

II Rosa Overbeek (2)

That morning they happened to have gym first, so Rosa swiftly receded from Kees' mind. But gym had been going on for half an hour or so when the head master came in, with Truus, Kees' little sister, by the hand.

All gym immediately stopped, and Kees took the worst fright of all. Of his own accord he left his row and walked up to the head master. 'Bakels, someone has come to collect you. Just go with your sister, the lady is waiting outside.' And he nodded in the direction of the door. And while the head master walked up to the gym teacher, to explain, no doubt, Kees went out onto the corridor with his little sister.

In the street stood Miss Smit, their neighbour. She was half crying, gave Truus a kiss and said: 'You must come home with me immediately. Your father has come home so bad.' 'Slap, an accident,' Kees thought. An accident with his father, and who knows if that hadn't occurred the very moment when he was exchanging glances with that miserable girl. 'What happened?' he asked.

But Miss Smit didn't answer him; she just kept saying 'there now, there now' to Truus, who was crying ever worse. 'Miss, what's wrong with Dad?' Kees asked, who was now beginning to get nervous too. But Miss Smit again didn't hear him. And suddenly Kees thought: What a fool I am, to keep walking so slowly with this lot, when I can be there twice as fast. And without saying another word he ran ahead. Who knows how his mother was waiting for him now, to get medicated cotton-wool or something. He ran and ran...

There was nobody in the store. Through the passage he rushed. At the entrance to the room he stopped. His mother stood at the bedstead and softly slid the curtains to. 'Then I'll be back shortly and have another look,' the doctor was just saying. He lumbered into Kees for a second, and then was into the passage and gone.

Mum saw Kees. He suddenly couldn't speak from fear. His mother lifted him up and gave him a kiss. A sob shook her body. Then she pushed him through the passage, towards the kitchen.

'Go and get ice quick. Here, here's a bucket. For a quarter ice, you know where, over the bridge.'

Kees took the bucket and carried it so that it wouldn't jingle. Hop, out the door, onto the bridge...

The way back he couldn't walk so fast: there was one big chunk of ice that kept wanting to slither out of the bucket. His mother stood at the door to take the bucket. She gave Kees a slip of paper, he recognized the prescription and was on his way again.

To be on the safe side he held his hands as at gym, at the double march, and breast forwards. He must now hold out, his father was in danger and could perhaps be saved... There was that stitch in the side, he had also felt it just now. Bother, just brazen it out, as if you felt nothing. Was the spleen played that trick on you, the teacher had told them; that was why some runners simply had their spleen surgically removed... Ouch, there it began even worse. Just walk normal for a bit, until it was gone; just push your hand firmly into your side, that usually helped. So, and now stealthily get into the double again, as if you wanted to fool that spleen...

Ouch, why, this was just too bad. He had to stand still for it. Shame, shame, that that stitch should be there; he wasn't tired yet by a long shot. Why, he was hardly panting!

What if he'd just push on regardless? He'd perhaps drop dead at it. What a boy, everyone would say: ran himself to death because of his father...

He started again, slowly at first. The stitch was gone. Or no, it was still half there, ready to strike again as soon as Kees would get into the double. Little test: ouch, blast, too damn bad! He *had* to stop again. It wouldn't work. He actually had to walk, walk leisurely, as if he was in no hurry at all! Well, fortunately, there was the pharmacist's.

'Collect in an hour,' the employee said. And Kees politely answered 'Yes sir,' and left. But out in the street he was sorry. This must be a mistake. This wasn't possible. Collect in an hour! He balked at it, but he had to: he stepped back into the pharmacist's.

'I'm sorry sir, but isn't there some mistake, wasn't it a... an emergency prescription or something?'

The employee gave him a brief smile: 'No, boy, collect in an hour, no sooner.'

And Kees was back in the street again. No fighting *that*. But he had warned that it was an emergency prescription, and if the medicine would come too late for his father, well, he would bear witness that he had expressly come back. But perhaps the doctor had come again. *He* would know at once.

At Miss Smit's Truus sat playing in the window with Thomas. So the children couldn't stay at home, for the bustle of course.

Well, it was quiet in the house. His mother was in the kitchen. 'Collect in an hour,' said Kees. 'What next, Mum?'

'Nothing,' his mother said. 'But how you've been running, Kees.' She sat down on the kitchen chair and pulled him against her.

'How's Dad now?' Kees whispered. 'Asleep?'

'I think so.' And she sighed, and again squeezed Kees.

'Has Dad had an accident?' Because he didn't really know a thing yet.

