

The Orange Boys

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Fiction

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I could do little else but look out, the fields a blur as the colors of the grasses and tufts of wildflowers coalesced. Fifteen miles back there had only been burned earth and rubble. But here it was nice, and for the first time in a long while, I felt things might be nice again. Even as my train car flew northwards, the ever-present ticking of the tracks and the vibration of her inertia blending with my wandering mind, the sun remained fixed. It looked as if it followed me. I felt I watched myself there across these Belgian fields, the sun a steady constant as it began to dip behind the earth once more. Another day passing into memory.

The events that brought me here, to this train car right now, seemed so much a blur as the passing fields. Should that bother me after all that had happened? All of the people I had known and the things I had seen? Perhaps. But it was what it was. It's because you don't want to remember. Most of it anyway. Not yet. All that mattered now was that soon the sun would set. The flat country was broken here and there by small channels between the farms; little ditches. I saw some cattle. Cows! Do they even know there is a war?

My train car crossed a ditch that was wider than all the rest. It stretched to meet the sinking sun. I felt it then in my bones, a something that could not be questioned: we had finally passed into Holland.

My trolley car was not meant to human occupants. It was a supply train carrying munitions and some grain north that had been captured from the German Army. You could learn how to curse when the troops hollered and laughed at one another. But it was when they whispered that you learned about something happening in the war. There was famine in Holland, I heard. Papa and Mama. And little Jakob. I could see their faces still, but every time I did, they would shrink as if starved, their eyes sad. A rumor of famine was enough to turn me around at Aachen, to see my worn and swollen feet hop upon the train destined north.

And here I was. Antonis Theodore Minkhorst, the last of the Orange Boys.

Well, I might be the last, anyway. I lost Henrik after Aachen. He went on south to fight with the Americans. That was the last I had seen of him, that stupid grin on his face as he turned, his head bobbing as he strolled towards God knows what. Hell, I need to have a beer for Henrik. I hope he's all right. He always was a fighter. But war is different.

I turned back inside the trolley car, rummaged through my worn pack, and pulled out an apple. It was the last, browned and soft in spots; a sweet, sweet treat. Turning back again to watch the sun's last moments, I sat upon the train-

car floor, my legs dangling free. My ragged pants gave a small hiss as we rushed along. Tufts of grass slapped my feet. I made a game of trying to give them a good whack. The sun-soaked the sky in orange and purple. I bit into my apple, a rivulet of juice running down my chin. I ran a finger up to guide it back in.

"This is for Henrik!" I said to no one in particular as I chewed. "And for Johan! For Peter! For Jakob!" One by one I toasted my brothers. And still, the train sped on.

My apple was nearly spent. I looked at the core. I remembered then how Oma ate her apple's core and all, the way all old-fashioned farmers' wives did. And just then I knew the extra nutrients would do me some good. But up ahead, as the train's path began to bend softly, I saw a small shed and some grazing cattle, no care to be bothered by my speeding train as they mulled. I flung the apple core at the precise moment. It struck the sheet-metal siding of the shed with the thunderous peel of a church bell. I fell back laughing. But then felt guilty at disturbing their peace. I struggled to sit up again. Even such a small thing as laughing left me exhausted. It was good I had decided to come home. I wondered if I would be the one who looked starved. I rolled my feet inside the train car and dozed off, a sack of grain my pillow.

When I awoke, the train was stopped.

It was dark. I could hear voices. They were muffled, still several cars down. But I could tell by the way they came to me that they were speaking Dutch. This was it. I made it. I found myself overcome with grief and exhaustion, my mind whipped into mush in the bowl of my skull. The voices drew near, and although I should have been able to understand them, their conversation sounded altogether foreign. Had I really been gone so long? No, no, I was simply dehydrated or something of that nature. Perhaps I was still half asleep. I knew I had to let them find me. If I stepped off a car they expected was only full of supplies, I would probably find myself facedown and full of carbine-bullet holes.

Lantern light flooded my car, and it was if the sun had risen many hours too soon. There were shouts in Dutch, and I raised my hands and squinted. A rifle was before me. I recognized the German weapon, the weathered barrel of the Kar98k glinting dully in the lamplight. My voice caught in my throat. Fear seized me in tested irons. Were the Germans still this far north? Pockets of German resistance were certainly not impossible. Were they speaking Dutch to lure stowaways out?

Arms grabbed me, and I was pulled roughly from the train. I was blind in the dark, my eyes bearing the light-sores inflicted by their lamps. A barrage of questions fell upon me as the men dragged me across the rocks. My mind was frozen, their speech sounding like garbled nonsense.

