

WHEN I WAS EIGHT

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I found a little bell in the woodshed. It was very old and rusty, in the shape of two shells with a little ball that swung in between. There was an eye on it, so you could wear it as a necklace. I immediately took it to Aunt Suus, who was in hospital. I loved Aunt Suus very much and it made me angry when the grown-ups made fun of her and the children from our camp said she was crazy. They said this because she always used to give you three perfectly good marbles for every cracked one you brought her. Nobody knew how she got all those good marbles. The cracked ones she kept in a big box under her bed. "Broken glass brings luck", she said to me with a giggle, "and without luck we'll never get out of here alive."

I myself didn't think she was that crazy. Aunt Suus was the only grown-up you could talk to about gnomes. She knew a lot about them, also about fairies, and she once "read a spell" over me when I was ill. Mother told me she had just been sitting there, a big cool shadow next to my straw mattress; I said she must have done some magic, because when I woke up I was better, but Aunt Suus herself said: "If you pray to God the gnomes will help you."

She became very excited when she saw the little bell. There had to be a bell for her too, somewhere in the camp; I should go and look for it everywhere, because people who had a bell like that were chosen people. It was a sign of God that I was the one who had found it; I should take care not to lose it.

But how could you not lose something like that, when all you wore were underpants, which had no pockets of course, and when there was no place in the camp where you could hide anything? Everybody always saw everything you did, everybody always wanted to take everything from you; the person who owned anything today could be sure it would be gone tomorrow. But Aunt Suus said she would make me a necklace for the bell. And when I returned that evening, she was lying there, muttering, a thin necklace in her sweet brown hands. She had crocheted it for me herself from blue and yellow embroidery thread. Of course she said that it was gold and silver thread, but whatever it was, I thought it was very beautiful. With reverence she tied the little bell around my neck and I was so happy I ran off immediately to show it to anyone who was interested. The next day, when I again walked past the window by her bed, she was already looking for me and held her hand out like a child. I was afraid she might want me to give her the string with the little bell and hesitantly I came closer. "Where is it?" she asked. "The other little bell? The bell that was meant for

me? Haven't you found it yet? Have you really looked well?"

I had not found anything; the only thing I had done was gather wood for my mother and pick leaves from the hedge for the noon rice. Aunt Suus didn't mind, she didn't mind anything any more, but I had to promise to look for it that afternoon. The gnomes would surely help me, after all, she was praying, wasn't she? "Seek and ye shall find", she said, pointing her finger at me, and in such a solemn tone I realized it had to be a biblical saying.

Of course I did not find another bell. Maybe I didn't look for it very well. I was so busy with the daily chores, like gathering wood and looking for food, and anyway I was really pretty sure there could be only one bell like that in our dry, hot, awful camp. I was almost afraid to go back to Aunt Suus again, because whenever she saw me she thought I was coming to bring her the little bell. And then, when I left her, she would call after me, "Seek and ye shall find", and I would dream about that at night.

I There were walls everywhere in the camp. There was no view and we couldn't see the horizon. I had heard about a war we had that lasted eighty years. "Then you are born in the camp and you die in the camp," I thought. But in our camp no children were born, in our camp people only died. And then the hunger, or rather the appetite. Eating was the most important thing. What there was to eat, how much there was to eat, and who got something to eat. We boiled grass and stripped all the bushes bare. During the day we ate everything that seemed edible and at night everybody had to vomit. The Japs' garbage heap was the talk of the day, because you could tell what their menu had been from the peels they threw out. Little boys were lying in wait and ten minutes after the garbage had been dumped there was not one peel left. We looked for food all day long, my brothers and I, and we took everything we found to my mother, who divided it fairly into four.

But one day, when I was walking across the camp square and saw a little boy with a small carrot in his hand, I only thought of myself and how it used to be. It was a carrot much like the carrots our baboe (nanny) used to give us, before the war: flaming orange, with black wrinkles and a bunch of green at one end. On the other end it had a long hair. I had almost forgotten what carrots looked like, but now I remembered and I knew right away that I had to have that carrot, and more than that, I would eat the whole thing myself. I felt my heart beat inside me as I strolled towards the boy.

"What have you got there? Do you know what it is?"

"A carrot," said the boy.

"From the garbage heap?"

"No, it fell off a Jap cart."

"Carrots aren't that great," I bluffed.

"It's something to eat," the boy said.

"Well, you have to like them," I said.

"I like everything," the boy said.

"Carrots were my favourite food before the war, you know."

I had decided to show the boy I was very interested, because he was just about to walk away.

"So what?" He lingered for a moment.

I didn't know him, I had never seen him before, but I had to have his carrot.

"My mother was in prison for a year."

I was trying to get his sympathy and maybe even his pity.

"My mother is dead," he said.

"Want to swap?" I asked. "The carrot?"

"For the bell." He nodded.

My mouth turned dry with fright. In fact I had known from the moment I saw the carrot that it would cost me my bell. But I also knew it was worth it.

"You won't get the string," I snapped.

"I have a pocket in my pants," he said proudly. They are really taking good care of him, I thought, while I fumbled around untying the bell with my clammy fingers. Pants with pockets, that was something very special.

I had the bell in my left hand, he had the carrot in his right. Swapping things had become a ritual for the children in our camp. We swapped at the same time.

"Tick tack, touch black no backs," I said, as quickly as possible, because if he said "backs" before I had finished, he would have the right to swap it back. But he didn't say anything and ran off with the bell in his hand, his hand in his pocket.

Squatting against one of the camp walls, I ate my carrot. I had thought up a special way of eating good things. First I took a big bite, very nonchalantly, munched on it quickly, as if I didn't care, and swallowed. But before the stuff had gone down my throat, I did something with my tongue to make it come back into my mouth. Then I chewed again, but thoroughly this time, pushing everything in front of my teeth and sucking the juice inside. When there was finally no taste left at all, I swallowed for good, looked dreamily in front of me for a while and took another bite.

After three bites my carrot was gone. Also the bunch of green, also the long hair. I realized now I did not have a bell any more, and I could not tell anyone I had had a carrot. My brothers would ask why they didn't get anything, and what was I supposed to say then? I went to my mother, crying with remorse. She asked me what was wrong and I

told her that I had lost my little bell and didn't dare tell Aunt Suus. It was only a little lie. My mother did not think it very important, I believe.

To punish myself I went to Aunt Suus. That same evening. She noticed right away that the little bell was gone and that I lied when I said I lost it. I thought she would order me to go and look for two bells now, but she did not say anything when I left. She was crying and I never dared to look at grown-ups crying.

The next day the story went around that Aunt Suus had gone "matta gelap", completely crazy: she had walked out of the camp. She was wearing a white nightgown and the guard took her for a ghost and hit her on the head with his club. When I went to the hospital to take a look, her window was closed. That afternoon a small truck drove onto the camp square. Two nurses supported Aunt Suus and helped her in the back. The Jap closed the back. I was standing behind a tree but saw everything. Aunt Suus had big white bandages with red-brown spots around her long grey wavy hair. She held on firmly to her box with the broken marbles, but her bundle of clothes had to be put in the truck by the nurses. The Jap gave a shout and the truck drove off. "To the Malay nuthouse," my mother told me, and she added: "She'll never get out of there alive."

I kept the yellow-blue string around my neck for a long time. I got into the habit of hanging onto it with my hands. Otherwise my arms would hang too heavily beside my body. Just as my head became too heavy to hold up. Just as my feet became too heavy to do anything but shuffle. My cheeks too tired to laugh.

And it might be another eighty years before there was peace.