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Excerpt: *Thin Ice (Tin iis)* by Tiny Mulder, pages 7–17

I

"How about a new addition to the family?" said Dad. It was not a question. It was a statement. So we looked at Mum. She blushed like a rose and smiled shyly: "No, no. As if!"

"Who? And what? And how?" shouted Jan, the youngest, at nine years old, who always had something to say.

"It's a girl and other than that all we know is the how, not the who or the what," said Mum. "You tell them, Dineke."

But Jan continued: "No way. Two sisters are enough for me."

Dineke, the eldest, rested her elbows between the dirty dishes on the table and said, "She's a Jewish girl. They told me she's about nine."

"Ooooh!" I gasped. It just popped out of my mouth. Even when I think about it now, I can still feel exactly how shocked I was, the sort of shocked when you stop breathing and your toes cramp up in your shoes.

After all, Jews had to leave, to go to Poland. Any Jews who were still here were not allowed to go anywhere. They had to wear a yellow star made of cotton on their coats, with the word "Jew" written on it in black letters.

The first time I remember being upset about the Jews was in the Hermespark. New signs had suddenly appeared at both entrances: "Forbidden for Jews." And when I went around the neighbourhood doing shopping for Mum, I saw the same kind of signs at the cinema too, at Hotel De Engel, at the gym and the swimming baths. It made me feel sick.

What if I'd been born not to Harm and Jikke Jagersma, but in Tramstraat as the daughter of Mr Oldenburger the baker, and I was called Eva, like Evy Oldenburger? Then I might have gone to the Hermespark on a Wednesday afternoon with my friends Jopy and Hinke, completely unawares.

Jopy and Hinke would have called round to my house for me: "Do you want to come out with us, Evy?"

"Where to?"

"To play in the park."

"All right. Mum, can I..."

"Yes, go on, but make sure you're back by half past five."

"Will do!"

The three of us walk to the park and are about to go in through the gate. Then Jopy shouts: "Hey! What does that sign say?"

"Forbidden for Jews," Hinke reads out loud. And they look at me and quietly say "Oooooh" with round mouths and eyes. I feel scared. And sick. I want to throw up, and I run home to Mum and Dad, where I lock myself in the toilet, with the hook on the door. No park, no swimming baths, no gym, no school party.

That was as far as I could think. I couldn't really imagine how Evy must have felt. I had the same black hair as her and the same brown eyes. When I saw Evy on the street with the evil eye of that star on her coat, then I felt ashamed. At school we all wanted to be so terribly nice to Evy that it really wasn't nice anymore.

One day Evy wasn't at school. And she wasn't coming back, Mr Bos said to us. He told us about what was happening, but we didn't understand what he meant. He talked a lot, but he didn't say much. No one knew where Evy was.

In Poland, they said later, in a labour camp. At home, we already knew about the camp. Mrs Goudman had told Mum. Mum used to pop round to visit Mrs Goudman now and then. "She's so alone, now that all her children and grandchildren are in Poland," Mum said.

At first Mrs Goudman used to receive occasional news about the children: postcards from the camp at Westerbork and later from Poland. "We have to work hard here, but it's not too bad," Jaap wrote, and Essy sent a postcard saying: "We met Uncle Bram and Aunt Else here. Just by chance!"

"And in the short time I spend with her," Mum said, "Mrs Goudman must say the same thing about five times: My children are healthy and fit, and so are my grandchildren, and hard work isn't the worst thing in the world."

Later she stopped hearing from Poland. "Ach, there's a war on," Mum said to her, "so sometimes there are problems with the post." And Mrs Goudman said she supposed they had to work extra hard in the summer, so they didn't get around to writing and that wasn't the worst thing in the world either.

I thought it was strange. If I were in Poland, I'd send Mum and Dad a card every week. If I was worn out, and I didn't have any news, then I'd at least sit down for a bit and write: "How are Mum and Dad and Dineke and Jan? I'm fine. Love and kisses, Klaske." You can write that much, no matter how tired you are.

