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Hide

I very much regretted having to go home to my apartment, where I would be alone with my thoughts.

Jan had gone to an LO meeting with the other members of the Dutch resistance a short train ride away, and thought I wouldn't miss him -- at least not for a few days. It was not untrue I would not expect him until tomorrow, or the day after. Also true was Jan's conjecture that I would be kept plenty busy enough, what with the new location of Opekta still settling in. All of its employees had been a little frazzled lately, especially Mr. Frank.

Historically, I was a little afraid of my boss. Well, not exactly afraid. After all, he was very much a gentleman, very reserved and educated. He had always spoken to me with respect and with kindness. But even though I had been working in the office for some years, I thought it would be foolishness itself to assume too much. And after all, a healthy distance was suitable, even if he had taken to inviting Jan and me to dinner lately. We were friendly, and no more.

It was a cool March night, early in the spring of 1942, and I rode my bicycle home slowly, riding carefully under the glow of the street lamps. Each one, instead of lighting my way, seemed to muddle my vision, lighting my thoughts into sharp contrast with each other. They snarled together like suspicious dogs, shaking my tired brain like an egg. I tried my best to ignore them, but like any frightened animal at night, I found I wasn't rid of them until I had shut the door of our rooms firmly behind me. I was trembling.

It was dark -- but of course Jan was not home. I went through the space, turning on light switches, and putting the kettle on the stove. When the water boiled, I made tea and sat in the kitchen with my cup and the newspaper, trying hard to battle the anxious thoughts that were swerving me from the course of action that an hour ago had seemed so clear.

Slowly, I rested my head on the table. I could not seem to keep the tremors from my arms and legs. My heart was quickly catching on.

Caught, caught, we'll be caught, I thought, *And if we're caught we are lost, lost for certain*. What had I done? How could I agree? Jan, me, my sister Catherina, my mother and father -- everything my adopted family and my new husband had given me: a new life in Holland without asking anything but love in return. My adoptive family had saved me from ill health and a gray existence with a mother and father who could not care for me. Jan had saved me from deportation to Austria. Though I could more easily call Holland my motherland than Austria, it was only by him, Jan, that I was legally a Dutch citizen at all. And yet for three years now, the country of my birth had ceased to exist.

Eventually, trembling like that, I fell asleep folded over the newspaper. I woke up sometime in the early morning, the light still purple and hazy, to the sound of the front door

opening quietly. Still half asleep, I gripped the table, my heart seizing with fear that they had found us, already they had sensed that --

But it was Jan.

“Miep!” he cried, hand still on the doorknob, “What’s the matter?” He blinked a few times, looking closer at me. “Did you fall asleep there?”

“Yes,” I said, shocked at myself, “I suppose I did. I was upset, so I was trying to read the newspaper.” I frowned down at the crumpled newsprint. I had spilled neither tears nor tea on it, but was finding the smell of the ink oddly soothing. I probably had smears of it on my face.

Jan came in and set his suitcase on the floor by the little table where we ate. He was smiling and trying to pretend he wasn’t smiling. “Did you have your bicycle stolen on the street?”

“No,” I said, rubbing absently at my cheek. “Nobody would steal my bicycle. There are plenty of surplus bicycles the Nazis have confiscated from -- those poor people.”

Jan’s humor waned into bemusement. I asked him how his meetings had gone. His confusion increased, but he said,

“It was a good meeting. The other men in my office believe that we may establish good contact with London, soon.” He sat down slowly in the chair opposite me. His voice was steady and reassuring. I let it soothe me. I shook my remaining sleepiness away and stood up.

Jan went on, “If we can make the contact, we’ll be able to hear more than the radio can tell us -- the stations we’re getting, anyway. Nobody can say what kind of effect we’re really having, but I think we ought be doing a little less theorising and a little more acting. Christoffel has heard that there are other Dutch resistance movements, but we can barely trust each other, let alone anyone else claiming to be radicals...”

As Jan was speaking, I was occupying my hands by making coffee. I thought he wouldn’t drink it so early in the morning, but he sipped it anyway as I sat down again, perhaps to lure me into speaking. He peered at me curiously as he said,

“In the end I suppose we’ll have to take the chance.”

I appreciated that he did not ask whether I had been let go from my job -- perhaps he thought it unlikely that I would be, after working for so diligently for Mr. Frank, and for so long. But still, a less tactful man would have asked.

Before I had a chance to consider whether I was ready to speak, before the silence in which Jan waited and I languished could stop me from beginning at all, I told Jan about what Mr. Frank had asked of me yesterday during work.

