

MARYSE MEIJER

We Are Leaving Here Forever

PETYA COUNTED TILES. On his knees from one end of the room to the other he crawled, sliding beneath the beds and the night tables, whispering as his lame and shrunken leg dragged along behind him. Marianne built a tower of plaster dolls and then threatened it with a toy hammer. Peter watched with his black button eyes as Leslie and William punched one another underneath a table while Ferdinand twirled Petya's dented rubber crutch between his knees. In the children's hospital no one had ever seen anyone die, nor did they believe in death. Sometimes a window rattled, or they had a bad lunch of soggy jam sandwiches, but at night they dreamed the quiet dreams of those who do not realize they have fallen so fast asleep.

ONCE A PHOTOGRAPHER and a journalist from a foreign newspaper came to visit them. The man wore a checked jacket and the woman clutched a sack of candy. She looked at them all mournfully and spent a lot of time kneeling and dropping camera equipment from a large black bag.

Where are your parents? the man asked, his speech so smooth it seemed to be stitched together with honey.

Our mothers never come, they said.

And your fathers?

We have never seen them.

The two strangers looked at one another: *Orphans!* they whispered.

Are you very sad? the man asked.

Oh no, the nurses said, drawing the children to their hips. *Look at all the puzzles they have!*

After the strangers left a story about the children appeared in a newspaper they could not read. The children made hats and little knives out of the slick paper and sliced at the soft bodies of their beds and pillows with pencils, pretending to be journalists. They remembered best how the man had leaned down in his big coat and asked what they wanted to be when they grew up:

A captain, said Peter.

A druggist, said Petya.

A surgeon, said William.

The moon, said Marianne, and the strangers had laughed.

THE ROOM WHERE THE CHILDREN SLEPT was long and narrow. The ceiling was so high that even if the children had stacked themselves one atop the other they could not have touched it. The walls were white, except where the iron bed-frames stood out like ribs against them, and the light thrown by the cupboard lamps was always nibbled down by a larger darkness.

We are inside a great beast, Marianne said, pressing a stolen stethoscope against the leg of a chair.

What kind of beast? Peter asked.

Marianne thought for a moment. *A very old beast,* she said, moving the scope along the chair. *With tiles for scales!*

Scales are on the outside, Petya said.

Sometimes...he swallows them, Marianne replied.

Then where is his mouth?

There, she said, pointing to the windows, and they all looked up.

When the doctor came in, pushing a steel tray full of pills in glass dishes, he found the children clawing wildly at the walls.

My God, he said. *What are you doing?* and he grabbed Peter's shoulder and twisted him around, shaking him as though to wake him from a nightmare.

We're tickling it, Peter said.

Tickling what?

The beast, Marianne said. *We want to see if it will laugh.*

THEIR FAVORITE TOY was a large box made to look like a theatre. Cardboard figures danced along shallow grooves in the bottom while music played, telling the story of the ghastly Tittle and the three horrible mice. When the gears wound down and the melody struck its final flat note the children reached for the crank handle again and again, their arms pumping feverishly, until it broke. Then they tore out the curtains and Marianne made a cape for her favorite doll. They also had iron horses and soldiers; a chest full of alphabet blocks; Chinese checkers made of cracked jade. Sunday mornings the nurses poured buckets of water over the floor, and the puddles swelled and the children shrieked and climbed on top of the beds as the nurses dragged the gray cotton hair of the mops along. Pushing

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