

DITCH JUMPUNG IS NOT FOR GIRLS

a short story written by Astrid Zollinger

To my great astonishment, the drawing room was deserted. This made me feel both relieved and hopeful, as this situation gave me the opportunity to make the request to the path of my highly desired future. Suddenly I felt such a sense of excitement that my legs discharged all energy and started doing a happy dance. Involuntarily, that brought back a memory.

I frolic through the village with my father. I accompany him on his visits to his patients. Along the way we talk about this and that. When we arrive at a farm, father asks me to wait outside. A group of boys are playing near the ditch. I heroically walk up to them and ask if I can join them ditch jumping, but they ignore me. I ask again and now they even laugh at me. After all, girls can't jump ditches!

"We'll see!" I say defiantly.

"I bet you a penny that I can jump up and down ten times, and still be faster than you!"

The boy couldn't match my swiftness.

Returning to the present, I collected all the necessities to write my letter. Most important was my seriousness, which I had lost sight of for a moment. I thought of how my future would be, if I did not write this letter: my life would be useless

and empty, my desire for knowledge smothered like a candle fighting to stay alight in the slightest breath of wind. I would write to the minister to eliminate that delusion and ask him to build a bridge so that I could cross the abyss to the world I longed for.

Dear Minister of the Interior,

By letter I would like to ask your permission to study Medicine and Physics at the University of Groningen. Last year in July I passed the pharmacist exam in Amsterdam with good marks. I hope you'll see no barriers to granting your approval.

Sincerely, Aletta Henriette Jacobs

I sealed the letter and decided to drop it off at the post office. After I had posted the letter, I took a short detour back home. Lost in thought, I unexpectedly bumped into my sister Charlotte. We greeted each other and she asked with interest:

“Have you been to the post office by any chance?”

Hesitantly, I confirmed that question.

"Who did you write to, if I may ask?", she continued. I thought about my answer for a while, would I lie? But I knew my secret would be safe with Charlotte.

“I have ... written to ... Minister Thorbecke.” Her surprised look made me silent for a moment. But I couldn’t go on without an explanation, so I continued:

“I have asked Minister Thorbecke to study at the university. Please don't tell anyone yet.”

Charlottes eyes began to shine.

“It was hard for me to bring it up, but now that you've taken the first step, it gives me courage. All my life I have felt that there must be more to strive for!

However, my reticence meant that I never dared to take the first step”.

Meanwhile I looked at Charlotte with affection and asked her sympathetically:

“So by not to resign myself to the fate destined for women in this society, I can help you take the jump as well?” Charlotte nodded. Suddenly a burning question arose:

“But suppose my letter is not answered with approval? My life would be like the torment of Tantalus. I could behold the fruits of knowledge, but never would I be able to reap them.”

Charlotte comforted me:

“Deep down you know that your visions for the future are not impossible, and remember, Aletta, that you are making a step that takes lots of courage”.

We were almost home now. Approaching the front door, Charlotte closed:

“And Minister Thorbecke is quite progressive and will be more open to change than most ministers!”.

That same evening I recalled a scene from the past associated with Charlotte:

"Please don't do that, Aletta. You know it's not allowed!" Charlotte says clearly, even though I know she also finds it amusing. Still, I hastily put on the clothes that belonged to one of my brothers. I hide my hair under the cap, and before Charlotte can stop me, I run down the stairs and go outside. A lady stands at the door of our house and asks:

"Is Dr. Jacobs at home, or is he on his visits, boy?"

"He is, as you say, busy with his patients, madam. I think he'll be back in an hour," I answer her, trying to imitate a boy's voice.

"And, madam, you are mistaken. I'm not a boy at all." I say, taking off my cap.

"Good day Madam!" I greet her with a triumphant smile. The lady stares at me petrified. I can't contain my laughter and surrender to it. The lady reproaches me loudly:

"Well I never! Obstinate, headstrong girl! Insulting me like that! It's unheard of!" I see that Charlotte can no longer contain herself. Mother looks at me furiously, and I run to my room as fast as I can.

A very long, boring week went by, during which it seemed as if my letter was a dream, and I struggled to carry on with my domestic life, which I hated so much. I constantly kept an eye on the mail, but to my vexation nothing ever came for Miss Jacobs.

One ordinary afternoon, when I had almost given up hope, I watched father with a sealed letter in his hand, which he showed to mother. I took in the words "stately, seal, minister" and it made my head spin with excitement, but I also got a nagging sense of concern that reminded me of an occurrence a few years ago.

I'm in my room when my father asks me to come down and take my schoolwork with me. Curiously I do what is asked and a little later I present myself in the drawing room with my notebooks. A friend of father's would like to see my language work. As he quietly watches my work and praises it, I am overcome by a sense of agitation. I pull the notebooks out of his hand, tear them up, and shout:

"It's pointless! Why am I clever if I can't even use my talent?! Oh, it would have been much better if I was stupid!"

And with bitter tears I run to my room.

The intensity of those emotions resurfaced, yet I could not dwell long on this feelings, for I heard father call my name in an urgent tone. Slowly I rose and accompanied him to his study, keeping my eyes on the letter.

"In his letter Minister Thorbecke informs me of your correspondence. He also indicates that he generally does not see any obstacles regarding your study at University".

I could hardly breathe; my heart skipped a beat. I jumped up and wanted to embrace father, but he asked me to wait a little longer and listen.

"He does leave the decision to me," said father in a serious tone. My heart was beating in my throat. Would father still encounter obstacles? I stared at him with a frightened look.

"You don't have to look so scared, Lettie. Don't you know I've always been on your side? I will be very proud of you!"

I was absolutely delighted. I could go to college and start a practice! And my dear Charlotte would follow!

This story was submitted to the creative writing competition of Chawton House in August 2021 and ended up on the shortlist with the last five entries. The writing competition was inspired by their exhibition 'Man Up! Women who stepped into a man's world'. For more information:
<https://chawtonhouse.org/2021/10/man-up-creative-writing-competition-results/>