And then I was inside and seated at a wood table. The light was dim and better for my eyes. Two men conversed in low voices. I only just noticed a blonde haired soldier kneeling before me. He gave my shoulders a shake.

"What is your name?" he asked in Dutch. "Can you hear me, son?" He

repeated the same in German. And then in a poor excuse for English.

I felt that if I gave an answer he did not like, I would be shot. My mouth moved by nothing came out. One of the other soldiers laughed. I can't die now. I have to make it back to the farm. Someone.

"Give him some gin," said the soldier who had laughed.

A bottle was pressed to my lips.

My tongue jumped alive as the liquid fell into my mouth. I sputtered, choked. I wiped my mouth with one tattered sleeve before throwing the bottle back again, this time making no mistake. If it were to be a final drink, then I would make it a damn good one. Again the soldier in the back laughed, but this time it was different. Perhaps it was the way it reverberated in that low-lit room with the bite of the gin in my throat that brought memory rushing upon me like a tide.

* * *

I slammed the bottle down on the little table and squinted against the burn.

The sounds of the night insects kept us company as we sat in the barn around a small table. Johan and Jakob sat on a stack of hay. Piet was on the ground. Henrik leaned against a support beam. The one lantern on the small table cast our faces in angled light, dramatizing the emotions that lived there. It seemed the turns with the bottle were coming much too quickly. I wondered how much longer we could keep this up. We had done this before, but this was the first time for little Jakob.

It was his turn now.

Jakob's cheeks were flushed red and his eyes lidded, the bottle of gin in his slumped hand. If I were a good big brother, I would tell him not to take this next drink, to cut his losses and pass it on. But there was fun to be had. He was all grins now. The others were sniggering as they watched their drunken little brother talk about the girl from the farm down the road.

"Aleida..." he said softly into the air as if he were savoring the taste of her name. We laughed again. Jakob could be a funny little shit, and he knew it. The gin was only embellishing his temperament. He held off taking his drink, basking in the attention.

"What is your favorite part about her?" asked Johan, the smoke from his cigarette pluming lazily about his face. If Papa knew he was smoking in the barn, he'd give John to the Germans the next time they asked for milk. I got his attention to toss me one.

"Have you seen her swimming? She's healthy," said Jakob, the stupid grin stuck on his face. He cupped his hands at his chest. Another fit of laughter lit the room. A cow snorted her irritation. I struck a match and savored the cigarette's smooth taste in a deep pull.

"Are you even going to know what to do with them?" asked Piet, fixing

his cap as he chuckled.

Jakob mimed just what he might do if he ever got the chance. The barn was full of laughter again. No shame, little Jakob, no shame at all. Finally, he threw the bottle back, the gin hitting his lips. He cringed and passed it to Johan. I was the oldest of the Minkhorst brothers at nineteen. I was in farm school, top of my class. Well, I was before the war had started. We had not met for class in weeks, but that really was all right for now. Papa could use the extra hands. Henrik was seventeen and in his final year of high school. His long blond hair was always tied back behind his head, a freshly rolled cigarette between his teeth. Johan was Henrik's twin brother, but he didn't look like it. He looked more like me. Like our mother. He kept his black hair short and never smoked. Piet was sixteen and quiet. He was always scribbling something down in a notebook he carried about. When asked, he would say he was writing poetry. We were kind enough to leave it alone. We knew his classmates were not. And then there was Jakob at fourteen, the youngest brother. A ball of energy and charisma made tough but not beaten down by his older brothers.

"Toni," said Henrik, gesturing to the nearly spent cigarette in my hand, "What do you think?"

I gave it a look over and smiled. "Not bad."

"You always ask for one when you're drunk."

"That's the only time it sounds good," I said.

"Let me try yours."

I pulled my pipe out of my pocket. My matches were out again, and with soft puffs, I coaxed the half-smoked tobacco back to life. Great plumes of silver smoke wafted about our faces. Several of the brothers smiled at the sweeter smell of the pipe-smoke. I passed it to Henrik. He took a drag and began to cough. We laughed as his face turned red, visible even in the dim. Piet stood to smack his back.

"Don't inhale," I said. "Taste it on your tongue and blow it out."

"Oh," said Henrik. And finally, he got it right.

When the din began, we fell silent at once.

It was not the sound of the air raid sirens. The muffled noise sounded to me like voices being played over a loud-speaker. I stood in the silence and walked to the double barn door, throwing one-half of it open to the night. The echo of the din came through clearer now, and I realized it was German. My brothers were at my side as we listened.

