

DON'T SAY NOTHING

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Utrecht, in the centre of Holland, possesses the country's highest steeple, the Domtoren: at a hundred and ten meters it can be seen from afar from all directions, except from the southwest where its view is obscured by the woods which cover the sand hills that were left there by the glaciers of thousands of years ago.

It was not until Jos started going to junior high school that he began to take particular notice of the tower. It would suddenly come into view when the bus emerged from among the beech trees, into the unending flatness of the grazing lands spread out like a checkered tablecloth. At that moment the tower presented itself like a huge forbidding finger growing ever larger.

Upon seeing it, Jos had difficulty suppressing his tears. Grade school with its familiar faces, its simple rules and its two teachers, had not been like this at all. The principal taught grades four to six and Miss van Erk taught the young ones. There had never been anything to disturb or upset Jos. On the first of September his friends had all gone to trade school four kilometers away, and he was left to wait two days before he could take the bus for the first time and travel twenty-two kilometers to Utrecht.

He recognized nothing and nobody in the city. There were barely any trees, there was no sand, and high walls hid every garden and playground. To enter the schoolyard, one pushed a green door situated in the middle of a brick wall and one came upon a square jammed with bicycles and screaming boys. A group was playing soccer amidst the crowd and the players would knock down anyone who came between them and the ball.

One of the priests who ran the school was attempting to maintain order. Regularly, he would pull out a whistle, point to a boy and send him in. The brother looked familiar to Jos. It seemed as if he had seen him before in a photograph. He was tall, he had a ruddy complexion and a curved nose, and he wore glasses.

"Pope Pius XII, that's who!", Jos muttered to himself. "Maybe, it's his younger brother? No... Can't be...! The Pope is Italian." Jos could not help but be impressed by his imposing stature, his bearing, his sardonic smile.

When the bell rang, they all lined up in groups by class and section. Anyone who stepped out of line or talked received a quick tap on the shoulder with a rule from his home room teacher.

Class 9C was the property of Brother Charles.

He was short and some-what rotund and he wore his hair slicked back. He already seemed to know half the class. After prayers, he explained the basics of life at St Alphonsus Secondary.

"For example," said he, "you, Peter. Should you decide to act up, I have a patented way of taking care of you."

"Me, Brother Charles!? What have I ever done!"

"In any case let me show you what I mean."

Speedily he moved past Peter's desk, turned around and bounced the knuckles of his clenched fist off the back of Peter's head. Peter grimaced, a single tear rolled down his cheek.

"May this be a lesson to all of you," intoned Brother Charles, beaming from behind his desk.

Was it from that moment on that Jos had begun to hate St. Alphonsus Secondary? He did not know himself, but he knew that he despised the high walls, the mile long walk along the canals during recess and most of the boys with whom he had to deal; they were loud and rough, and they stank of sweat, musty clothes, and the metallic odor of the buses and trains they rode. Above all he hated their mindless happiness, their indifference to being punished, and their eagerness to score points with their buddies and with the teachers.

Was there no way he could remain hidden behind the bicycles after recess? Would the wall not swallow him up? Why not just burst through the green door on to the street and keep running?

It was now the middle of November. The trees, leafless, waved their branches in the wind and there was no hiding from the rain. When the bus reached the open country, Jos could barely make out the tower. The rain streaming down the window made it look like an overly tall but misshapen chocolate pudding. His cheese sandwiches felt soggy in their waxed paper wrappers and beneath his raincoat a small puddle began to form.

At school, the boys were more skittish than usual. The principal, majestic as always, occupied the same spot in front of the main door. The rain did not affect him, it seemed. His black garb and his forehead glistened with water, but he neither noticed nor cared. Jos felt his clammy clothes stick to his body and his hand touched his soggy sandwiches. He knew he was inferior, unhappy and forever out of place. He would never like the rain, the dirty water trickling in his eyes, and he was ready to cut off his feet to be rid of the damp cold feeling in his shoes.

