

## **The Bat House**

**BY PIA DE JONG**

Last year Tilly and I found a bat with only one wing lying on his side in the field behind her house. We put him in a cage in her father's barn where she used to keep hamsters. Three days later he died on the plastic covering the bottom of the cage. Tilly had thought that he would drag himself to a corner, that he would do something special for the occasion of his dying. But she told me that he looked just like when he was alive, except that he was dead. She showed him to me after she had wrapped a piece of tissue paper around him and had put him into a corner of the cage.

I was angry at her for doing all that. Moving the bat's body, wrapping him in a piece of tissue paper. She spoiled it for me.

We buried the bat in a cardboard box on the same spot where we found him. We thought that was the best thing to do because if we had not found him, he would have died there anyway. We dug a hole in the earth with a stick and our fingers. We had left the box open and took turns saying our good-byes to the little bat, as if he had been our friend for years. We reminisced about events that never took place and let ourselves be comforted by our stories.

Then we put the box into the hole and pushed the dirt back over it. After we were finished, it looked like nothing had happened. To anyone else, it would have seemed an afternoon like any other, but for us something important had happened.

After some time passed, we went back and looked for the gravesite again. It was hard to find it because of all the overgrown grasses there now. "Reeds," said Tilly, matter

of factly, since she would always say things matter of factly. I knew it did not make sense, since there was no water nearby. "It's beach grass, silly" I said. It was a phrase I had heard for the first time just a few days earlier.

We knelt down and there and combed through the grass with our fingers, but we never could find the place where we buried the bat. "Someone stole it," Tilly declared.

Maybe some wild animal has found it, I suggested, but Tilly said that was nonsense. "Then we would at least find a bone. His broken wing for example. Or a leg." Soon Tilly got tired. "We'll find a new bat," she told me. I was not so sure. People do not catch bats every day. This was special.

I am average height -- not tall, but not small, either. Every year I get a new coat, because my sleeves get too short. I get new pants because the legs are too short, but usually by then the knees are already worn thin, anyway. If I were to stop growing, my mother would notice and tell people -- my father, the neighbor, and finally the family doctor.

A lot of things about me are common, like my brown hair, and brown eyes. You could swap me with many other kids. Fortunately I also have some things that nobody else has. I have a scar on my arm from the time I was caught it on barbed wire. Also, when I was six, the family doctor looked into my throat and said, "You have a double uvula."

I think about my double uvula often. The double uvula makes me who I am, it makes me different from other kids. It's not often that a doctor looks in the throat of a child of six years and says to her mother, "Your daughter has a double uvula".

Our house is at No. 36 Orchard Road. According to my father, we are lucky to

live here. I was born in this house on an extremely cold day in January. So much snow fell that my father was not able to get my mother to the hospital in time. She tried to hold me back, but I came out anyway.

I have my own bedroom, and what used to be my baby room is now the guest room. My grandmother comes to visit twice a year. My father then puts down a rollaway bed, and my mother makes it up with a down pillow and a clean pillowcase. The next morning, when my mother asks my grandmother if she slept well, she always tells her the hard bed gave her a backache. Still, my father never changes the bed.

Every morning I walk out of the house on the flagstone path, past the barn and the compost pile where my mother puts the potato peels and the used teabags. Tilly waits for me at the end of the back path, where the street begins. We always wear the same outfits. Sweaters over brightly colored blouses in winter. Knitted cardigans over dresses in pastel shades in summer.

Tilly kicks her shoe impatiently into a clump of leaves. She does not give it much thought. Tilly never gives anything much thought. "Hi," I say, and we walk together, pebbles crunching beneath our shoes. Her shoelaces are loose. Back in the day, her mother used to run after her to tie them. But that was long ago.

Along the way we meet more kids, but we prefer each other's company. With Tilly around, I'm not afraid of anything. Nobody dares speak up to her. She will tell you off, people know that. There are few people who like her.

Our knee socks are always sagging down to our ankles –it doesn't matter, either. Even when it's winter, as it is now, with our fingertips numb and goosebumps on our arms, we hold hands and sing together. Sometimes we roll on the ground laughing.

"Tilly," I say while I watch her name turn into a puff of breath in the cold air. She waves her hand through it, as if it were cigarette smoke. She runs away from me. I know she is not interested in what I want to tell her.

"Hey, look, a moving van," she says, and suddenly stops in her tracks. As we watch, a car stops in front of the house where the bookkeeper used to live. The bookkeeper was a quiet man who moved away a few months ago. We used to throw pebbles at his mailbox, and when he came out shouting at us, we'd laugh at him from a safe distance away.

A lanky man gets out, probably the father, followed by a slightly shorter but still tall mother, a boy with stooped shoulders, and a girl about our age. The girl looks serious. She wears a white jacket with a belt around her waist. The jacket is buttoned up to the collar. Her hair is in braids and her legs are covered with gray woolen tights. On top of her shoes are silver buckles.

