

9. Why Are You Lying?

Annemarie went outside alone after supper. Through the open kitchen window she could hear Mama and Ellen talking as they washed the dishes, Kirsti, she knew, was busy on the floor, playing with the old dolls she had found upstairs, the dolls that had been Mama's once, long ago, The kitten had fled when she tried to dress it, and disappeared.

She wandered to the bam, where Uncle Henrik was milking Blossom. He was kneeling on the strawcovered floor beside the cow, his shoulder pressed against her heavy side, his strong tanned hands rhythmically urging her milk into the spotless bucket. The God of Thunder sat alertly poised nearby, watching.

Blossom looked up at Annemarie with big brown eyes, and moved her wrinkled mouth like an old woman adjusting false teeth.

Annemarie leaned against the ancient splintery wood of the barn wall and listened to the sharp rattling sound of the streams of milk as they hit the sides of the bucket. Uncle Henrik glanced over at her and smiled without pausing in the rhythm of milking. He didn't say anything.

Through the barn windows, the pinkish light of sunset fell in irregular shapes upon the stacked hay. Flecks of dust and straw floated there, in the light.

"Uncle Henrik," Annemarie said suddenly, her voice cold, "you are lying to me. You and Mama both."

His strong hands continued, deftly pressing like a pulse against the cow. The steady streams of milk still came. He looked at her again, his deep blue eyes kind and questioning. "You are angry," he said.

"Yes. Mama has never lied to me before. Never. But I know there is no Great-aunt Birte. Never once, in all the stories I've heard, in all the old pictures I've seen, has there been a Great-aunt Birte."

Uncle Henrik sighed. Blossom looked back at him, as if to say "Almost done," and, indeed, the streams of milk lessened and slowed.

He tugged at the cow gently but firmly, pulling down the last of the milk. The bucket was half full, frothy on the top. Finally he set it aside and washed the cow's udder with a clean damp cloth. Then he lifted the bucket to a shelf and covered it. He rubbed the cow's neck affectionately. At last he turned to Annemarie as he wiped his own hands with the cloth.

"How brave are you, little Annemarie?" he asked suddenly.

She was startled. And dismayed. It was a question she did not

want to be asked. When she asked it of herself, she didn't like her own answer.

"Not very," she confessed, looking at the floor of the barn.

Tall Uncle Henrik knelt before her so that his face was level with hers. Behind him, Blossom lowered her head, grasped a mouthful of hay in her mouth, and drew it in with her tongue. The kitten cocked its head, waiting, still hoping for spilled milk.

"I think that is not true," Uncle Henrik said. "I think you are like your mama, and like your papa, and like me. Frightened, but determined, and if the time came to be brave, I am quite sure you would be very, very brave.

"But," he added, "it is much *easier* to be brave if you do not know everything. And so your mama does not know everything. Neither do I. We know only what we need to know.

"Do you understand what I am saying?" he asked, looking into her eyes.

Annemarie frowned. She wasn't sure. What did bravery mean? She had been very frightened the day—not long ago, though now it seemed far in the past—when the soldier had stopped her on the street and asked questions in his rough voice.

And she had not known everything then. She had not known that the Germans were going to take away the Jews. And so, when

the soldier asked, looking at Ellen that day, "What is your friend's name?" she had been able to answer him, even though she was frightened. If she had known everything, it would not have been so easy to be brave.

She began to understand, just a little. "Yes," she said to Uncle Henrik, "I think I understand."

"You guessed correctly," he told her. "There is no Great-aunt Birte, and never has been. Your mama lied to you, and so did I.

"We did so," he explained, "to help you to be brave, because we love you. Will you forgive us for that?"

Annemarie nodded. She felt older, suddenly.

"And I am not going to tell you any more, not now, for the same reason. Do you understand?"

Annemarie nodded again. Suddenly there was a noise outside. Uncle Henrik's shoulders stiffened. He rose quickly, went to the window of the barn, stood in the shadows, and looked out. Then he turned back to Annemarie.

"It is the hearse," he said. "It is Great-aunt Birte, who never was." He smiled wryly. "So, my little friend, it is time for the night of mourning to begin. Are you ready?"

Annemarie took her uncle's hand and he led her from the barn.

The gleaming wooden casket rested on supports in the center of the living room and was surrounded by the fragile, papery flowers that Annemarie and Ellen had picked that afternoon. Lighted candles stood in holders on the table and cast a soft, flickering light. The hearse had gone, and the solemn-faced men who had carried the casket indoors had gone with it, after speaking quietly to Uncle Henrik.

Kirsti had gone to bed reluctantly, complaining that she wanted to stay up with the others, that she was grownup enough, that she had never before seen a dead person in a closed-up box, that it wasn't *fair*. But Mama had been firm, and finally Kirsti, sulking, had trudged upstairs with her dolls under one arm and the kitten under the other.

