

How It Happened

Herman van de Wijdeven

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p 5-18

Today

The school gate slams shut behind me with a sharp clang. The bars in the fence sing, loud and shrill. Joi-oi-oinnnnng! It's a song of iron.

I can give the gate just the right shove, if I want to. Not too hard, just enough to get it to catch with a soft, dry click. I've had a lot of practice, and now that I'm in my last year, it's a cinch. I don't even have to look back to check whether it really shut. I've managed it every day since the summer vacation.

Except today. Today, everything is different. I want noise. What I'd most like is to slam today shut, too, so that it would be over with an ear-splitting bang.

Someone calls my name among the shouting behind me. I recognize the high-pitched voice, just like a girl's, and think of the things I could do right now.

I could glance over my shoulder at the face that goes with the voice. It's not a girl. It's Finn. I would see him trailing me. Not too fast. Like he doesn't really want to catch up with me.

I could stop where I am and turn around. See Finn hold back. His feet would hesitate, kind of shuffle on the sidewalk. I could clench my teeth so hard that the muscles in my jaw go all hard. Press my chin to my chest and glare at Finn from under my eyebrows as menacingly as possible. Then I could throw my hand in his direction. Like throwing him a ball, or a stone. As though I'm throwing him away.

I could also walk over to him, picking up my pace, letting the fingers of my left hand strum the bars of the fence as I go, meanwhile making a rock of my right hand. I could swing and bring my fist to his face, good and hard. So hard that his lip splits open. My knuckles would hurt as they hit a tooth, unsure whether the blood on my hand is Finn's or my own.

All those things would be easy to do. I do something else. I do the most difficult thing of all. I keep on walking, without looking back.

I hear Finn's voice get closer. The clacking of his heels on the sidewalk tells me he's nearly caught up, and then he stops in his tracks.

He calls out once more, not really to me this time. His voice drops and he lets my name fall one last time onto the pavement. 'Bent.'

You see? He doesn't swing, he's stubborn, he says to himself quietly, without saying it.

Two weeks ago

Finn was the new kid. His mother had dropped him off at school on the first day after summer vacation. At least, I assumed it was his mother, because she had the same pale, pointy face as he did.

She was really blonde. Almost white. There were thin black stripes painted around her eyes.

The woman crouched in front of him. This was not all that easy. Her flowered dress stretched tightly over her body, and her high-heeled shoes wobbled on the sidewalk.

She took his hands and talked to him, nodding the whole time. Once in a while the boy nodded back.

The other mothers squeezed past her, scowling, to get through the gate. They raised their eyebrows to one another behind her back. As a sign that they'd seen it all: the dress and the shoes and the thin black stripes and the blonde hair.

The woman teetered upright. She straightened her dress and had a quick feel to make sure her breasts were where they belonged. She pursed her lips and stood very tall, with her chin in the air. I was pretty sure I knew what she meant by this.

She took the boy by the shoulders and twisted him in an abrupt about-face. Then she gave his back a shove with her fingertips, so that he stumbled more than stepped onto the schoolyard.

Then she swerved around, too. As though two invisible hands had grabbed her by the shoulders and swung her the other way. She walked down the street towards the town square and the church, without looking back.

I almost felt sorry for the kid. Almost. First I had to find out if he was worth feeling sorry for. With a newbie, you never know.

He shuffled along the windows of the gymnasium, his head down. Nobody paid him any attention. I sauntered over to him. I took little detours, so it would look like I just happened to bump into him.

Against the wall of the bike shed, in the farthest corner of the schoolyard, he stood there looking as pale and skinny as possible. I nodded. He nodded back.

'Bent,' I said.

'Finn,' he said.

A laugh shot up from my belly. I caught it in my throat just in time. It had almost flown out of my mouth like a bucket of cold water, straight into his face.

He had a weird voice. High-pitched and squeaky. Like a scared little girl.

I glanced around the schoolyard. At the other kids greeting one another after two months' absence. Boys thumping other boys on the shoulder. Girls running in place, hands folded under their chin, like they had to pee really badly, and then throwing their arms around each other, shrieking. Other kids were already running and playing as though there hadn't even been a vacation. I hated all that festivity on the first day of school. Didn't see the point of it.

I turned my head back towards Finn. He had been looking where I looked. He pressed his bluish lips together and stretched his mouth from side to side. It took me a few seconds to realize he was smiling at me. It was like he had read my mind. My ears went all warm.