"Now that's a weird kid," says Tilly. "Did you see that jacket? Who in his right mind would wear a jacket like that? And that boy. Imagine having a brother like that. Such horror." She laughs, in her creaky, high-pitched voice. Tilly always has an instant opinion about everyone. Her mother does too.

"They will not live here very long," says Tilly flatly. "I predict they will be gone in a year."

"Why?" I ask, watching them open the door of the van and bringing in boxes. "Because," she says rolling her eyes. "I just know." She pulls on my sleeve. "Stop staring at me," she says, annoyed. "Let's move on. We don't want to be late at school." As if it ever mattered to Tilly whether she is late or not.

I hardly see Tilly during the day. They keep us on different sides of the classroom. Sometimes she turns around and rolls her eyes at me. School is the slow world. We spend most of our time waiting. It takes forever for everyone to sit down, to find the pages in our science books, to get ready for phys ed. Every time the teacher tells a joke, I count the seconds until the kids decide they are supposed to laugh. I count the hours on the clock across the hallway, and towards the end of the afternoon, I tick off the minutes. I know Tilly does too.

After school that day, when Tilly leaves me behind, I walk to the new neighbors' house. Curtains are now hanging on the windows. The garden gate that used to be open is latched. The empty flowerpots in the barn, usually filled with rainwater, are gone. It's only 4 in the afternoon, and still not dark, but the curtains are closed. My mother would consider that a waste of daylight.

I like to think the room inside is bathed in a yellow glow, turning the long hair of the girl into gold. By now she must have carried everything she owns inside. She is arranging her combs and clips side-by-side on a white vanity table. She of course is one of those girls who owns a vanity. When she's ready, she stands in front of the open window brushing her hair. One hundred strokes, shaking her hair out, her head full of thoughts.

I'd rather not think about her brother. A girl like her should not have a brother with such weird hair. When you have a brother, you want him to be handsome, a boy your girlfriends could fall in love with.

At home that night, I look out my window at the neighbors' house. It is built just like ours, but in reverse, a mirror image. Like ours, it has two bedrooms upstairs. One is

small and another is large. I wonder which room is hers and which is her brother's. I like to think she looks back at me from her darkened room.

"And ...?" Tilly asks the next day.

"And what?" I say.

"Did you see them up close?"

"Who?" I ask. She looks at me out of the corner of her eye. "Your new neighbors, of course. That weird kid with the crazy brother."

"I have not seen them," I say honestly.

"How can that be?" Tilly asks. "They go to school. Everyone goes to school. "

"She may go to a different school," I suggest.

"Nobody goes to a different school," says Tilly. "There is not even a different school. Do you know anything at all?"

She looks at me fiercely. Her pale mouth is as thin as a pencil line.

"Well, I will find out."

The next day I don't see the new people anywhere. The curtains are still closed, the fence locked. I begin to wonder if they really do live there. Maybe they just left their stuff and returned to their old house.

Then on Saturday, while walking on the path between our house and the neighbor's, I run into the boy with the bushy hair. There is something awfully strange about the way he looks. The separate parts of his body do not fit together, as if they came from different people. Big hands with broad, fleshy wrists stick through his orange sweater. He bends over the bushes, his eyes close to the branches and pulls the leaves off. He does it carelessly, running his hand along the top of the thorns. Blood seeps through

his fingers. Yet he does not cry. Also, he does not pull back his hand.

"Broken," he says. He says it every time he plucks off a leaf, tears it into pieces, and throws it on the ground. "Broken. Broken," I try to turn sideways to slide around him, hoping that he does not notice me. But he does notice me. He also notices that I'm afraid of him. A corner of his mouth curls into a twisted smile. Suddenly I wonder if the girl with the white coat and the shoes with the silver buckle on top is afraid of him. I think of her delicate face, which I've only seen once.

"The brother's name is Leon," Tilly announces the next day. She says it coolly, as if not to call attention to her detective work. Then she puts on her most solemn face. "He has a hole in his heart."

"Really?" I say. Tilly stands on her toes and looks down at me. She is five inches taller than me. "Really," she says. "A small hole, but a hole anyway. He will die of course. When, only Jesus knows. But he will be dead for sure." She kicks a clump of grass with her right shoe. Why, I suddenly wonder, why her endless kicking of clumps of grass? Tilly does not mention the girl. That means she does not know anything about her.

I find out that the girl leaves for school every day with her father at 7 in the morning. I sometimes wave at her, and she waves back. Her hand low, by her hip, shy. She almost always wears a skirt with bare legs, her feet, with white socks, in patent leather shoes.

When I see her alone outside one Saturday morning, I go up to her.