'Yes,' Mum said, and again she sighed, and Kees felt her trembling. 'Dad has coughed very badly, a terrible coughing fit... and then he was very sick... a handkerchief full... of blood... from the coughing of course.' 'Of course,' Kees understood.

'And now he needs rest, an awful lot of rest, today he's not allowed to move at all, actually.' She got up suddenly and sneaked to the room. Kees remained in the kitchen. He drank some water, for the running had made him pretty thirsty. He felt slightly relieved at what his mum had told him. Sick for coughing, well, that could happen. And you could very well cough your throat to pieces, too...

He went up to the door of the room and looked inside. My, how *very* carefully Mum handled those curtains!

In the afternoon he went to school again as usual. Truus was so happy to be sleeping at Miss Smit's. Simply childish...

The teacher looked at him intently. Didn't trust it, perhaps, that he had stayed away the whole morning?

'Been running errands the whole morning, fetched ice and been to the pharmacist's twice.'

‘Yes, all right,’ the teacher said. ‘And how is your father doing now?’

‘So-so,’ Kees said. ‘Needs a lot of rest.’

‘I see,’ the teacher said, still with this mistrustful look on his face.

They had reading.

The boy next to him gave him a nudge.

‘I know what your father got.’

‘Oh yeah?’

‘Spitting blood!’

‘Ah,’ Kees said, suddenly furious. And he gave that boy a kick as vicious as he had never before kicked any boy: purposely in his ankle. The boy barely managed to keep silent.

‘And if I get you in the street I’ll knock you to jelly,’ Kees hissed.

And then he ostensibly joined in with the reading, all the while hoping just one thing: that he could keep himself from crying, that he could please keep himself from crying...

At geography, fortunately, his nervousness was over. They did the two maps of the world, eastern and western hemisphere. One by one the teacher pointed out all the countries to them, and Kees observed with great satisfaction that he was now learning all those nice, distant postage-stamp countries. When would they get to Guatemala?

But it was four o’clock before they had done half of the countries; for the teacher might well have said that he would restrict himself to pointing and naming, but he kept forgetting and would start telling anyhow...

Because of Truus Kees couldn’t walk fast, or else he would have rushed home. But now that his father was ill – for some reason or other – he had to walk together with Truus. The silly child was once again happy that she was to go to Miss Smit’s again, for the peace. They would eat so good at Miss Smit’s, she and Tom. Kees played along with her childishness: ‘Wonderful, eh Truus, lovely eh? Yes, I wish I could come too.’

But boy, was he glad he could go to his own home. How many ages it was since he had last seen his father, he thought. Not since yesterday evening at dinner! And suddenly this became his nearest wish: to be with his father, however briefly, even if only for a few seconds. He’d ask straight away if he could...

Mother was in the kitchen.

‘Hi Mum. Mum...’ He wanted to broach the subject, but dared not.

‘Hey Kees. You know, Dad is a whole lot better, and if you’d come to the bedside for a moment. But no bustle, mind.’

There, see. Did he or did he not have one hell of a father. Strong man all the same, you see, to get better so fast – and Kees didn’t even answer but tiptoed to the room.

The curtains of the bedstead were wide open, Kees saw his father lying there. Gee, not at all ill he looked. He even laughed at Kees, and said: ‘Well, boy.’ True, he spoke a bit softly, but that was only logical, wasn’t it?

His one hand lay on the covers, and it stirred. Kees understood immediately, and squeezed hands with his father.

‘Hi Dad.’

Then there was a brief silence. The father laughed at Kees again, and, somewhat at a loss, they squeezed hands once more.

‘When will you be well again, sort of?’ Kees asked.

The father gave him a reassuring nod.

‘Was the ice good?’ Kees asked. He was a bit curious to know *where* his father had put the ice, but his father just nodded.

‘Had the continents today, Dad.’

‘Crimy,’ the father whispered. And his hand stirred again, and then held on to Kees’ hand.

‘Ought to have an atlas now, really,’ Kees said. His father squeezed his hand and nodded yes.

‘But there’s no hurry at all, you know. None of the boys ‘s got an atlas yet, except for Koppe, but that’s an old rag that I wouldn’t even want to have.’ Then Mother came in.

‘Right Kees, Dad needs his rest again now. And you have to do some shopping for us.’ Kees gave his father’s hand one last squeeze, his father gave him a wink, and then Kees followed his mother out of the room.

All right, he thought, so the accident is in fact over now. Dad will be ill for a couple of more days, but he’ll soon be quite well again. Marvellous. And he did the shopping a-whistling.

To be continued (April 16)