Really, it had begun like any other Friday morning. I had arrived early on my bicycle and met Bep on the way in. She was of course a dear friend by now, and I asked her about her father as we went inside. He had been ill yesterday from the warehouse and, as I had heard it, things had gone slightly awry without him. I wondered how much of this was from the lack Mr. Voskuijl’s actual aid, and how much was from the loss of his cheery, fatherly presence.

“Oh, he’ll tell everyone he’s just fine,” Elisabeth sighed, “But I think he really ought to see a doctor if his stomach is going to keep bothering him. But he won’t, the stubborn ox. I think my mother will eventually convince him.”

With a smile, Bep left me to settle at my desk while she went back to the kitchen to make the coffee. There were still boxes everywhere from the moving in -- most of them the endless, endless piles of paper -- and so before I sat down I decided to get through a box of pamphlets that needed to be filed.

Bep beamed when she came in, two cups of coffee in her hands. “Thank you, Miep! I really can’t stand filing for more than five minutes at a time. It’s the first thing they teach you in secretary school, so that by the time you graduate you’re sick to tears of it!”

I accepted the coffee cup and smiled. “Is that why you’re so quick at it?”

Bep sipped and shrugged. “I suppose it is. Mr. Frank doesn’t like things disorganized. Neither do I -- I think that’s why we get along.” She waded past the remaining boxes to her own pristine desk.

At that moment, the front office door opened and Mr. Frank stepped smartly in.

“Good morning Bep,” he said cheerfully, “Good morning Miep. I apologize for being late.” He removed his hat and mistakenly moved to the left, where the hat stand had stood at the Singel 400 office, before moving to its new home in this new office on the Prinsengracht. Mr. Frank corrected himself immediately, hanging his hat on the new rack put up for that purpose, and sliding off his coat to hang directly underneath it.

“Good morning, Mr. Frank,” we said, and though she had just sat down Bep popped up again, retreating into the kitchen so that Mr. Frank would not have to pour his own morning coffee.

Every morning, just the same. Still, we were always met by the quiet sadness that came with the knowledge that Mr. Frank was not late, was never late -- in fact it was only just now striking eight o'clock. He only considered it so because, before, he had always had the custom of arriving fifteen minutes early to the office, in order “to be on hand when the day arrived.”

But before, Mr. Frank had been allowed to ride a bicycle, and before, Mr. Frank and his family could have taken the tram. Now all Jewish people must walk -- whether they were elderly or young, burdened with briefcases or with children, it didn’t matter -- all Jews must walk, as though they would stain the cars, the trams, the roads, the very air with their Jewishness. There was talk of even more new Jewish legislation soon, in the next few months, but no one could imagine yet what it might be. When we had first heard of it, Jan wondered aloud, a little bitterly, if Jews would be required to hand in their shoes next. Quietly, we feared for Mr. Frank, with his nervous wife and his two young girls, and we were hugely indignant -- Holland belonged to all of us, not to these German invaders! -- but what could we say? Politeness; this, and fear for the safety of everyone involved, that kept us silent. And guilt, too, I think. I had been saved by a hasty marriage certificate. What could I say in comfort to Mr. Frank, without feeling like a dreadful hypocrite?

“Ah, thank you very much, Bep,” said Mr. Frank, stepping forward to rescue a trembling coffee from Bep’s hand. I saw the tremble but tried not to -- poor Bep! It really was too awful to think about, the poor, good Franks and their troubles. There were hundreds of families just like theirs, suffering for nothing better than by the chance of their birth.

As if he noticed my thoughts, I thought I saw Mr. Frank glance at me as I was sorting the last of a pile of paperwork. But when I looked up, he was looking away, moving swiftly towards his office, where he said he would be placing phone calls for the next hour, and not to disturb him, please.

I bent into a new box and put a new stack of files on the desk, checking the contents briefly. Thank goodness, these seemed to be alphabetized already.

I continued filing, waiting for the complaint phone to ring, imagining where the wives and mothers who made jam were at this very moment. Right now, perhaps, they would be cleaning the breakfast dishes. Most would have their apartments or houses to themselves, the children having been hustled off to school and the husbands off to work. The unfortunates might be tending to diaper changes, laundry days, or older children home ill from school. But the luckiest ones, I felt, were already at work -- whether in an office, like myself and Bep, a shop, like our neighbor Ilse, or simply at home, like my sister and countless other women were in those days. The important thing was to be rolling up your sleeves, never idle, always keeping busy, lending hands where they were needed. It was too frantic, too uncertain a time to sit alone with one’s thoughts.