'Which class?' I asked quickly.

He held up all the fingers on one hand and the thumb of the other.

'Same as me,' I said, more eagerly than I had intended.

Finn nodded. I figured he was probably ashamed of his girlish voice, so he used it as little as possible. Only to say what he couldn't say with his hands or his shoulders or his head.

Had I stifled my laugh well enough just now? Did my face give me away?

Finn must be used to it by now. He knew what a trying-not-to-laugh face looks like. Probably much uglier than a face that just laughs out loud.

Now I really did feel sorry for him.

I looked around the schoolyard again. I felt Finn following my gaze. I was looking for Yuri. My best friend. He always shows up just in the nick of time.

None of the other kids seemed to notice us at the wall of the bike shed. They were too wrapped up with themselves and with each other.

It was the first day of the new school year, and I knew something no one else did. I already knew the new kid's name. I had heard his weird voice. I was one up on the others. It made the first day back at school a bit less awful.

There was Yuri. He ran through the gate, half tripping over his loose shoelaces. I shook my head and held back a belly laugh. The bell went.

Today

I can finally take a right. When I've gone partway down the Zandstraat I stop. I listen. All I hear is the far-off shouts of children. Otherwise it's quiet. Still, I look around, just to be on the safe side. The sidewalk is empty until the corner. Finn hasn't followed me.

I'm a little light-headed. I think I held my breath the whole way from the school gate. I let my lungs deflate. A word escapes along with the breath, a word without a front or back. A word that means nothing and yet wants to say everything.

I consider my options. I could go straight down the street, and at the end take a right to my house. It's the shortest way.

But then I'd have to pass Schram, the butcher. Past Schram and his dog. It's always lying on there out front on the stoop, panting and keeping watch. And bobbing its head, just like the toy dog on the back shelf of Yuri's mother's car. Come on over, he seems to be saying. Plenty of room here on the stoop.

I hate that dog. He's already nipped at me twice. Once in the air just behind my knee, the other time he nearly got my hand.

I can also turn into the Bremsteeg just before the butcher shop. It's no more than a path. It slopes down to the canal and the wooden bridge. At the bottom is the abandoned stone mill with its broken windows.

From there I have to walk along the water, on an even narrower path through the grass, till I get to our back gate. That way is sure to be muddy and slippery after yesterday's storms. I'll track muck into the house and my mother will grumble.

She's bad at pretending to be angry. Her sadness shows through. Her disappointment, because I'm still scared of Schram's dog. She'll sigh and shake her head so slightly that you'd have to know her well to notice it.

Why are you so frightened?' she'll want to know. 'I want to understand. He's not so big, that mutt. Why not just cross the road? You're almost twelve. I don't get it. Why're you always so scared?'

She'll say it softly, with a voice that keeps rising, until she almost squeaks like a mouse. This way the question won't seem so mean, she thinks. What she doesn't get is that it has exactly the opposite effect.

I'd rather take the path than cross the street to avoid a dog. Because then you could think it was what I meant to do. That I enjoy taking detours. That I just happened to feel like it.

'See that kid there?' Schram would say. 'He doesn't feel like going home just yet. It's nice out, he wants to dawdle a little before starting his homework.'

Try explaining that to a mother. Even if she's nice and wants to understand.

Yesterday

'We don't have to do anything today,' my mother said. 'Today is Sunday.'

It was nearly eleven and I was still in my pajamas, something that was usually never allowed.

I wasn't sick. And still, my mother did all the things she does when I am sick.

I lay on the couch. She had brought a blanket and pillow from upstairs. She made tea and buttered rusks. She peeled a pear and squeezed oranges. Every once in a while she felt my forehead. The only thing she didn't do is call Dr. Vekens.

I think it was easier for her to pretend I was sick. Then she at least knew how to handle it. How to take care of me.

The telephone rang a few times. Every time my mother answered, I buried my head under the blanket. I hummed quietly to myself, filled my head with noise so that nothing from outside could get in.

Once, the bell rang. My mother answered the door and stood talking in the doorway.

When she came back in, I pretended to be asleep. I peered at her face through my eyelashes, to see if it gave away anything about what was just said. She didn't look more worried than just before. But not less worried, either.

She held the back of her hand against my forehead. 'Hmm,' she said, and she nodded.

She went over to the cupboard, opened a drawer, and fished around for the thermometer.

I was okay with that. It was comforting to think I might have something that would blow over after a day under a blanket, eating rusks and drinking orange juice.

