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When Floris turned thirteen he began to let his schoolwork slide. Till then he'd been quick to learn; it would be wrong, Werendonk had felt, to keep him behind a shop counter if he could do better in life. So he'd sent him to the *burgerschool*. That winter Floris stopped wanting to be one of the best pupils, he only did the bare minimum. After school he would sit in his little attic room staring into space or whittling at a bit of wood, or he would wander aimlessly around town.

On one of these days he remembered something that set him thinking, and the thoughts bellied out like clouds till they filled him up. The realisation that he was bad had come to him before, shortly after his mother died; now it returned. He had a clear memory of stepping out of the shop door one morning and being struck by a horrible feeling that everyone around him was a stranger. He'd looked up at the bedroom window and a voice in his head had said: 'It's your fault. It's because of all the bad things that you do, lying and stealing, that God has taken her'. And all the houses in the street had looked at him. He'd forgotten it, but it had come back more strongly, the feeling that he was cheating everyone and that he was alone. And it was as if all the houses in the street knew it.

And he glared at each one whenever he passed them, because he'd known for a long time now that there was wickedness inside every house, more than in his own. Looking at it now, he saw that it was taller than the others. The house next door, where Tops the cobbler lived, only had four windows; Minke's, on the other side, the narrowest in the street, only had two, if you didn't count the little one sticking out of the roof. The baker's house, at the corner of the alley, looked taller, but that was just because the curls on each side of its roof curved up into a sharp point at the top. All the houses were different, no two gables were alike or the same colour; some had quaint shapes, others were boringly square; some were stained dark, others plastered grey; one, in the middle of the street, was painted blue at the bottom, with a slapdash coat of white at the top; most were red brick, but even those were different shades. Werendonk's house, built of reddish-brown brick, its window frames painted a smart yellow, looked finer than the others, with its broad blue flagstones, front doorsteps and a railing separating it from Minke's house. It looked the most spotless.

In the case of most of the houses, he knew what kind of wickedness lurked inside. Mainly from overhearing Jansje talking to Stien in the kitchen. Every house has its cross to bear, she would say, and Stien would sometimes retort that one shouldn't always think the worst, but usually she just listened. That's how he'd heard about the grownups; he knew all about the children.

The pastrycook on the corner of the canal was a busybody and a telltale, Jansje said. If someone in the street was being gossiped about he'd drop by for a chat and give advice, as if he meant well. But if Wouters came round a lot, you'd soon find yourself in trouble with the tax inspector, or the office that checked your weights and measures, people found. He wasn't the worst though, Jansje said, because he kept his house in good order and brought up his children to be honest and god-fearing. But Floris knew

better when it came to the children. The first person he'd ever seen steal anything had been Fientje Wouters, and she was crafty about it, too, though you wouldn't think it to look at her, all blue-eyed innocence. He hadn't played with the Wouters children in ages, but he knew Steven was the only one who could be trusted. And yet their mother always beamed so proudly when she looked at them.

'You'll find wickedness in every house,' Jansje said, 'and more's hidden than you might think. Take the chemist's at the corner of Gortestraat – it's the busiest in the neighbourhood. *Juffrouw* Thijs wouldn't need to buy goods on credit if Thijs didn't spend so much at the tavern.' 'But she's partly to blame for that,' Stien remarked, though Floris didn't know what she meant. It was said of old *juffrouw* Sanne that she'd help anyone in need, but you had to watch out for her tongue. She was the source of all malicious gossip, so everyone was wary around her. At Warner the baker's you could always hear a row going on in the background; some said he was to blame, others his wife, but the children fought the whole time too. Briemen, the pork butcher opposite, had a terrible temper, at times his wife would run screaming into the street, clutching her crying children; people worried that one day his knife would slip. When it came to the nextdoor neighbours, Tops was sly, taking advantage of anything he heard, and as for Minke, he was always palming off shoddy goods on his customers, even children coming to buy a slate pencil or a sheet of wrapping paper. Not that he treated his own wife and children any better – that's why the place was so shabby. But the tinker's shop took the prize for messiness, Nuyl and his wife both being so lazy. They could never find anything a customer wanted, and the seven children looked like a pack of beggars, slipshod and unwashed. Wickedness was to be found wherever you looked: lies, slander or intemperance in one house; deceit, guile or brutality in another. All you could say of Werendonk's house was that the family was tight-fisted, but there was a good reason for that. Sin was everywhere. 'How could it not be?' he'd heard Jansje say. If all the houses were knocked down, if you could see what lay behind their walls, you'd find nothing but wickedness going back generations, not just in this street, but everywhere in the city. Every house was haunted by the ghost of old sins.