It was sickening; Mrs Goudman didn't say what she meant, Mum didn't tell Mrs Goudman what she was thinking, Mum didn't say to us what she suspected, we didn't say that we thought it was "odd" or "strange". Like Mrs Goudman, we were all so uneasy that we simply buried our heads in the sand. I didn't know exactly what was going on in Poland – but the silence! That nice, handsome Jaap Goudman, who I'd sometimes secretly watch, so cheerful with his black curls and that fashionable tailored jacket. Why didn't he write his mother a postcard?

So we were going to have another girl in the family. A Jewish girl. And we weren't even allowed to talk about it to anyone.

"Not to anyone! Do you hear me?" threatened Dineke, looking very fierce.

"Except Grandpa and Grandma," said Jan.

"Certainly not Grandpa and Grandma!" Mum stood up straight so that she could make it absolutely clear to us. Her eyes looked like black marbles under her high, smooth forehead.

"Why not?" Jan asked, because he always demanded an explanation for everything.

"Because the child isn't supposed to be here. Not here, not with her mother and father, not even in this country. The Krauts say she has to go to Poland. But she's not going. So she has to go into hiding. With us," said Dad, and he looked so serious as he said it. And threatening too, even Dad.

"Oh, so that's why you read out that bit about the Good Samaritan from the Bible after dinner," Jan blurted out.

"You've got it," Dad said with a nod.

"How's it all going to work?" I heard Mum muttering to herself amidst the clinking of the plates and cups and saucers that she was picking up off the table.

After Mum had turned off the light in my bedroom, I got out of bed and pulled up the blackout curtain a little. It was not completely dark outside yet. I slid the window open. It smelled of damp soil and dahlias out there; the long branches of the poplars waved at the crescent moon like old acquaintances, and the gentle wind stroked my warm forehead. Was Evy in Poland looking at the same moon? Was she tired from whatever work it was that she had to do? "Children have to work like grown-ups there, but that's not the worst thing in the world" – another of Mrs Goudman's opinions.

How *was* it all going to work with this new sister? What about Grandpa and Grandma? Wouldn't they be able to come to visit anymore? And how were we going to keep them away? What was I supposed to say to Jopy and Hinke?

"Forbidden for Jews, terrible news," I rhymed and I kept repeating it inside my head, quickly, slowly, with good intonation, flatly, angrily, fearfully, to myself, to the crescent moon and to a new star, to Jesus.

The new sister could sleep with me in the double bed. Would she be scared? Definitely. Even more scared than me. Dear Lord, why does it have to be like this? Do grown-ups understand any of it? I certainly don't.

II

"Klaske!" Mum called from upstairs when I got home from school. She was in my bedroom, moving things around. From the landing I could see that she'd practically turned my bed upside down. The blankets were dangling over the chair, and the sheets and pillowcases were in a heap at the top of the stairs. She had two pillows under her arm, and my wardrobe door was wide open.

"It's best if she sleeps in your room. Would that be a problem?"

"No. I'd already thought the same. Then she won't be so lonely."

"Good. I've already brought through an extra pillow from the guest bed. Could you hang up your clothes so there's room for her things too, and make some space on the shelves?"

"Do you know what her name is?" I said.

"No idea."

"Rachel or Leah or Ruth."

"Esther or Sarah or Rebecca," Mum continued. And then she added: "That's not going to work. We'll just call her Afke, after your auntie."

I made a pile of my underwear. What if I suddenly wasn't allowed to be called Klaske anymore and a bunch of strangers named me after an auntie I didn't know? Sybrandsje, or some other awful name. And they just put me in some strange girl's bed?

"When's she coming? Afke?"

"Tonight," Mum said. "Dineke's going to fetch her when it's dark."

"Where from? What exactly does our Dineke do?"

"Those are two of the thousand questions we're not allowed to ask." Mum flapped a clean sheet over my bed and quickly tucked it under the mattress. "Have you finished doing the wardrobe? Then you can carry on making the bed. I really need to get on with the dinner."

I pulled a case onto a pillow. *She probably has dark hair like me and like Mum. Evy's brother had red hair though. Not all Jews are dark-haired. Is Evy really in Poland? If this girl comes to live with us, then Evy can too...*

I couldn't keep my mind on my French exercise. Mum was darning my stocking. Another hole in the heel – and there was no such thing as new stockings. Dad was blowing stinking smoke out of his pipe. Jan was drawing. We were sitting around the dining table, the lamp bringing out the warm colours of the plush tablecloth. Dineke had gone out. I felt as if we weren't sitting cosily at home, but in the waiting room at a train station, about to set off on a journey to an unknown destination.