The Complaint phone rang -- an early first call today. I smiled as I answered it, because I thought it might be perhaps a housewife as yet too sleepy to read the directions for the jam, and it amused me to find that the irritated voice was indeed still foggy with sleep.

“Good morning,” I said. “Thank you for calling Opekta.”

All that day, I answered the Complaint and Information phone, continued filing papers from the boxes, and straightened the office into a greater working order with the help of Bep. We had none of our usual visits from Mr. Kugler or Mr. Kleiman, and Jan of course was out of town. It was a very quiet day. Mr. Frank kept to his office -- he did not come out even for his usual lunch break at noon. Bep invited me to lunch with her, Mr. Voskuijl, and Bep’s mother, and we returned shortly after. Bep did some letter writing, and I was bogged down with a long string of phone calls. I began to think that we would not see Mr. Frank until closing time, though through the glass I could see his figure pacing slowly around his office. I caught Bep glancing that way every once in a while. It seemed oppressively quiet whenever I hung up the Complaint phone.

At around three o’clock, Bep’s typing slowed and abruptly stopped.

“Miep,” she asked, after shuffling around her desk for a few moments, “I’ve run out of film. Do you have any more?”

“No,” I said, checking the typewriter I had not used that day. “This is dry.”

“Dry! Then where are the others?” Bep cried, horrified at this interruption. “Was there a new box moved from the Singel office?”

We looked around the remaining boxes, but all there was left to unpack were more papers.

“If there were more, you would almost certainly have the box at your desk,” I said eventually. “You type through more ink than I do.”

Bep’s eyes widened behind her glasses. She glanced again at Mr. Frank’s office door, and she sighed. The Complaint phone started ringing again.

“I’ll have to go get some more. I doubt Mr. Frank has any, and I don’t want to disturb him, anyway. I’ll be back in fifteen minutes.”

“I’ll tell him,” I promised, and dashed back to my desk to answer the phone. Bep put on her coat and left for the shops.

Once I had the woman on the phone calmed down and on her way to making pristine, perfectly congealed jam (why, I wondered, did they always add too much sugar?) I asked her if she had any other concerns I could help her with.

There was a moment of pause. “Well,” she said, “My husband is losing his second job of the month today. I don’t suppose you could help with that.”

“No, ma’am,” I said, alarmed. “I’m afraid not.”

“Of course not,” she said. “Still, it doesn’t hurt to ask, does it?”

I finished the call and hung up the phone in the now complete silence of the office, watching my hand set the receiver back into its cradle. I wore no ring. Jan could not yet afford one. Still, I was so blessed. Not only did Jan have a stable job, but I did too. We couldn’t buy much, but still, we had our apartment, and our clothes, books, food, savings. So many of the Dutch people were suffering because of the war, going without when we were not. It was enough to make me sick, deep in my stomach and my heart and the palms of my hands. Sick and dirty. Blessed, but unclean.

The phone chimed again suddenly. I broke out of my thoughts and answered it. It was Mr. Frank.

“Miep,” he said, “Would you come in a moment, please?”

“Of course,” I said, surprised even at the familiar question. I didn’t know what he had been doing all morning, but I was relieved that the day might be getting back to its regular order.

I knocked on the door lightly before I went in, and when I did, Mr. Frank was waiting for me, his fingers resting lightly on his desk. His expression was deep and his eyes were very quiet, and instead of feeling nervous I felt as though I were seeing him, Otto Frank, as a new man. A nervous man -- not my boss, but a gentleman who invited my husband and me to dinners with his family, a man who liked to talk politics and conjecture about the war between England and Germany and France. It surprised me to find that there was such a very big difference, in that man and the man who was my boss. He asked me to sit down.

“I have something very important to tell you,” he began, almost hesitantly. He paused for a moment, but when I was silent, he went on, “A secret, really.”

I think I might have nodded. I had a passing thought of birthday secrets or party plans, but those thoughts faded quickly. I knew that this was not a playful secret. Actually, I think I knew exactly what kind of secret it was.

“We plan on hiding ourselves here, in this house,” Mr. Frank said. “My family and Mr. van Daan’s. Of course I cannot assume, but we hoped --” Here Mr. Frank cleared his throat. “Would you be prepared to help us -- with provisions, and so forth?”

Those few sentences came out as calmly as the rest, but the weight of them hung in the air like a cocked pistol. My head began to buzz.

