
Sunday Hero



by Annalese Jochems

When I got home from football, Oma was in the kitchen, chopping vegetables. “Are you making soup?” I asked.

Oma looked at the celery. “Yes.”
“Green soup?”

“Yes.” She put down the knife and waited. I was confusing her, but I’d started now.

“Mum said we have quite a lot of green soup in the fridge already. There’s more in the freezer.”

“Did I make it yesterday?”

“You did.”

Oma peered at the celery again. Then she looked out the window.

“I made it yesterday?”

“It was really nice.”

“Green soup. Yesterday.”

“Dad likes it, too.”

Oma shrugged. She didn’t believe me. I could see her remembering all the other times I’d said the same thing. “How was football?” she asked.

“Good. How was home?”

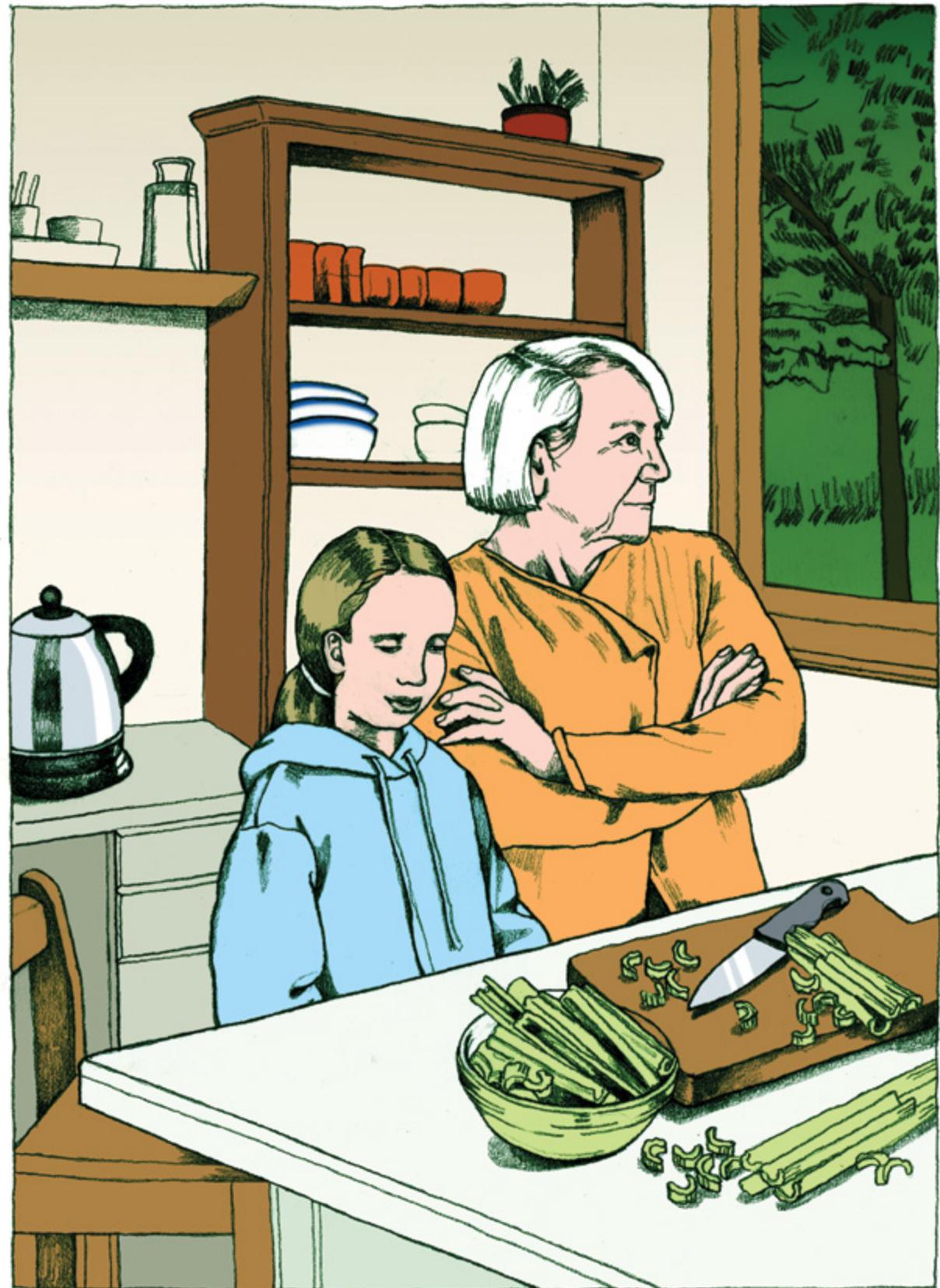
“Good. I made soup.”