That this was what made me feel like something was squeezing my ribs together. That this was why my stomach constricted and turned upside down.

Because I was sick. Not because of what had happened the day before. On Saturday.

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Today

I wait until Finn has turned the corner before I start walking. I keep an eye out in case he's taken cover from the rain, which has started coming down again, in fat, lazy drops.

As I hurry past the crooked wall of the cemetery, I try to decide what to do, so as not to waste time dithering.

I could walk further into town, to the only traffic light, just before the church and the square, and then turn onto the bit of the Veldstraat where there are no more shops.

Or I could turn right at Verhagen's. Along the sand path that runs between the tall house and the mill. And then further past the unkept garden patches and rundown sheds.

That's a roundabout route. And now it's bound to be as muddy as anything. The puddles are probably so big that you can't jump them, or skirt around them, you can only go straight through them. I don't care, 'cause at least I won't bump into Finn. The new kid doesn't know the way. He's never been there.

I pass the house and turn the corner. I pass the bladeless windmill. There's the first puddle.

Something catches my eye as I look down to concentrate on the narrow strip of grass between the water and a concrete wall. I look up.

It's Finn standing in the middle of the path.

His mouth is open. He's panting without making any sound. His eyes are red around the edges, with dark circles underneath. They were crying not so long ago. Or almost were.

'Bent,' he says.

It doesn't sound like Finn. His voice is low and hoarse. His face is even whiter than usual. He's nearly transparent.

His hands are dirty. His clothes are almost as filthy as mine. There are black smears on his neck.

We stand there facing each other like two grubby gunslingers about to fight a duel.

My back and leg muscles tense. If he moves even a finger, I'll jump him.

'Bent,' he says again. 'I've been looking for you.'

His entire body trembles under his skin. It reminds me of Olga, the neighbors' greyhound. Skinny thing on quivering legs.

Finn raises his hands and holds them, palms outward, loosely in front of his chest. Is this a sign of surrender?

I rush forward. It doesn't go quite like I'd imagined it. The mud is holding me back, so I stumble more than jump at him.

Finn just stands there. Just before I reach him I turn one shoulder forward and ram into his ribs.

He goes, 'Uhm'.

We fall. Me on top of him. I think I hear something crack inside his ribcage.

We roll on the ground, until I'm sitting on his stomach. I try to grab his wrists and pin his arms to the ground. I want to crucify him in the mud.

Finn grabs me. He's much stronger than I thought. He shoves me off him. I fall onto my back in the water.

Leaning on one elbow, I gawp at Finn. He turns on his side, too. How'd he manage to toss me off him like that, like a sack of old rags? With that scrawny body of his?

His strength is inside him, I figure. All this time. There's an angry version of Finn on the inside, and I've just woken him up.

I get up and pounce on him again. I grab him by the collar. My nose right up against his. His breath smells sour. My jaw is clenched tight.

'Dammit, Finn,' I say.

Finn won't fight. He's only keeping me in check. He doesn't fight back. It makes me even madder.

'Fight.'

I press the words between my clenched teeth.

'Fight, dammit.'

Finn turns his head away. He could take me. The angry Finn could. He could take me easily and he doesn't do a thing.

I let go and spread my arms.

'Come on,' I say. 'Come on.'

'Bent.'

'Say it, then.'

Finn shakes his head. 'What?'

'Say it!' I shout.

'Say what?'

'What it is you're thinking.'

'What am I thinking?'

'About Saturday.'

'What about it?'

'That it was my fault.'

'Bent.'

'Say it!'

It's quiet for a moment. Finn looks at me. Then his eyes turn away.

'I don't think it was.'

He's given it some thought. I can hear it in his voice. Not now, not just a minute ago. He's already thought about it.

'Not?'

I do my best to stay angry, but I hear the relief in my voice.

'No,' Finn says.

'Whose fault was it, then?'

'I dunno.'

'His own fault?'

'No.'

'Then whose?'

'Nobody's.'

'Huh.'

'It just happened, Bent. It's just... how it happened. That's all.'

'Pfff.'

I let go and roll off him. We're lying side by side. Stretched out on our backs. Without moving. Only my chest rises and falls in short spasms.

We're quiet for at least half a minute. Stock-still. Thunder rolls in the distance.

Finn breathes deeply, in and out. And again. I look over at him. He's the only one I can talk to. About Saturday. He's the only one who knows how it went. How it really went.
