

Betrayal

Elizabeth Shove

My life is ebbing away. I can feel it in my bones and in my dreams. Before I go, I have a confession to make.

For those who don't know me, my real name is Willem Eck. I was born in Antwerp and born to travel. I crossed the channel when I was seventeen and landed in Britain in turbulent times: civil war raged. My uncle Arthur paid for the trip in exchange for information about crops and the weather. I enjoyed my itinerant life, foraging for food and walking North but with no real purpose or destination in mind. After the first two short notes back home, I stopped writing.

When the frosts came, I found myself in Welby, a small, fortified settlement at the navigable limit of the river Ouse. I was young and strong and although I say it myself, I was a good craftsman, and an excellent cook. Rye bread was my speciality. The people of Welby were used to strangers from the South, especially with the wars. I stayed a while and made myself useful. Perhaps this would be where I'd see the cold months out.

'Act natural', Arthur had said. 'Blend in. Get married if you like'. So that's what I did. The next spring, I sent an encrypted message back to Antwerp via Arthur's network of trusted wool merchants. I explained that I'd gone native, that I was living in Welby, and that Agnes, my wife, was pregnant. Agnes didn't know that I could read or write in code, or that I was an enemy spy, and sometimes I forgot as well.

It was when Jake, our eldest, was about ten that things got tricky. My uncle's secret messages came more often, and with a new, more urgent tone. There were detailed questions about our fighting capability, our defences, and our preparedness for war. Arthur said that I was not to worry. He promised that I'd be well rewarded when the time came. Reading between the lines, an attack was imminent.

The straw mattress in the loft was comfortable enough, but I didn't sleep well. Should I tell my uncle the truth, and if I did so what would happen to me, and to Agnes and the kids? If Welby fell to the enemy, I presumed we'd all be saved, but how could I be sure? Would anyone know that I was really Willem Eck, the foreign spy? There were rumours of armies massing on the continent and of new alliances between the Dutch and the French. Everyone was on edge.

Finally, I had to choose. The alternatives were stark. Either I betrayed my uncle, who I'd not seen for years and who might, or might not be willing to betray me, or I betrayed my wife and children. It's true I'd deceived them for a decade or more, but to see them captured and tortured, that was a step too far. I couldn't stop the new alliance or the likely destruction of settlements up and down the coast, but I could abandon my past and my former self: I could turncoat. If we left soon, and if we disguised our tracks, Arthur would never find us. We'd make a new life somewhere else.

'Agnes', I said, 'Fetch the children, we have to go. Things are not what they seem.' Agnes objected. 'Wilf, I don't know what you are thinking of. This is our home, and this is where we live. I can't just walk away from my parents and my brothers and sisters.' I sighed. There was nothing for it but to tell her the truth. 'Agnes', I said, 'I'm sorry but all the time I've known you I've been a spy. I'm not Wilf. My name is Willem Eck and I'm from Antwerp. Welby will be overrun in a few weeks. We have to leave'.

Agnes was absolutely furious. I'd misled her from the start. How could she ever trust me again. 'No way', she said. 'I'm staying here with the children. You go where you like, you've done enough damage for one lifetime. That's it, no more, go'. I'd not bargained for this. I'd made the decision to break with Antwerp in favour of Agnes, but now she didn't want anything to do with me.

Thankfully, Jake was asleep when I left with just a few possessions and some scraps of food in my bag. My last message to Arthur warned him of an ambush that was planned by the citizens of Welby. If anyone tried to lay siege to the town, they'd be slaughtered, no question about it. And with that, I vanished into thin air.

I can't complain. I've lived to a good age, but I've been haunted by memories of Jake's trusting innocence and Agnes' parting look of absolute disgust. When Arthur realised I'd switched sides and when he discovered that I'd lied about Welby's preparations he came looking for retribution. He never found me, but the fear of discovery has been ever present.

Now that I am at the end of my life, it is a relief to come clean. Now you know it was me. I am a serial betrayer: spy, turncoat, fraudulent husband and father, and traitor in my home country.

With these words, Willem laid back on the pillow. Death would be a release.