I gave her a hug. Before she moved in, we’d never hugged much. It still felt a bit weird. We left the vegetables on the chopping board and went to watch *Brooklyn 99*. We were on to our second episode when Dad came in, wanting the key to the shed.

“Still lost?” Oma said.

Dad couldn’t find the key last week, either, and now the grass was long. Mess made my dad aggro. He liked to mow the lawns every Sunday.

“I guess you haven’t seen the key?” he asked me.



Dad went to the hardware store, and Oma went to her bedroom. I was in the kitchen, putting the vegetables in a container when I heard her call my name.

She was standing in the middle of her room, looking. "Don't laugh or you'll break my heart," she said. "I have a box of keys somewhere. Maybe one of them unlocks the shed."

"OK," I said. I wasn't so sure I wanted to get dragged into this.

"I know it sounds crazy, but it'll work if you take it seriously."

"OK."

I was waiting in the doorway, and Oma waved me in. "Now, we're looking for an old tin with a picture of Santa on the lid. I think it's red, but it could be green."

Oma had a lot of things. There was barely enough room to move.

"Get down and check under the bed, will you? I'm not doing that."

Oma opened drawers while I looked under the bed. I was actually enjoying being told what to do. It was like the old Oma had come back.

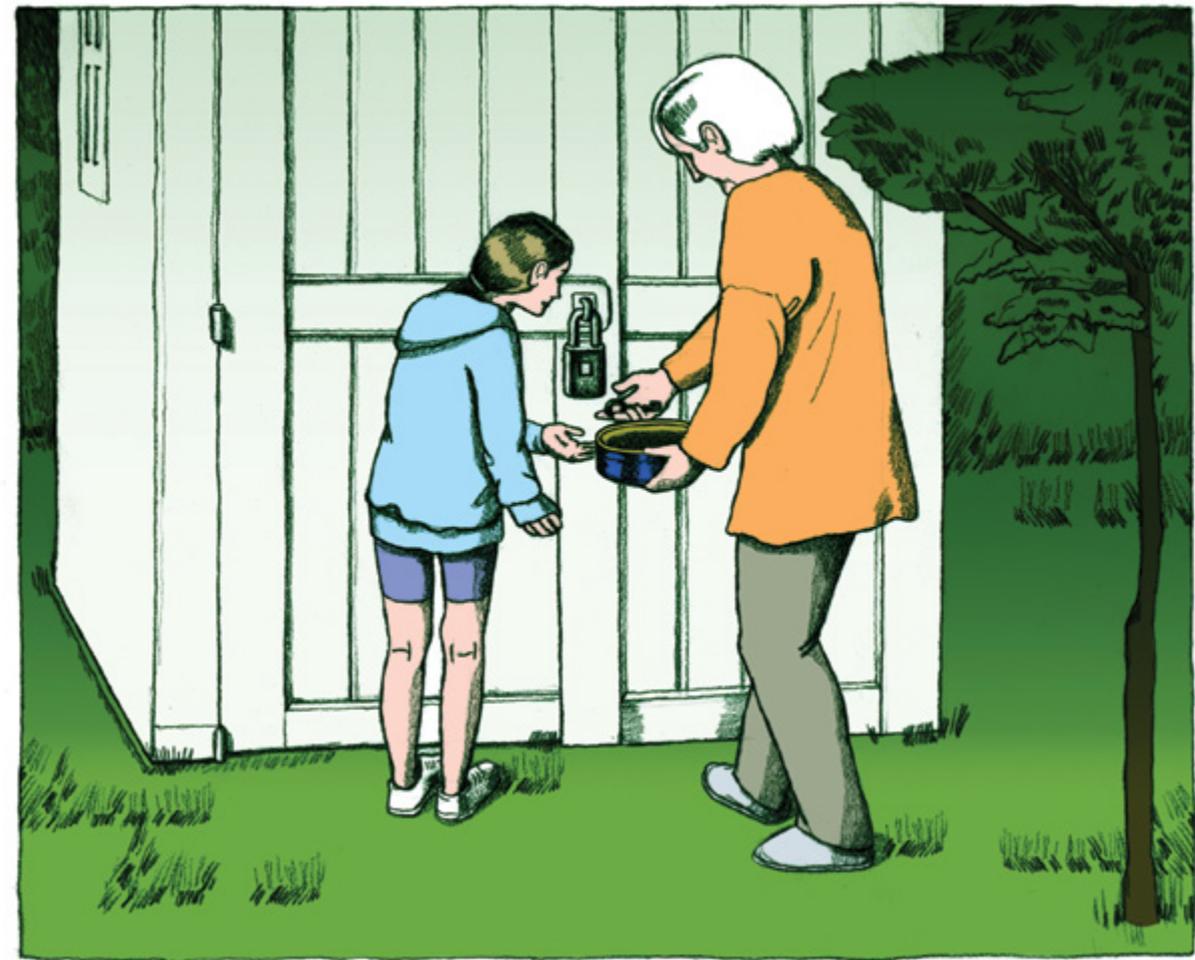
We searched for ten minutes before I found the tin inside a plastic tub.

