous cells until they'd been removed.

Quirijns has no plans for therapy. "Making the film was mine." She's delighted by how the film has galvanised viewers to rethink family relationships. "Seeing family can become an obligation, but I think they can become very interesting again when you talk about things. When people are facing death, they suddenly want to talk. People with old parents have told me they've seen the film and thought, 'Maybe I should do what you did too?'"

Initially, her mother couldn't say if she thought making the film had helped her or not. But she agreed to therapy, initially for her panic attacks, but subsequently to tackle Saskia's death, using EMDR (eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing), a form of psychotherapy that can reduce the vividness and emotion of trauma memories.

Quirijns was dreading showing her the film. (Her father thought it was "a work of art.") "But she actually said that it really made her think completely differently about my father. Because she didn't realise that there was so much emotion in him, as they never talked about it. It really changed her view on him."

Now, the former couple meet as often as once a week for dinner. "Because they went through this, they are now looking out for each other, although not romantically. I had one lunch with them both when we talked about what happened that day with Saskia for half an hour. That is really very, very special for them, but also for me. I've always had a very good relationship with my mother, but this has given it new depth. I just feel very sorry she's started to address her trauma so late in life. Saying Saskia's name felt like a betrayal, but now it has been uttered, she has been brought back into our world." ■

Your Mum and Dad is in cinemas and on demand on Curzon Home Cinema from April 26