Wir werden weiter marschieren,
Wenn alles in Scherben fällt;
Die Freiheit stand auf in Deutschland
Und morgen gehört ihr die Welt.

"What's your name?"

For the first and only time in my life, gin brought be clarity.

I put the bottle down. Two soldiers sat at the table with me, their faces stern and questioning in the low light. The third was still against the far wall, his Kar98k in hand. They did not wear the grey of the Wehrmacht, but instead the green of the Yanks. A likely disguise. A picture of the Dutch football team hung on the far wall next to maps and a clock. Still, I was not convinced. It was midnight.

"Are you Germans?" I asked. My voice sounded small and tired.

The soldiers laughed.

"About as German as you. Do you know where you are?" asked the soldier sitting to my left. He gestured to the standing comrade against the wall, who promptly left the room.

"Holland," I said. I knew I had made it. I had felt it. I had long come to trust such gut feelings.

"Correct. And there haven't been any Germans here since the Yanks pushed through a month ago. The war is almost over, friend."

"They've been saying that since last spring," I muttered. I saw the soldier who had left reenter the room with a plate in his hand. It was set before me. Bread with ham, cheese, and two slices of tomato; a royal feast. If I was lucky, there would be some butter. If I had any tears to cry, I would have shed them there without shame. I realized then how pitifully I had eaten since I left Aachen several days ago. The meal was finished quickly.

"Dank u wel," I said.

"What is your name?" the soldier sitting to my left asked again.

This time I found the words. "Antonis Minkhorst."

"And where are you from?"

"Didam."

"You're not a soldier, are you?" It was more of a statement than a question.

I looked down to my faded orange shirt and my tattered pants. My jacket was obviously civilian. I guess it was not hard to tell I was not a member of the Dutch Army.

"No, but I fought the Germans with the Orange Boys," I said. "You would be correct to say I am a soldier of some sort."

"I am Lieutenant Willem. This is Gerrit and Cornelis. You said the Orange Boys... who are they?"

"My brothers," I said.

"Yes, I understand," said Lieutenant Willem, "but was this a civilian resistance group? Was it sanctioned by the army? A communications line?"

I smiled a sad smile. "There were five of us. Me, Henrik, Piet, Johan, and Jakob. Five Minkhorst brothers made up the Orange Boys."

Willem was silent as he considered my words. He looked to Gerrit and Cornelis. Their blank looks offered their superior nothing. I noticed how

shit ugly Cornelis was. And how Gerrit's thin, angular face made him look all too much like a ferret. Poor bastards. Lieutenant Willem got up and grabbed four glasses and a wooden box from a cabinet. Gerrit joined us at the table with a bottle in hand. It was not gin, but something dark. The glasses were poured. Cornelis, the ugly one, lit a cigarette.

"Do you smoke?" Willem asked.

I pulled my pipe out of my jacket pocket. It looked quite different from that night in the barn. Its polished wood surface was nearly black from dirt and scratches littered the once beautiful finish. Willem smiled when he saw it.

"I like pipes with a story," he said. "May I?"

I nodded. My hands were filthy. He grabbed my pipe and began to pack it full with his tobacco leaf. He was an expert, and the leaf looked nice and dry. It was going to be a good smoke. I tasted the dark liquid in my glass. Whiskey.

"I want you to tell me your story now. I want to know where you came from. I want to know where your brothers are. And I want to know just who these Orange Boys were," said Lieutenant Willem. He handed my full pipe back to me. Willem's face flared in the light of a match as he coaxed his pipe with quick sips. He slid the matches to me. A flick and a few puffs and my long cold bowl was glowing once again. I leaned back and kicked up my legs, savoring the taste of Willem's leaf. There were hints of vanilla.

"Where should I start?" I asked at length. The men chuckled.

"You have a grand story to tell or something?" asked Willem.

I smoked my pipe and eyed him in silence.

Willem furrowed his brow and took a sip of his whiskey. "Well, start where it all began then. How did the Orange Boys come about?"

The smoke rolled like morning mist in the small room. I squinted my eyes. We looked like very important people then, generals or great commanders about to have a secret council. They all looked at me with great intent, and I knew I had them captivated, and they would listen to my story. I would bet that this may be one of the more exciting things to happen to them during their shipping and receiving duties. A mysterious Dutchman tumbles out of a train car and a member of the Orange Boys to boot. Yes, I guess I might be quite a spectacle.

I leaned forward. "Well, I guess it all began when we decided we had enough of that German racket."