

Circles within Circles

Chapter Three – Questions

December 2021

Anneke poked cautiously at the mass of glistening vegetables and greasy meat on her tray, wondering – neither for the first nor the last time – whether the cafeteria meal plan here in college was really worth it.

Well, nothing to be done just yet. Maybe this weekend she'd head out to the supermarket and buy stuff so she could make and bring her own lunches to campus. After all, might as well make use of her apartment's little kitchen, right?

She reluctantly gulped down another greasy forkful, only half-listening to the swirl of conversation around her. Cafeterias were noisy at any time, and now barely three days into the semester, the commotion was almost deafening. All around her were friendships being made and broken... people giggling, and protesting their course reading loads, and following one another on social media, and sharing the latest viral videos. It was all good, she readily admitted. All perfectly normal. All just as she had expected.

The fact that she was partaking in none of it was also wholly expected – and thus, it was with the mild interest of a detached spectator, and not with envy, that she let her grey eyes scan over the bustling room.

Her mind wandered back to similar scenes from the previous year and the previous university. Back home in Amsterdam, things had been much the same; her fellow students had seemed far more interested in one another than in tall, quiet Anneke who ate by herself and minded her own business. Oh, sure: she'd had a few friends here and there. Some had been friendships of convenience: friends to exchange lecture notes with, or to lend books, or to cooperate with in labs. Some had been legacy friendships from high school, with old in-jokes and references that brought a smile to her lips and a little glow to her heart. But none of them had been romantic friendships... not really.

This year, here at this new university, things would be different. They simply had to be.

She brushed off the thought almost reflexively and took another bite. She could worry about that stuff later. She had one more class to attend in a half-hour: the first session of an English literature course. And after that she needed to bike back to her apartment. There were readings to finish, and

emails to write, and maybe a quick FaceTime with Marie before it got too late back home...

Ah, Marie. Anneke found herself smiling unbidden at the fond memory of her younger sister. Marie had just turned eighteen last month, and she was just beginning her own first year of college back home. God, how Anneke missed her family, and Marie most of all: her bubbly personality, her naïve questions, her absurdly endearing fixation on all things K-pop. If only it would have made sense for her to come here to study as well...

No, that was nonsense. No sense dreaming about the impossible. Marie was much better off back home, safe and sound. Safely away from America... the unknown dangers of big, foreign cities...

Shit, it was getting late. Better head off to class now. Wouldn't do to be late for the very first session!

"All right now, everyone! We're a fairly large class this semester, and so I think it's all the more important to get to know at least a few of your fellow students. We want a community in this class, after all. So what I'd like you each to do, in the next five minutes or so, is to turn to the person on your right and ask them just three questions: things like where they're from, what their hobbies are, you get the point. Okay? Everyone clear? Okay, good. Let's go!"

The professor's blithe tones subsided, drowned in the rising murmur of her thirty-seven new students. Among them, and seated strangely enough side by side, were Anneke and that odd guy she'd seen on move-in night. Ethan, he'd said his name was.

"Umm..." Ethan began uncertainly, his gaze flitting from his open laptop screen to a region located somewhere between her eyes and her V-neck top. "Um, like, you- you want me to start?" "Sure," Anneke smiled, fighting back the not unpleasant memory of his cheeks reddening after she'd called his bluff before his mates. "Sure, why don't you go ahead? It's Ethan, right? I'm Anneke."

"Um, yeah. Cool... Anneke. Okay." His brow furrowed for a moment, then cleared. "Okay. So, like, where are you from?" "That's an easy one," she responded, for a brief second wondering if she'd have to explain yet again where the hell the Netherlands actually were. "Amsterdam. You know, in-" "The Netherlands, right? That's so cool!" And he seemed like he genuinely meant it, too.

Not bad. Not bad at all. One point to Team Ethan.

"Um, let's see. Umm... this is hard..." "Hey, it's nothing too serious!" she reassured him amid the din of chatter around them. "Come on, we'll make it a lightning round. Just say the first question that pops up in your head!" He gave a little chuckle and shrugged. "Uh, okay! How tall are you?" "Hundred and seventy-nine," she found herself saying reflexively, then laughed at her mistake. "Oops, sorry. I guess I should put that in feet and inches, shouldn't I?"

But Ethan was already tapping hurriedly on his keyboard. "Ehh, got it. That's- wait, no, I want cm to inches- Ah, got it! That's- wow, that's five foot ten, huh? Basically the same as me!" Well, there wasn't much to do about that but laugh and nod, was there? Which she did.

And then, seemingly out of nowhere, came his final question in an unthinking rush. "So, like, are you a virgin?"

What the hell? "Um, beg pardon?" She blinked in uncertain surprise, seeing on Ethan's face a curious mixture of self-consciousness and dogged persistence. "You- you heard me," he insisted, even as his cheeks reddened. "Are you a virgin? Or is that, like, not something I should ask-?"

"Well, it's not something I *normally* begin conversations with," she admitted, with a short and rather forced laugh. Jesus, he was an odd duck. But then again- what had she just been pondering over lunch...? "But I don't mind saying. Actually, yes. Yes, I think you could say that." Might as well stick with the essential truth. No sense wading into the technicalities, certainly not with a probably innocent guy she'd just met a few days before...

"Oh? Okay, um- wow. I- I guess I just thought Europeans were- You know-" Ethan was floundering for words, clearly becoming more and more disconcerted with every awkward utterance that left his mouth. "I mean- not that I think you're-" "You know what?" Anneke cut in evenly, with a polite smile and shake of her head. "Why don't I just ask the questions now?"

Which she did, much to Ethan's evident relief.

"Have you ever left the country?" Yes, he had – once to go with friends to Cancun. "What fantasy universe would you live in if you could?" Middle-Earth, definitely. And then, with a sly smile on her lips and a lowering of her voice: "Okay, my turn now. Are *you* a virgin?"

The flushed cheeks and head toss that accompanied Ethan's half-defiant, half-ashamed "no" made her bite back a giggle. "And I don't suppose you want to talk about it..." she began, but by then –

and perhaps mercifully for Ethan – the professor was already calling the class back to order.

Interesting, she mused. Very interesting. This guy was such a weirdo, and such a strangely amusing dork. And so it was that, as she made her way out from class later that afternoon and pedaled her bike back toward her apartment with long and even strokes, she found herself pondering whether she might not have found just the sort of fellow she was looking for. Someone quirky... someone who was a loner... someone who seemed rather taken with her...

Oh, yes. She would definitely need to get to know this Ethan fellow better.