"It's cloudy," Dad had said as he let Dineke out. It was pitch dark. Not one lamp was shining outside, not for years now. There was no light from the houses either. Everyone had to put up black paper blackout curtains on the windows when the lamps went on. Not one ray of light was allowed to shine outside, or the police would come round and give you a fine.

"Go to bed, Jan," Dad said suddenly. Jan didn't pay attention, just went on drawing, and Dad didn't make a fuss about it.

"They'll be here soon," said Mum.

Jan held up his drawing. A cross-eyed horse with a neck that was too long. Mum hung my stockings over the back of the chair. My French sentences danced across the page, and I couldn't catch hold of them.

"Here they come," said Jan.

Mum almost ran to the kitchen door.

"Um, no, Mum. The Tommies, I mean," Jan said with a grin.

In the distance we heard the familiar monotonous drone of aeroplanes: the RAF on their way to Germany with bombs.

"Let's hope the air-raid siren doesn't go off," Dad said nervously.

The droning grew louder, a dull, surging hum. We listened to see if they were coming our way. Dad went outside, but he soon came back. "They're heading north."

Then suddenly Dineke was there, holding a girl by the hand. *She's not nine,* I thought, *more like seven maybe*.

"This is Anneke," said Dineke.

For a moment, there was silence. I'll never forget that image, even if I live to be a hundred years old: a thin, black-haired little thing, a doll on each arm, a rucksack on her back, watchful brown eyes taking in that strange room, those strange people. Then Mum put an arm around her shoulders: "Come on, Anneke."

She doesn't need to be called Afke, I thought happily, but I noticed that we were all staring at her strangely. Dad apparently did too. "Come over here and let me take a good look at you," he said. "You're our new daughter. So you should take a good look at us as well." Dad unbuttoned her coat and took off her hat. *Who on earth wears such a warm hat and a winter coat at this time of year?* I thought.

"Just put the dolls on the table, and then you can take off your coat," said Dad. Reluctantly, she put the dolls down and then picked them back up as soon as she'd taken off her coat.

"If you come over here and sit on my lap," said Dad, "I'll tell you who we all are. How about that?"

Anneke nodded and let him pick her up. The dolls dangled, one on either side of her blue knitted dress. One of the dolls was wearing the same dress as Anneke. It was a doll with blonde curls around a porcelain face with sleepy blue eyes. The other one was a yellow-and-red-checked harlequin. Dad turned in his chair to give Anneke and the dolls enough space on his knee.

"You can put the dolls back on the table, you know," he said. But Anneke just hugged them even more tightly to herself.

"Are you scared you might lose them?" asked Dad.

Anneke opened her mouth for the first time. "They're such a comfort to me," she said. It sounded funny, coming out of the mouth of such a little girl, but no one laughed.

"You already know Dineke," said Dad. "And the one with the brown eyes and black hair like you, that's Klaske. And the boy's Jan. Will you call us aunt and uncle? Good, then that's your Auntie Jikke, and I'm Uncle Harm. Can you remember that?"

Anneke stared at each of us, one by one, and then she nodded.

"Would you like some cocoa, Anneke?" asked Mum.

"Yes, please," she said.

"Us too!" shouted Jan. Cocoa! Mum had stashed away a box of cocoa powder and we only ever had it on important days.

"Six cocoas!" said Mum, heading into the kitchen.

Anneke whispered something in Dad's ear.

"Of course, sweetheart. You come with me. Do the dolls have to go too?"

Dad and Anneke disappeared into the pantry. "She needs to go to the toilet," whispered Jan.

"Just like you and me and everyone else," said Dineke. "The poor girl's exhausted. She's had a hard time. This is her fourth address."

"Address?" asked Jan.

"Yes, the fourth place she's been in hiding. They call it an 'address'."

"What about her mum and dad?" I wanted to know – as long as it wasn't one of the thousand forbidden questions.