But Stien wasn't convinced. 'There may be a grain of truth in that', she said, 'but many sins have already been atoned for. And when the whole city falls to dust on the Day of Judgement, leaving only the foundations, you'll hear lamenting everywhere. Because people are sorry about the evil they've done without meaning to.' 'You haven't learnt anything yet,' Jansje retorted, as she went on mopping the floor, 'as if we don't have any choice about being good or bad'.

He talked to Frans about it when they went out for a walk, his uncle leaning on his arm. One winter morning Frans had rushed outside, thinking that the church bells were being rung to signal fire, but it was to warn that the streets were slippery, sleet having fallen in the night. He'd slid on a patch of ice, fallen and broken his ankle. He'd been bedridden so long he'd developed a limp, and the doctor had said he should go out and about as much as possible. They paced slowly under the trees along the bank of the Spaarne, and Floris asked him if it was true that wicked deeds had been done in every house by the people who'd lived there before – deeds they couldn't help doing. 'I don't know,' Frans answered. 'Do you see the church tower up there? Who can say how long it's been there? All day long you hear the big bells, and in the evening the little ones, and do you know what they're saying? The big ones tell us to pray that all our sins will be forgiven, and the little ones, when night is falling, that we can be sure that

the Kingdom of God will come. People have lived in these houses for I don't know how many centuries – it's an old city, after all – and they must certainly have done some evil, but what's left of it now? Vanished, fallen into dust, just like the clothes they wore. At least, in those very old houses where the brickwork's all askew and the gables lean so much they've got iron bars hooked to them, to stop them toppling over. Those ones with the flat tops and blue rooftiles aren't that old yet, so a bit of evil might still be hanging around in them from a few generations back.'

He believed what Jansje had said, because he knew from other boys that they lied or cheated just because they wanted to. The ones who cheated at school knew cheating wasn't right, but they'd rather play than learn their lessons. He also knew it from the behaviour of his cousins, Hendrik and Evert, Diderik Werendonk's oldest boys. They were his only companions on afternoons off school, and he would take them on long walks, past Bennebroek. When they turned back they always had to run, so as not to be late home. Once he'd stopped them and said they didn't need to hurry, they could make up an excuse to escape a scolding. Hendrik, who was smaller than him, had come right up to him and said: 'Do you think we'd *lie* to father!' He'd been shocked at the vehemence of the words. And he himself knew that he didn't need to lie if he didn't want to. Sometimes, though, he did it without thinking. He couldn't help that. And it was only right that he was punished for it – he preferred that to not being found out. He could sometimes lie so convincingly that he fooled Uncle Gerbrand, but it was a lie nevertheless, and it preyed on his mind in the evenings before he went to bed. A fear came over him that he couldn't shake off, and when he lay in bed he could see Uncle Gerbrand's eyes looking at him.

Once he woke up thinking about lies and other bad deeds that hadn't been found out and once again he saw those eyes looking straight at him, as clear as blue glass. But they weren't angry, it was as if they were saying: 'Don't do it again, I'll help you'. He resolved to own up to everything he'd done and ask Uncle Gerbrand to punish him, and to help him not to do it again. Feeling better, he went back to sleep. When he got up the next morning he'd forgotten all about his resolution.

But it came back later, more strongly. It was a May evening, not yet nine o'clock, the room was dark, but twilight lingered in the courtyard. The cashbox stood on the table, with a pile of guilders next to it. Werendonk had been counting them, and had gone away briefly. He took a guilder, the pile toppled over. Hurriedly, he piled the coins up again. Then he reached into his pocket to add the guilder he'd taken, but he heard the shop staircase creak and dropped the guilder on a corner of the table. He couldn't run away; his uncle came in. When the lamp had been lit he saw his uncle look at the guilder, lying far from the pile. He picked it up but said nothing. Floris wanted to say what he had done, but he couldn't get a word out. He left the room.

As he undressed in the dark he wept and saw the eyes looking at him under the lamp. He told himself that he was bad, but that tomorrow he would own up to everything. He'd be severely punished, because even though he'd thought better of it this time, he'd confess that on other occasions he *had* done it, but he would rather suffer the worst punishment than have this prey on his mind forever.