Ellen was silent, and had a sad expression. "I'm so sorry your Aunt Birte died," Annemarie heard her say to Mama, who smiled sadly and thanked her.

Annemarie had listened and said nothing. So now I, too, am lying, she thought, and to my very best friend. I could tell Ellen that it isn't true, that there is no Great-aunt Birte. I could take her aside and whisper the secret to her so that she wouldn't have to feel sad.

But she didn't. She understood that she was protecting Ellen the way her mother had protected her. Although she didn't understand

what was happening, or why the casket was there—or who, in truth, was in it—she knew that it was better, *safer*, for Ellen to believe in Great-aunt Birte. So she said nothing.

Other people came as the night sky grew darker. A man and a woman, both of them dressed in dark clothing, the woman carrying a sleeping baby, appeared at the door, and Uncle Henrik gestured them inside. They nodded to Mama and to the girls. They went, following Uncle Henrik, to the living room and sat down quietly.

"Friends of Great-aunt Birte," Mama said quietly in response to Annemarie's questioning look. Annemarie knew that Mama was lying again, and she could see that Mama understood that she knew. They looked at each other for a long time and said nothing. In that moment, with that look, they became equals.

From the living room came the sound of a sleepy baby's brief wail. Annemarie glanced through the door and saw the woman open her blouse and begin to nurse the infant, who quieted.

Another man arrived: an old man, bearded. Quietly he went to the living room and sat down, saying nothing to the others, who only glanced at him. The young woman lifted her baby's blanket, covering its face and her own breast. The old man bent his head forward and closed his eyes, as if he were praying. His mouth moved silently, forming words that no one could hear.

Annemarie stood in the doorway, watching the mourners as they

sat in the candlelit room. Then she turned back to the kitchen and began to help Ellen and Mama as they prepared food.

In Copenhagen, she remembered, when Lise died, friends had come to their apartment every evening. All of them had brought food so that Mama wouldn't need to cook.

Why hadn't these people brought food? Why didn't they talk? In Copenhagen, even though the talk was sad, people had spoken softly to one another and to Mama and Papa. They had talked about Lise, remembering happier times.

Thinking about it as she sliced cheese in the kitchen, Annemarie realized that these people had nothing to talk about. They couldn't speak of happier times with Great-aunt Birte when there had never been a Great-aunt Birte at all.

Uncle Henrik came into the kitchen. He glanced at his watch and then at Mama. "It's getting late," he said. "I should go to the boat." He looked worried. He blew out the candles so that there would be no light at all, and opened the door. He stared beyond the gnarled apple tree into the darkness.

"Good. Here they come," he said in a low, relieved voice. "Ellen, come with me."

Ellen looked questioningly toward Mama, who nodded. "Go with Henrik," she said.

Annemarie watched, still holding the wedge of firm cheese in her hand, as Ellen followed Uncle Henrik into the yard. She could hear a sharp, low cry from Ellen, and then the sound of voices speaking softly.

In a moment Uncle Henrik returned. Behind him was Peter Neilsen.

Tonight Peter went first to Mama and hugged her. Then he hugged Annemarie and kissed her on the cheek. But he said nothing. There was no playfulness to his affection tonight, just a sense of urgency, of worry. He went immediately to the living room, looked around, and nodded at the silent people there.

Ellen was still outside. But in a moment the door opened and she returned—held tightly, like a little girl, her bare legs dangling, against her father's chest. Her mother was beside them.

10. Let Us Open the Casket

"You are all here now," Uncle Henrik said, looking around the living room. "I must go."

Annemarie stood in the wide doorway, looking in from the hall. The baby slept now, and its mother looked tired. Her husband sat beside her, his arm across her shoulders. The old man's head was still bent.

Peter sat alone, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. It was clear that he was deep in thought.

On the sofa Ellen sat between her parents, one hand clasped tightly in her mother's. She looked up at Annemarie but didn't smile. Annemarie felt a surge of sadness; the bond of their friendship had not broken, but it was as if Ellen had moved now into a different world, the world of her own family and whatever lay ahead for them.

The elderly bearded man looked up suddenly as Uncle Henrik prepared to go. "God keep you safe," he said in a firm but quiet voice.

Henrik nodded. "God keep us all safe," he replied. Then he turned and left the room. A moment later Annemarie heard him leave the house.

Mama brought the teapot from the kitchen, and a tray of cups. Annemarie helped her pass the cups around. No one spoke.

"Annemarie," Mama whispered to her in the hall, "you may go to bed if you want to. It is very late."

Annemarie shook her head. But she was tired. She could see that Ellen was, too; her friend's head was leaning on her mother's shoulder, and her eyes closed now and then.

Finally Annemarie went to the empty rocking chair in the corner of the living room and curled there with her head against its soft, padded back. She dozed.