"They're in hiding too. Don't ask me where, because I don't know."

"Doesn't Anneke know either?"

"No, she wasn't allowed to know. Just like her mum and dad can't know where Anneke is."

"That's weird," muttered Jan. "Stupid Krauts."

"Is she really called Anneke?" I asked.

"I don't know," Dineke replied.

Dad and Anneke came back in, followed by Mum with six cups of cocoa.

"Thank you, Mrs Jagersma," said Anneke as Mum put the cup down in front of her.

"Not Mrs Jagersma," said Dad.

"Oh, no. Auntie Jikke." Anneke put the harlequin next to her cup. As soon as she had finished drinking the cocoa, the doll was back in her arms, head with pointed cap sticking up, jester's legs dangling limply down. Comfort.

"Time for bed, Anneke," said Mum. "You're sleeping with Klaske, in her room. Is your nightdress in here?" Mum picked up the rucksack, which was leaning against the china cupboard. Anneke nodded and slid off Dad's lap. "Will you come up soon too, Klas?" asked Mum. "Come on, Anneke."

As soon as they had left the room, I said: "She looks like Mum and me."

It was silent for a moment. Jan gathered his paper and pencils and disappeared upstairs.

"What did you just say, Klaske?" asked Dineke. "Say it again."

"I said: She looks like Mum and me."

"I've got it!" shouted Dineke. "Thanks."

"Why are you being so nice to me? And what have you got?"

"I'll tell you later. Maybe. I'll see if it works first." Dineke the Oracle.

I went into my room and saw Anneke sitting up in bed in a pale-blue nightdress with red roses on it. She had such beautiful clothes. The dolls were lying on the far pillow, the one by the wall, and the contents of the rucksack were scattered over the blanket. Mum and Anneke were digging through underwear, dresses, blouses, skirts, socks and shoes.

"My brown sandals are gone," Anneke shouted angrily. "I bet that Clara stole them. And oooh, my pink blouse isn't here either. Yes, Henny must have pinched that!' Her face had turned red now, and her eyes were blazing.

"Wait a second!" said Mum. "You can't just go around saying things like that, you little rascal."

"I can! They steal everything. Even Joast's train!"

"What are you talking about? Where were these children?" asked Mum.

"At the aunties' place. They had about eight Jewish children in the house and a few others too." Anneke chattered on about Clara and Henny and Job and Kees and Joast. She threw her clothes around again and held up a red ribbon. "Where's my blue one? Oh, there it is."

"Can you calm down a bit?" Mum said softly. She put her arms around Anneke and soothed her. "My little sweetheart. We're going to take good care of you." Mum had tears in her eyes. I felt like crying too, so I started trying to create some order in the chaos of clothes.

"Will I have to go away again soon?" asked Anneke.

"No, absolutely not. You're staying with us now," said Mum. Anneke sat very still, leaning against Mum. I folded her things and put them in the wardrobe. Then Anneke shot out of Mum's arms again. "And they took my parcels too, the ones I got from Mum and Dad, parcels of biscuits and dolls' clothes."

I got undressed, put on my pyjamas and climbed into bed. "Are you coming?" Anneke slid in beside me and put a doll on either side of her head. The four of us lay there together. Mum gave us a goodnight kiss and went downstairs.

Anneke was not planning to go to sleep any time soon. Angrily, she poured out stories over me about the aunts and another aunt and uncle, and about all manner of children who were apparently too much for her to handle; this one stole and that one hit her and another one pinched her, and little Joast was a darling. Had Joast been separated from his mum and dad too? Oh yes, for a long time. Did Anneke have any brothers and sisters? No.

I wanted to know how she had become separated from her mum and dad. How does that happen? But it didn't seem like the right moment to bring it up. It must have been

something like eleven o'clock by then. I could hear Mum in the kitchen clattering the dishes, the wind tugged at the window a few times, as if it wanted to come in, and there was the brief droning of an aeroplane, just one, a Kraut. I couldn't hear Anneke anymore. I cautiously raised my head and looked to my right. She had fallen asleep between her two comforters. Lord, please let her stay with us. And not get found. And let us not get... Yes, what might happen to us?