"Open it," Oma instructed.

There were maybe a hundred keys in there. Old keys and new keys. Rusted keys and copper keys and silver ones. What would happen when we found out none of them unlocked the shed? Oma might cry.

"Put your doubts out of your mind or you'll jinx us," she said. "We'll never get the shed open, and your father will be muttering for the rest of his life."

I laughed. Oma had liked making jokes before Grandad died. Before she'd started to forget everything.



We went outside. Oma nodded at the shed door and handed me a key. It didn't work, and I passed it back. She shrugged and handed me another. We'd have to be quick if we wanted to test them all before it got dark. "What's this one?" I asked. The key was small and a pinkish-silver.

"I found it outside the supermarket." Next, she passed me a big old rusty key. It was very long, with two small teeth at the end like rabbit teeth.

"This was the key to the church my mother used to clean," Oma said.

"Are there others from the Netherlands?" I asked.

Oma rummaged in the tin and fished out a copper key. It was less rusty than the church one. "Well this was their house key, but I've no idea about the rest. They belonged to my mother. She gave them to me. I'll leave them to you, too, I suppose. Do you want them?"

The house key had a flower pattern at the end. It was beautiful. I knew my great-grandparents had been poor. It was probably the prettiest thing they owned.

“Yes, I want them,” I said.

Oma nodded, pleased. Then she passed more keys. I tried each one before she dropped it in her pocket. “You know, church was very important back then,” she said once we’d got our rhythm. “For a lot of people, Sunday was their only day off. And my opa was their Sunday hero.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Well,” said Oma, “it was because of the Clydesdales. Opa broke them all in. Those horses! They had hooves like dinner plates – and their heads were logs of wood.”

“Like as big as tractors?”

Oma looked doubtful. “Small tractors, maybe.”

I nodded, though I couldn’t see where all this was going.

“Opa always said horses loved work ... and they did ... but he also said they loved food and rest too. If everything was in balance, they were happy – just like people. That’s why Sunday was so important. Horses and humans need at least

one day to loosen their muscles and relax their thoughts. To get a little bored even, so they want to work again. Is that true for you?”

I thought about school while I tried another key. “I could use three days off.”

“Yes, even better!” Oma said.

“One year, there was a huge harvest. There was so much wheat to get in. The village landlord realised things could be done faster if there were no days off. He said to Opa, *If the horses don’t have a day off from eating, why should they have a day off from work?*”

“What did Opa say?”

“Then the horses won’t work for you. And neither will we.”

“So, he took the next Sunday off?”

“Yes ... and he went to church! Afterwards, he went to the barn to feed the horses. And the landlord came.”

“The landlord came?”

Oma nodded. She was so happy. “He got close to Opa and peered down at him. My opa was short. The landlord said he hadn’t seen the men in the fields. *No*, Opa said. *The horses refused because it’s Sunday*. The landlord said he hoped they wouldn’t refuse next Sunday. Opa looked into a horse’s big, chocolate eye – then he looked at



the landlord. *I think they'll refuse even tomorrow, he said. If there's no Sunday, the week makes no sense. You're the only one around here – man or animal – who thinks we should work Sunday.*

“What did the landlord say?”

“Nothing! He went home, and he never spoke to my opa again. He used the other men to pass on messages.”

“Maybe he was scared of the little man with the big horses.”

“Exactly.”

After a while, Mum came out to sit in the sun. She had a packet of chips. There were bees in the flowers and birds loud in the trees.

“Show Mum how many we've done,” I said, and Oma lifted her cardigan pockets to show how they sagged with the weight. Mum went off again and came back with an ice-cream container.

I didn't want to talk any more about the keys or the horses in front of Mum. I didn't want Dad to know either, even though Oma is his mum. It felt like we had a secret understanding.

“You know,” Oma said, “your grandad was always antsy about the lawn – like your dad. He said looking at overgrown grass gave him sweaty armpits.”

She handed me a slender key. There weren't many left in the tin, maybe ten. I held it a moment before sliding it in. It went in easily, like slipping on a T-shirt, and the lock clicked open.

Mum nearly choked on a chip. “Babe!” she yelled at Dad. “They did it!”

“What?” he yelled back. Dad came over, and we all stood there, laughing at the lawnmower inside the shed.



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illustrations by Lucy Han

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"Green soup, 'yesterday'?"

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