In the hallway, a short bearded priest garbed

in brown, moved about among the boys with a knowing and jovial air. He clasped hands, slapped shoulders, laughed, grinned, and called out names.

"Don't let him know anything," Jos overheard one of the boys from a higher grade say. The priest continued to move among the students as if he were a long-lost friend.

Around eleven o'clock it was Jos' turn to go up and see Father Boerenkamp. He was seated in a sitting room on the third floor which barely had room for the two chairs. A tiny window looked out on the roofs of the houses surrounding the school. Fatehr Boerenkamp introduced himself and invited Jos to sit down. Jos tried to move his chair away a little but there was no room. Their knees were nearly touching and Jos began to feel uncomfortable.

The priest stroked his flowing beard several times, coughed, cleared his throat, coughed again and said

"Well, then Jos, how are you?"

"Fine, thank you."

"Good, good...and your family? Your father and mother?"

"My father has been dead for nearly seven years, Father."

"Oh, I am so sorry to hear that." He put his hand on Jos' knee. Jos tried to move back but there was nowhere to go.

"Now tell me, Jos, how are you getting along in school?"

"Oh, fine, I guess."

"Not very happy, it seems."

"No, I would have preferred to stay with my friends in Maarn. I don't like the city."

"Who are your friends, Jos...and what do you fellows do?"

"Oh, there is Richard. He is a grade ahead of me. He is the only one from the village who also goes to this school. We wait for the bus together and sometimes I study over at his place. And then there are Herman and Peter. We go riding together. Sometimes we bicycle all the way to Amersfoort or Zeist."

"And what do you boys talk about?"

"Everything, I guess. Cars, motorcycles, school, soccer. Why, everything!"

"And what else?"

"Oh, that's it."

"Nothing else?. Don't you ever swear or use bad language?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. Oh, perhaps. Sometimes I say 'dammit' or something like that."

"And Richard...what's his family like?"

"Oh, fine, I guess. He lives with his sister and his mother. His dad left a long time ago and so did his sister's husband."

"Is that so? And how old is his sister?"

"I don't know. Twenty, perhaps."

"And you and Richard. What else do you do?"

"We study together in his bedroom, and sometimes he helps me with my work. He is really smart. He likes school."

"How long do you and Richard spend alone in his bedroom?"

"An hour, maybe two, three. Who knows?"

"Thank you, Jos. You can go now."

Jos got up and could not help but rub Father's knee again. The room felt hot and stuffy and he was eager to get out. When he turned around to close the door, he saw Father write something down in a small notebook.

When he got back to his seat, Philip Hooistra asked him what he had told Father Boerenkamp.

"Oh, nothing much. I just told him about who I study with and where I live."

"Stupid! You should not have told him anything. Last year they nearly expelled Marten Verboom because he told him he had a girlfriend."

"No kidding. He was only thirteen years old then. Was it true?"

"Oh, he liked the girl who lives across the street from him. Sometimes they walked part way to school together. But now they can't see each other at all. The principal called in Marten's father and Marten was sent home for the rest of the week. I live on the next block and Marten's brother told me."

"Quiet, over there," yelled Brother Charles suddenly. "Unless you would enjoy a dose of my patent medicine. I am ready any time you are."

Jos wanted to tell Philip that he had revealed no secrets, but he was too afraid of Brother Charles' knuckles to utter another sound.

Right after recess Jos was called to the principal's office, where he was told to sit down across from him at a table covered with a multihued cloth from which dangled silken tassles.

"I would like to talk to you about the times you spend with Richard in his bedroom. How old is Richard?"

"Fifteen, I think."

"So what do you do together, Jos? Tell me, honestly."

"We study, Brother Boniface."

"But what else do you do?"

"What else? Oh, sometimes we play tic-tac-toe or darts or we shoot spitballs at each other."

"But what else do you do?"

"Occasionally, his mother brings up tea and cookies or sandwiches."

"No, no. What else do you and Richard do

together?"