The next morning Uncle Gerbrand was busy, so he had to wait till evening. And as the light faded he stood once again in the room next to the table where the cashbox was. Once again, Werendonk had gone away briefly. He waited, he heard Stien busy with her buckets, singing in the courtyard. His hand stretched out to the box, his fingers took out a ten cent coin but let go of it again. He was just doing it to show himself that he didn't have to take it if he didn't want to, he thought. His heart beat. He could take it anyway, no one would notice, but he didn't want to. When he heard someone coming he quickly went and stood on the other side of the table. Werendonk came in, lit the lamp and sat down.

'Boy', he said, staring at him unexpectedly, 'what you were doing there next to the money?'

He blushed, he stammered. Werendonk waited, his eyes averted. Suddenly Floris covered his face with his hands and began to cry and sob. When he grew calmer, Werendonk said: 'If something is troubling you, it's better to make a clean breast of it. A hidden burden grows heavier, and you can be sure I will treat you fairly.'

And Floris began his confession, at first timidly, in a low voice, but he stuck to his resolve to be forthright and in the end the words just tumbled out by themselves, he owned up to things he'd almost forgotten, it was so long since he'd done them. A tale of truths concealed and lies told, and of theft, from the shop drawer, too, that he'd committed years ago. He'd never been sorry before, but now he'd realised what a terrible sin he'd been guilty of, he couldn't stop thinking about it. He sobbed again, and through his sobs he said he didn't want to become like his father.

Werendonk leapt up, laid his hand on Floris's shoulder and said, 'Do not speak of your father like that. He has appeared before the highest judge of all and has long since paid penance for whatever he did wrong according to our human understanding. And it befits you, as his son, to think of him with respect. I'm glad you have owned up to your misdeeds. That shows you understand the nature of evil and that you seek to be better. Before, you were unrepentant, but now your conscience has been awakened. Give me your hand and swear that from now on you will be a good boy. Justice must be done, though, and the guilty must be punished. By stealing the money you have wronged others. For three months you will receive no pocket money and when the fair comes to town, no money to go to the fair.'

He said: 'Thank you Uncle', and went up to bed. As he lay there, listening to the sound of scrubbing in the corridor below, a deep sigh escaped him.

In the days that followed, they all noticed the friendly tone of Werendonk's voice when he asked whether Floris had come home from school yet, and how he smiled at the boy during the evening meal, also that Floris took more trouble with his homework and answered cheerfully whenever he was asked anything. He was always on time, he waited patiently when he was told to go out with Frans, and walked along slowly at his side.

He showed more interest in what Frans had to say, and asked him things about the houses and streets, like why people called de Markt 'het Zand' and how Jacobijnestraat got its name. They would stand still

for such a long time, gazing up at the gables, that people stared at them. When they encountered Meier, the blind man, tapping past the doors with his stick, Frans would give him a cent. Looking in his wallet, Floris could see it contained almost nothing: just a ten cent coin and a couple of cents. 'Why do you have so little money?' he once asked him. 'Little? It's more than enough for me,' Frans answered, 'It's not as if I need to buy anything.' Floris thought it odd. There were boys in his class who had more pocket money than that, and Uncle Frans was nearly forty.

On their walks they always passed the church, crossing Groenmarkt and Klokhuisplein, and each time Frans would glance up at the tower. Once, looking at him, Floris had the feeling that perhaps he wasn't quite all there. The city's houses and the bells in the church tower were the only things he ever talked about, and he obeyed his brother like a child. From that day on Floris watched him, and the tone in which he talked to him changed.

After his fall, Frans used to go upstairs once the midday meal was over, and Stien would come and re-bandage his ankle. One day, as Floris was going up to the attic, he saw that the door of his uncle's room was ajar. He tiptoed up to it and peeped through the crack. Frans was sitting on the bed, leaning back slightly, his face lit up by a patch of sunlight, and Stien was kneeling in front of him. She had a little pot in her hand and was rubbing something on his foot. 'You mustn't do this anymore,' said Frans, 'it's much too expensive and your father needs the money badly.' 'Yesterday, when I paid Briemen's bill, he gave me back fifty cents,' she replied, 'I can buy another pot with that, you'll see that it eases the pain.'