"Hi," I say. "I am your neighbor."

She smiles at me.

"What's your name?" I ask. Suddenly her mother appears. "Her name is Anna,"

she says.

The girl looks at her shoes.

"Let's play Anna," I say.

"Anna has hay fever," the mother says. "Also asthma," she adds quickly, as if hay fever is not worse enough. "Playing tires her."

"My mother says that playing outside is healthy," I say. "It makes you strong."

"Anna is a vulnerable child," says the mother. "We are careful with her. I think it would be better if you go now. Anna is tired."

"She's not tired," I say. The mother frowns at me, then takes a deep breath that makes her nostrils tremble.

"Asthma wrecks her health," says the mother firmly. "You do not see that, but Anna feels it. And if she is too tired, she sleeps poorly, and then she gets all kinds of other diseases."

The mother lies, of course. Anna would get no symptoms whatsoever when she plays outside. Nothing will happen. Her mother just does not grant Anna to me.

"Where do you go to school?" I ask.

"Anna goes on the public school outside the city", says the mother. "Here are just Catholic schools, and we are not Catholic."

The mother does not look like at Anna at all. Her nose is broad and flat, while Anna has a turned-up nose. She has bristly dark hair, while Anna's is blond and silky. Perhaps Anna is not really her daughter. Maybe she switched her own ugly child for a beautiful baby.

"I have important information for Anna", I say to the mother. "But it's a secret, no

one knows."

I see Anna's eyes flash. She is curious, I know now. Curiosity is her weakness.

"Anna and I have no secrets," says the mother.

"If you want to know the secret, you must send me a letter," I whisper softly to Anna as I walk away. "With your signature underneath."

I wave at her, and she waves back. Her hand low, at her side.

The next time I see Anna, she is standing in my yard in front of our house. She peers into the kitchen, through the window. She has something in her hand, but I do not see what it is.

"There's a girl outside," says my mother.

"Oh," that is my friend Anna," I say.

I run into the garden and push her into the barn. "You have come to find out about the secret," I say grabbing the piece of paper out of her hand. "You signed the contract."

She nods. Her blonde hair is pinned to one side with a bobby pin. "I know your mother does not know you are here," I say.

She nods again. "Yes," she says. "She went out for groceries and I have to look after Leon."

"But he just sits quietly upstairs." I say, "so you thought: no one will notice if I go out for a little while."

She looks at me, her round blue eyes wide open. "It means you don't have long" I say. "So I will be quick."

"The secret," she whispers. "I need to know the secret."

"The secret cannot be simply revealed," I say solemnly.

She is uncomfortable. Under her pinafore is a fluffy sweater. I want to say something to her about it, about fluffy sweaters that itch. Especially for people with hay fever. And asthma. I have to stall for time while I think of the secret. Why did I not think about it before?

"There is an underground tunnel," I say. "Under this whole area. And only I happen to know where the entrance is." She looks around. "It leads to an underground vault," I continue. "If you follow it, you will arrive at a city full of dead bats."

"Bats?" she asks.

"They stink," I say.

"Who," she asks. "What stinks?"

"The dead bats, of course." Anna seems to let it all in. I know for sure that she never found a dead bat. She probably never even saw one. She seems nervous.

"How did you found out about that tunnel?" she asks.

"I will tell you that when you come again", I say.

"I must go," she says. "If he breaks something, it will be my fault. And we do not have enough money to repair or replace anything."

She pauses at the door and turns towards me. "My mother is afraid of him," she says. "He is terribly strong. He can lift her with one arm. He once smashed the dog of the neighbor knock out with one stroke of his fist. But around me he is calm."

"I will tell you all about the underground passage," I say. "Tomorrow, same time, same place." She looks puzzled. Doubt is good, that means it is a possibility.

"I'll wait for you tomorrow," I say. "Here, in the barn".

Her eyes shine bright in the dusk, then she sneaks away swiftly, careful not to let her clothes be smudged by anything inside. I know she will come back tomorrow. Maybe she will stay longer. The smell of rose water in her woolen sweater lingers in the air afterwards. I worry Leon has noticed that she was gone. I know he would tell on her.

"Why don't you bring over that new girl next door?" asks my mother. "She seems to be a nice girl."

"She can't, she has asthma." I say.

"Why don't you go to her house to play then?"

"They do not want me to visit," I say. "They do not like snoopers. They keep to themselves."

My mother looks up.

"Snoopers?" she asks, continuing to peel the big potato with a blunt knife.

"She has an older brother too, right?"

"His name is Leon," I say. "He has a hole in his heart."

"Oh my," she says. "I understand why they want to keep to themselves then," she says. "Such a worry."

"They do not believe in God," I say. "They are pagans."

