

On a Mission of Mischief

It was a perfect opportunity—too good to pass up. In the little kitchen, Mrs Whetstra slid a batch of cookies into the wood-burning stove as she joyfully hummed a hymn. Just outside the kitchen, a large pane of new window glass leaned against the front of the house. Andrew van der Bijl's slender, young frame shook with excitement. This was his chance to prove the Whetstras were not such good Christians after all.

Andrew quickly removed his clunky wooden shoes and crept from his hiding place beneath an old fishmonger's cart. He carefully shouldered the wide pane of glass and dashed to the ladder that led to the Whetstras' thatched roof. With an evil grin, Andrew nimbly climbed the ladder and centered the glass on top of the chimney, completely blocking it. Then he flew down the ladder and back to the safety of the dilapidated cart.

Within minutes, the prank was accomplishing its purpose. Andrew watched Mrs Whetstra come back into the kitchen, which had filled with thick smoke.

She immediately began to cough, waving her apron in a feeble attempt to clear the air.

“Phillip!” she choked out. “Phillip, come quickly!”

Mrs Whetstra threw open the oven door just as Mr Whetstra ran into the room. The little stove belched smoke.

“Get outside,” Mr Whetstra ordered, gently ushering his wife toward the door. “I’m going to the roof.”

Andrew was disappointed by the lack of profanity and angry outbursts. Still, he had to smother a giggle at the look on Mr Whetstra’s face when he spotted the glass on the chimney. Mr Whetstra snatched up the pane of glass and looked around the yard. Andrew shrank deeper into his hiding place. Mr Whetstra climbed slowly down the ladder and leaned the glass against the house. He glared around the yard one more time, his eyes lingering dangerously on the fishmonger’s cart. Andrew held his breath. Finally, Mr Whetstra sighed, shook his head, and led his wife back inside. Andrew grinned. Success!

Andrew was well-known around his little town of Witte, Holland as a prankster and a troublemaker. He wasn’t truly bad, and he never tried to hurt anyone, but he longed for excitement and intrigue that was foreign to his sleepy little village. More than anything, Andrew wanted to be a spy, a smuggler, a saboteur, or a superhero. He was forever sneaking around, creating secret campaigns and embarking on missions of mischief.

Sometimes Andrew's exploits were harmless, but other times they had costly consequences. With a shortage of real enemies, the boys of Witte often fought one another, battling fiercely with their wooden shoes, called klompen. One afternoon, in a desperate showdown, Andrew broke his klompen on the head of his best friend, Kees. In the aftermath of the fight, Kees and Andrew stared down at the broken shoe.

"What will your father say?" Kees wondered quietly.

Andrew swallowed hard. Papa already got up before dawn to weed the garden and then rode his bicycle four miles to his blacksmithing job in another town. After working hard all day, he rode the four miles back home, often after dark. Money was tight and time was even tighter. There was no money for new klompen and no time to repair broken ones. Papa would not be happy.

"He won't say anything compared with what your mama will say when she sees that bump on your head!" Andrew teased, trying to make his voice light.

Kees reached up and gingerly touched the rapidly swelling knot on his forehead. He winced. Then both boys looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"It was a good fight," Kees admitted.

"One for the record books," Andrew agreed, linking arms with his best friend. "And there is no one whose head I would rather break my shoe on!"

But as the boys parted and Andrew headed toward home, his sense of dread began to grow. He hated to disappoint Papa. With a heavy heart and a shoeless

foot, Andrew faced Papa. He held up the broken klompen.

“I broke my shoe, Papa,” Andrew admitted quietly.

Papa, nearly deaf from years of work in a noisy blacksmith shop, shook his head and furrowed his brow. “Speak up,” he urged in his too-loud voice.

Andrew took a deep breath. “I broke my shoe, Papa,” he nearly shouted.

“Oh, Andrew,” Papa boomed. “You must learn to be more careful.”

Papa took the klompen and worked late into the night beside the old oil lamp, carefully repairing the wooden shoe. As Andrew watched his father work, he felt a twinge of regret. He knew he caused Papa headaches and heartaches with his escapades, but the drive for adventure was just too strong. Soon, Andrew found himself in the middle of another quest.

Andrew’s older brother Ben worked hard after school and on weekends, doing odd jobs to earn pennies. In Andrew’s mind, Ben was an enemy, a wealthy secret agent for some foreign government. One afternoon, Andrew’s vivid imagination got the best of him, and he snuck up to Ben’s attic hideaway while Ben was in the village on a job. Andrew was determined to take his arch enemy down.