She was startled from her half sleep by the sudden sweep of headlights, through the sheer curtains and across the room, as a car pulled up outside. The car doors slammed. Everyone in the room tensed, but no one spoke.

She heard—as if in a recurring nightmare—the pounding on the door, and then the heavy, frighteningly familiar staccato of boots on the kitchen floor. The woman with the baby gasped and began, suddenly, to weep.

The male, accented voice from the kitchen was loud. "We have observed," he said, "that an unusual number of people have gathered at this house tonight. What is the explanation?"

"There has been a death," Mama's voice replied calmly. "It is always our custom to gather and pay our respects when a family member dies. I am sure you are familiar with our customs."

One of the officers pushed Mama ahead of him from the kitchen and entered the living room. There were others behind him. They filled the wide doorway. As always, their boots gleamed. Their guns. Their helmets. All of them gleamed in the candlelight.

Annemarie watched as the man's eyes moved around the room. He looked for a long time at the casket. Then he moved his gaze, focusing on each person in turn. When his eyes reached her, she looked back at him steadily.

"Who died?" he asked harshly.

No one answered. They watched Annemarie, and she realized that the officer was directing the question at her.

Now she knew for certain what Uncle Henrik had meant when he had talked to her in the barn. To be brave came more easily if you knew nothing.

She swallowed. "My Great-aunt Birte," she lied, in a firm voice.

The officer moved forward suddenly, across the room, to the casket. He placed one gloved hand on its lid. "Poor Great-aunt Birte," he said, in a condescending voice.

"I *do* know your customs," he said, turning his gaze toward Mama, who still stood in the doorway. "And I know it is the custom to pay one's respects by looking your loved one in the face. It seems odd to me that you have closed this coffin up so tightly." His hand was in a fist, and he rubbed it across the edge of the polished lid.

"Why is it not open?" he demanded. "Let us open it up and take one last look at Great-aunt Birte!"

Annemarie saw Peter, across the room, stiffen in his chair, lift his chin, and reach slowly with one hand toward his side.

Mama walked quickly across the room, directly to the casket, directly to the officer. "You're right," she said. "The doctor said it should be closed, because Aunt Birte died of typhus, and he said that there was a chance the germs would still be there, would still be dangerous. But what does he know—only a country doctor, and an old man at that? Surely typhus germs wouldn't linger in a dead person! And dear Aunt Birte; I have been longing to see her face, to kiss her goodbye. *Of course* we will open the casket! I am glad you suggested—"

With a swift motion the Nazi officer slapped Mama across her face. She staggered backward, and a white mark on her cheek darkened.

"You foolish woman," he spat. "To think that we have any

interest in seeing the body of your diseased aunt! Open it after we leave," he said.

With one gloved thumb he pressed a candle flame into darkness. The hot wax spattered the table. "Put all these candles out!" he said, "or pull the curtains."

Then he strode to the doorway and left the room. Motionless, silent, one hand to her cheek, Mama listened—they all listened—as the uniformed men left the house. In a moment they heard the car doors, the sound of its engine, and finally they heard it drive away.

"Mama!" Annemarie cried.

Her mother shook her head quickly, and glanced at the open window covered only by the sheer curtain. Annemarie understood. There might still be soldiers outside, watching, listening.

Peter stood and drew the dark curtains across the windows. He relit the extinguished candle. Then he reached for the old Bible that had always been there, on the mantel. He opened it quickly and said, "I will read a psalm."

His eyes turned to the page he had opened at random, and he began to read in a strong voice.

O praise the Lord.

How good it is to sing psalms to our God!

How pleasant to praise him!

*The Lord is rebuilding Jerusalem;
he gathers in the scattered sons of Israel.
It is he who heals the broken in spirit
and binds up their wounds,
he who numbers the stars one by one...*

Mama sat down and listened. Gradually they each began to relax. Annemarie could see the old man across the room, moving his lips as Peter read; he knew the ancient psalm by heart.

Annemarie didn't. The words were unfamiliar to her, and she tried to listen, tried to understand, tried to forget the war and the Nazis, tried not to cry, tried to be brave. The night breeze moved the dark curtains at the open windows. Outside, she knew, the sky was speckled with stars. How could anyone number them one by one, as the psalm said? There were too many. The sky was too big.

Ellen had said that her mother was frightened of the ocean, that it was too cold and too big.

The sky was, too, thought Annemarie. The whole *world* was: too cold, too big. And too cruel.

Peter read on, in his firm voice, though it was clear he was tired. The long minutes passed. They seemed hours.

Finally, still reading, he moved quietly to the window. He closed the Bible and listened to the quiet night. Then he looked around the

room. "Now," he said, "it is time."

First he closed the windows. Then he went to the casket and opened the lid.