"Nothing, that's it."

"Don't lie to me, young man! How old are you?"

"Fourteen, Brother Boniface."

"You are playing innocent, but I won't let you go until you tell me what else you and Richard do together!"

"That's it. Nothing else!"

"Nothing else! Nothing else!"

"Nothing else."

"I don't believe you. I must know what is going on, you impudent and immoral young man."

In his nervousness, Jos had begun to knit together the tassles which hung from the tablecloth. Now they looked like so many girls' braids and they made him think of his sisters. Jos smiled.

"You're not taking this matter seriously, are you? Smiling or rather sneering at me! I am sending you home immediately. I want to see your mother as soon as she can get here. Now go!"

Jos left not knowing where to go or what to do. He had only taken the bus early in the morning and at four in the afternoon. Suppose he had to wait until then?

The wait at the bus stop seemed interminable. Buses would go by regularly, but none had the right number on them, and few even bothered to stop. When his No. 22 finally pulled up Jos, in his confused state, nearly let it leave again without him. He slumped in the back seat and stared out of the windows. One after the other meadows separated by shallow ditches flashed by. Every now and again he would catch a glimpse of a cow staring aimlessly into space. Big round eyes transfixed and immobile. What held their attention for so long?

His mother was shocked to see him home at three. What had happened? What had he done? She would phone the parish priest immediately and get his advice. What was a woman with nine children and no husband to do? "You go and play, but don't go far."

Jos took his bicycle and rode off into the woods. The beeches, the chestnut trees and the oaks waved their barren limbs in the soft breeze. He tossed his bicycle against a tree – the pedal caught in the bark and the bike stayed upright – and Jos lay down in the heather. Tiny clouds like puffs of wool moved overhead. They came from nowhere and were going nowhere. They just kept moving along.

"That's what I have been doing since father died," thought Jos. "When I get where I am going I don't want to be there, and yet I go

anyway. I just keep moving along until I get pushed in a different direction. I don't want to go to this school, I don't want to stay home and I don't want to meet anyone. But every day I do what I have to do and I do it whether or not I am filled with fear and anger and terror. When father was alive our lives were light and purposeful. Since then a black curtain has fallen before me and behind me. I can't see what's coming my way, nor do I recognize what has happened to me afterwards."

When he came home, his mother was greatly agitated. "The parish priest does not want you to see Richard and his family anymore. They are a bad influence."

"But what have they done? All we do is study together."

"Never mind. His mother is divorced and his sister is already separated. That is why he disapproves of them. Now I want you to go to church and go to confession."

Jos had nothing to say to the parish priest, who gave him three Hail Marys. Afterwards, alone in the church, he noticed the sun go down through the church windows and strike the statue of the Virgin Mary. For a moment it seemed as if a miracle had occurred. Her face radiated in the colours of the stained glass. Her outstretched arms seemed to want to embrace him. But then the sun disappeared behind the beech trees which surrounded the church. The statue lost its hue and returned to its plaster white colour. Its perfectly formed eyes, nose, and mouth cast an ever lengthening shadow over the rows of pews ahead of Jos. Light between two darkneses was all there had been.

Outside, the street lights were already on. Jos pedalled furiously. He wanted to be home before it became completely dark. Suddenly his headlight went out. He stopped at the nearest light, turned his mirror around, spun his wheel and tried to catch a glimmer of a burning bulb. Instead he saw only his own face, **but it was grotesquely greyish green. What was the matter? What had happened?** Jos looked up, the mercury-filled streetlights burned his eyes. That was it. They had given his face the complexion of a prehistoric monster. He jumped back on his bicycle and laughed out loud. In his mirror he was the skin of a gila, an armadillo, a brontosaurus. All the monsters that had ever lived converged in the glass and then when he turned onto the unlit sideroad on which he lived, they fell away instantly and Jos was left alone with the whirring motion of his bicycle's wheels and the nothingness of darkness which enveloped him completely.