They stood up and Floris quickly made himself scarce. In the attic he met Stien on the way to her room, the pot in her hand. When he took his books upstairs later that afternoon, he cautiously opened the door of her room, curious as to what was inside the pot. A dark, sweet-smelling ointment, he discovered. There were other things lying about too, and the cupboard door was open. The next day he came again and poked around. In a box he found a handkerchief with money knotted up in it. It felt heavy. He wondered how much it could be, but didn't dare unknot the bundle. One morning during the holidays, when she was away, he counted the money. It was sixteen guilders.

Three days before the fair he ran into Kolk, a boy in the third class who already wore long trousers. He was going to the fair with a few other boys and asked if Floris wanted to come along. 'Or won't your uncle let you?' he said with a smile. When the sound of barrel organs floated up to his window he took two guilders from the handkerchief, while Stien went about her work downstairs, singing cheerfully.

He met Kolk and three other boys on Botermarkt in front of the menagerie tent; two girls had come along too, and they all went inside. Then they went to other tents, ate doughnuts and waffles, drank beer at Koppen's stall, grew more and more boisterous. Floris lent money to someone, and when he himself had none left, borrowed in turn from someone else. Then they skipped along, arm in arm, yelling at passers-by and singing *We gaan nog niet naar huis*<sup>1</sup> at the tops of their voices. When they had nothing left, Kolk said he'd go and ask for money, and they all went with him. As they waited under a

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<sup>1</sup> We're not going home yet

tree near the Houtbrug, one of the boys proposed three cheers for Floris, because he wasn't a chump after all. He joined in the cheering and led them back to the lights and the barrel organ music, his face red with excitement. They got wilder and wilder, pelted each other with doughnuts and shoved their way through the crowds. Then Floris heard the church tower clock strike eleven, and he crept silently away.

When he got home, Werendonk looked up from his papers and asked where he'd been. At the fair, Uncle, he said, with a few boys who treated me. Werendonk frowned and left the room.

The next evening he begged to be allowed to go to the fair just to look at the stalls, and Uncle Gerbrand gave him permission. He went every day with the boys until the last Saturday. And when it was over he lay in bed staring through the attic window at the little patch of sky. There was still one guilder left in the handkerchief. He would have to take that too, to pay Kolk back the money he owed him. And once again he saw Uncle Gerbrand's eyes looking at him. He'd shaken his hand and sworn not to do it again. He wasn't entirely to blame, though, he thought. If only Kolk hadn't smiled like that when he asked if he wasn't allowed to go to the fair. He tossed and turned, he couldn't sleep. Outside, fairgoers could still be heard making merry.

The next day he waited in his room for Stien to go out. It was quiet in the house and already getting dark by the time he heard her close her door. He didn't hear her on the stairs. He sat there a little longer, and his head suddenly got hot at the thought of what he'd done. He'd no choice, he must give Kolk the money, the sooner the better, his head was throbbing so. He opened the door and tiptoed cautiously across the landing to the door opposite. As he entered, he glanced behind him. When he turned round he saw Stien, sitting on the bed, dressed to go out, with her hat on. The handkerchief lay on her lap, a tear ran down her cheek. 'Did you take it?' she asked with a sob. He hung his head. Nothing broke the silence in the room, not even any sound from outside. 'Why did you do it?' she asked plaintively. 'It was the money I've saved from my wages – my father needs it to pay his rent. Oh Floris, don't fall into wicked ways!' He was crying so hard he couldn't see. All of a sudden she was standing in front of him; she took his head in her hands and pressed it to her chest so as to muffle the sound of his sobs. 'Come,' she said at last, and she wiped his face with a towel dipped in the water jug, 'I have to go by steam tram and it's already late, come with me as far as Haarlemmerhout.'

She didn't speak to him in the street, but once they got past the bridge and were alone, she asked 'Was it because of the fair that you took it? What would your uncle say if I told him?' He clutched her arm with both hands and begged her not to, otherwise he would jump in the Spaarne, because he couldn't bear the thought of Uncle Gerbrand's face. Stien walked along silently, holding his hand as if he'd been a little child. When they reached the deer park she stopped under the dark canopy of a tree. She took his face in her hands and raised it up to hers. 'You must promise me that the next time you're tempted, you'll come straight to me, because I don't want you stealing. He answered, 'It's no use, I'm just a bad person.' But she persisted until he promised.

When she got into the tram she waved at him. He went away slowly, glanced back and saw she was pressing the handkerchief to her eyes. That made him feel lonely all of a sudden, and he didn't dare join the people strolling near the bandstand. He stayed under the dark foliage, watching the distant figures. He thought of Uncle Gerbrand and clenched his fist.