Hiding. I had heard of Jewish families trying to escape, to flee to America or Britain, or anywhere, really, where there might be a chance they could be safe from this senseless, inhuman persecution. But that must be extremely difficult to do. Even getting my birth certificate from Austria had been nearly impossible. I could not imagine getting the papers to transport seven people -- seven Jews -- from Holland to elsewhere would be any easier. Of course they must hide, I realized. And as easily as that, I said,

“Yes, of course.”

I thought it went without saying. Of course they must hide, so of course we must help them. I wondered aloud if Bep knew. My thoughts cleared at the same time my conscience did, though it had been sick and tired only moments before.

“Yes,” said Mr. Frank, who looked pleased and deeply relieved. His shoulders relaxed. “Bep and Johannes are in on it. Mr. Voskuijl has been quite a help to us, actually. He has built a bookcase to cover the entrance to the old laboratory between this building and the furniture place next door. Behind it is a stairwell that leads to a few rooms where we will be staying. Mr. Kugler is aware, and Mr. Kleiman, of course.”

He took me upstairs to see the few rooms where they would be staying -- it had a few pieces of furniture here and there, and curtains covering the windows. He showed me where Anne and Margot would sleep, and the van Daans. I saw the attic space and the little bathroom. There was a sink and a little stove already set up, and an empty shelf that I imagined would be filled with books the moment the Franks set up house here.

I don’t know what I thought, initially. I suppose I must have been in shock, of a sort. I remember thinking dimly how marvelously well planned it all was. Mr. Frank, I could tell, had gone over every detail, every possibility. He would teach the girls from library books, and run the company from upstairs, with Mr. Kugler, Mr. Kleiman and Jan to supervise. Bep and I would bring the shopping. Nobody else would know. It was going to be a perfect facade to last them for the rest of the war. Neither of us mentioned how long they might be hiding for. There was no way to know, and anyway the both of us thought that it must surely -- surely -- end soon.

Eventually, I went back to my desk to catch the phone, and for the rest of the day was kept busy. The moment she came back with her ink films, Bep beamed at me, but said nothing. She must have seen the look on my face and known. The both of us understood we had been let

into a terribly important event, and Bep I think was simply glad that I now knew. The less secrets -- between friends, that is -- the better.

It was only at the close of the workday I was betrayed. Mr. Frank came outside a few minutes after us, neat and dignified as always in his hat and overcoat, prepared to walk home, when he saw us attempting to untangle our bicycles from each other. He came over immediately and clasped my hand briefly, then Bep's. He gave a great yank to Bep's bicycle to remove it from mine. He said nothing at all, but it wasn't necessary to. His kind, beseeching eyes said quite enough.

He turned to walk home, and Bep said goodbye, and I was left there with my bicycle, chilled to my very heart. Outside the office, with the city looking out at me, I felt small and very alone. I felt foolish for not consulting Jan in this decision, and ashamed, thoroughly ashamed, for feeling guilty about my "yes."

It took me quite a while to climb onto my bike. How could I move, stricken as I was by the weight of the thing I had done, would do? I thought I could hear the city whispering, as cities do, faster than one can keep track of. The city knew, even if nobody else did, what I had agreed to, and Amsterdam would be sure to store that information securely for a later, more ominous date. Gossip, nowadays, was always the way that friends turned to enemies.

"So you're saying you've changed your mind? Shall I call Mr. Frank?" Jan asked calmly, stirring milk into his second cup of coffee.

"No!" I cried, affronted. "Of course not! Mr. Frank, Mrs. Frank, her little girls -- they need us to help them. Aren't we their friends? Haven't they risked everything to even *ask* us?"

"They asked you," Jan reminded me. He smiled, his eyes crinkling behind his round glasses. "They must think you're a trustworthy person. And a good person. A brave one."

"I'm not anybody," I said, flustered. "I'm only doing what's right, aren't I?"

He took my hand and squeezed it. "It's only that you seemed so uncertain, a moment ago."

"I am certain," I realized. "But I'm afraid, too. Jan, I'm so afraid for them. What will happen to them? How have they done wrong?"

Jan's hand patted mine. He was quiet for a few seconds, leaving my questions unanswered. Then he said, "It's quite a world that makes you afraid to do what's after all the decent thing, isn't it?"

"You do agree with me, don't you?" I asked. I realized I had still not asked him, that he deserved to be asked. "You'll help to hide the Franks?"

Jan only smiled at me.

"Miep," he said suddenly, as though hit upon by a wonderfully serious idea. "Do you think we ought to get the hiding place some newspaper pillows? It's the latest thing, you know. I'll mention it to Mr. Frank. After all, what are ink stains to sleeping on the latest headlines?"