"I can come over more often", Anna says as she closes the door to my barn. "Whenever Leon gets help. Almost every day now someone visits him. A physiotherapist or a speech therapist. A psychologist. Now a podiatrist is looking at the way he walks," She leans back on the inside of the door, as if to prevent herself from escaping. She gasps for breath.

She tells me that the doctor makes Leon walk across the room on his bare feet, in his underpants. Up and down, up and down. "Like this," she says. She stands up and begins to walk through the barn with her hands in the air. "That man always squeezes Leon's buttocks. Right in the middle of the lesson. Leon then jumps a foot off the ground. It makes the man laugh, terribly loud."

Anna sits on the blanket that I put on the floor for her. It is cooler. I can feel the chills go up and down my spine. "When will Leon die?" I ask her.

"Why," she says. "Why would he die?" I suddenly wonder if they have forgotten to tell her. Just as there is something glued to the back of your sweater that everyone sees and laughs about, but they never tell you.

"Everyone knows that he has a hole in his heart," I say, breaking the nail of my index finger while scratching the floor.

"Tilly, told me" I say. Then I quickly add: "Some girl in my class."

She does not care about Tilly. She makes sure her clothes don't get dirty.

"Leon is born with a heart defect," she says. "They had thought that he would be dead, but his body, because of his weak heart, had become extra strong. 'Leon is made out of concrete,' the doctor always says."

"How long will he live?" I ask again.

She shrugs her shoulders. "Don't you care?" I ask.

"It does not matter whether I care about anything," she says. "It is all about him. Nobody cares what I think."

"I do," I say. She does not react, but I do not blame her. With Anna, words float around in her head for a while until they get through to her.

“You promised to tell me about the underground tunnels,” she says. “Where is the entrance?”

“You have to know the code to find the entrance,” I say. “I have been there, but it is hard to find. It is hidden between the beach grass. If you go with me, and help me dig, we will find it.”

There is some pilling on her white sweater, and I have to keep myself from plucking at it.

"I must go," she says.

"Tomorrow you must come a little earlier," I say. "It is a special day."

"Why is it special?" she asks.

"I've known you for one month," I say. "And you've been here three times. Three times two is six. That's a magic number. I show her the crosses that I have put in chalk on the wall. Every cross has a date beneath it."

Anna watches it all carefully.

"I now am obliged to let you in on all the secrets" I say.

"Tomorrow. A little earlier", I repeat. "Do not forget." She looks away.

Something's not right. I know something is not right.

"I cannot play with you any more," she says suddenly. "My mother does not allow me to. We already have enough worries about Leon."

Each and every one of her words are slaps in my stomach. Why is everything about Leon? Leon with his weird hair and this hole in his heart. It's not her fault he is the way he is. We would all be so much better off if he died. I grab her wrists.

"Ouch," she says, but I do not let go. I love holding Anna's tiny wrists in my hands. Pretty Anna with her white woolen sweater and patent leather shoes. I squeeze her wrists even tighter. The sweet smell of her flowery perfume makes me dizzy. She looks at me, with her dimpled cheeks. Frightened, like an animal. Then I let go, to allow her to run from me. But she stays. She holds her hands, with the neatly trimmed nails, frozen in the air. Her feet seem to get loose from the floor.

"The secret path", she says, gazing in my eyes. "The holes in the ground. You made that up, didn't you?"

Her flushed cheeks stand out like lights in her pale face.

"Didn't you?" she repeats. She turns around. Then spits on the plaid blanket I had put on the floor of the barn for her.

Through the window in the barn, I watch her running to her home.

She holds a hand above her head, to shield herself from the drizzle. Her other hand drags behind her, waving strangely like a sick animal's wing. Her white skirt is smudged.

I never talked to Anna again. Once, when rain poured from the heavens, I saw her standing in her garden on green rubber boots. Her mouth wide open, her tongue sticking out, as if to taste raindrops for the first time. I imagined how the rain would fill the dimples on her cheeks, up to their brim, until they flowed over, forming a pond. I wanted to let myself submerge in that cool, salty water.

Sometimes I saw her in front of her window. She never waved at me. I imagined her with her combs, her hairpins, her brushes. When she turned on the light, I knew her

hair would glow in the light of the yellow curtains.

Before Christmas, when all the fathers brought home trees, when the mothers brought down the boxes with the ornaments, I saw a moving van in front of their house.

"And ...?" Tilly asks, "Any news?"

"About what?" I ask.

"That girl of course."

"She is stupid," I say. "She will be stuck forever with that scary, crazy brother.

That whole family is strange. They do not even believe in God."

"I told you that already," Tilly says. "I told you that they would not stay here even a year. Come," she suddenly whispers close, so close to my ear it feels like her voices scratches my eardrums. "I found a mouse. One with a broken leg. He is in the cage in the garage. He will not live long, for sure. Want to see it?"