Avoiding imaginary guards at every turn, Andrew found Ben’s prized possession: an old piggy bank filled with pennies he had earned. Carefully sliding a pocketknife into the opening, Andrew shook twenty-

five pennies onto the floor. He stuffed his pockets full and carefully replaced the piggy bank. Then he slipped from the attic into the yard to enjoy his treasures.

As he fingered the coins, Andrew realized he had a problem. Twenty-five pennies was a great deal of money for a young boy in those days. If he walked into the candy shop to spend it—as he had dreamed of doing—the shopkeeper would certainly ask Andrew where he got so much money. But his spoils were worthless if he couldn't enjoy them. Then Andrew had a brilliant idea.

“Miss Meekle?” Andrew said timidly as he approached his teacher the next day at school. “Look what I found.”

Andrew held up his cupped hands, filled with all twenty-five pennies. Miss Meekle's eyes widened.

“Can I keep it?” Andrew asked.

“Well, Andy, that's a lot of money,” Miss Meekle said, rubbing her chin thoughtfully. “Are you sure you don't know who it belongs to?”

Andrew gulped. “No, Miss Meekle,” he lied. “I found it on the road outside our school.”

Miss Meekle thought for a moment. Then her face brightened. “Of course, Andy! You must take it to the police. They will know what to do with it.”

Andrew's heart constricted. The police? They would see him as the criminal he was for sure! But now that he had told Miss Meekle about the money, there was no way out. With leaden feet, Andrew slunk toward the little town hall where the police chief's office was. His insides quivered.

The police chief listened to Andrew's story. "Tell me again where you found the money," he prompted.

Andrew repeated his lie. "I found it in the street."

"And you have no idea whose it is?" the chief asked.

"No, sir," Andrew lied again.

The police chief peered at Andrew over his spectacles for a moment, studying him carefully. Then he opened a drawer in his heavy desk. Andrew closed his eyes, sure he was about to be handcuffed.

"Here, Andrew," the chief said.

Andrew opened his eyes. The police chief was holding out an envelope. Andrew took it hesitantly.

"Put the money in the envelope," the chief instructed. "We'll write your name on the outside. In one year, if no one has claimed it, the money will be yours."

A whole year? That was an eternity! Andrew reluctantly put the money in the envelope and handed it to the police chief. One year later, Andrew made his trip to the candy shop. Ben had not mentioned the missing pennies, and of course no one else had claimed the money. As he sucked on his candy, Andrew silently congratulated himself on his skills. He had successfully completed another adventure without being captured.

Andrew was an expert at evading capture on his missions of mischief, but he also became skilled at avoiding capture in his escapes from church. Sundays were a day of worship in the van der Bijl household, and every Sunday morning the family would walk

together to the Protestant church on the far end of Witte. Because it was so hard for Papa to hear, they always sat together in the front row, filing solemnly into a pew that was not quite long enough to hold the entire family.

Andrew soon learned that if he deliberately walked slower than the rest of the family on the walk to church, he would be last into the pew, and he would be the person who didn't quite fit. So, Andrew always stayed a few steps behind his siblings. Then, when the pew was full, he would generously offer to find himself a seat further back in the congregation. With Mama and Papa's blessing, Andrew would move further and further back in the building until he had slipped right out the door.

In the summer, Andrew spent his Sundays basking on the sunny polders—wide fields that surrounded Witte. In the winter, he used his wooden klompen to happily skate along the frozen canals that crisscrossed the town. Because nearly everyone in Witte attended church, there was no one to challenge Andrew as to why he wasn't in the service.

Andrew always seemed to know when the service was winding down. As the church service came to an end, he would slip back into the building and station himself near the preacher as the worshippers emerged from the doors. Although he looked like he was waiting patiently for his parents, Andrew was really gathering “intel,” making mental notes of the comments the

congregation made about the sermon. By the time Mama and Papa finally emerged from their front-row position, Andrew usually knew the text and theme of the sermon, as well as the key points and illustrations.

On Sunday afternoons in Holland, the men gathered in living rooms around the villages to drink strong black coffee and discuss current events and—most importantly—the Sunday sermon. With a pounding heart and clammy hands, Andrew would join Papa in these discussions, throwing out thoughts and ideas gleaned from the townspeople as they exited the service. Andrew's careful comments convinced everyone that he not only attended church, but was actively engaged in the services. No one ever suspected he had sat through only a handful of them.

Andrew grew increasingly comfortable living a life of deception and lies. After a while, his stories seemed more real than the truths of his life. But the foundations of Andrew's reality were about to be shaken, and his quiet, carefree life would never be the same.