

# On the Float

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She was late. The parade was not going to wait for us, and we still had to get her into her costume and everything. This year we had made a float with a Hansel and Gretel theme, where I was Hansel, and she would be the evil witch. Because of the weight limit, we could only have 2 persons on the float, so Gretel was made out of papier-mâché.

Being on a float for a few hours in February could be pretty chilly, so I had put on thermal underwear and two thick sweaters - Hansel was after all supposed to be fattened. I even found flesh-colored leggings that I wore over the long thermal underpants; so that they would appear to be bare underneath the lederhosen. My costume was completed with a robin-hood hat, which was the most appropriate thing I could find. All in all it was thick enough that I was getting warm here inside, even though the hall I was in, where the float was standing ready for the parade, was not heated.

Then a woman I didn't know entered the hall, and started looking around. She was dressed like someone in her fifties; long skirt, woolen tights and flat shoes, under a basic coat in an equally drab color. Short hair and big glasses with a black frame completed her look. But taking a better look at her, I estimated her in her early twenties, like myself.

"Can I help you?"

"Are you Erzo?"

"Yes, I am."

"Good. My name is Diana. Marie-Anne sent me. She is not feeling well this morning, when I visited her, but since she had no replacement, she was determined to join you on the float anyway. But that seemed very unwise to me, out in the cold for hours, so in the end I offered her to take her place. We have about the same size, so we assume her costume would fit me too."

I took another look at her: such a boring gray mouse in that witch costume on the float? It didn't seem like a great match, but it was not like I had a choice, and I probably should count myself lucky that there was a replacement for Marie-Anne at all. Still, I had to make sure she knew what she was signing up for. "Are you sure you can do this? You'll be out there in the cold for 2 to 3 hours, in full view of everybody, constantly needing to smile and wave."

"Yes, I'm sure. I've had this conversation already with Marie-Anne, and in the end she was satisfied. So let's just get going, shall we?"

"OK, then. Here is the box with your costume. I don't know much about it; I have borrowed it from a friend, and it was used before in a different parade. I heard it is more of a friendly witch costume, more intended to make you look good than is really fitting for the Hansel and Gretel fairytale, but sometimes you have to make do with what is available."

Together we opened the box that I got from my friend, and studied its contents. On top was a dress in black PVC with white stars on it. When taking it out, we noticed it was thicker than expected: it was lined with fleece on the inside. Its skirt seemed wide, and not that long.

The next item in the box was some sort of panties, which were undoubtedly supposed to be worn under the dress. But they weren't just panties; there were very high-waisted, and even had straps that we assumed went over the shoulders. It closed in the front with a sturdy metal zipper. Taking them out of the box, they were heavier than we expected, and the part around the waist seemed thicker and less flexible, almost like a waist cincher. There even was a panel with lacing at the back. Diana looked doubtful, and wondered if she could not just wear the dress without those panties. But with the short skirt of the dress, and her being high up on the float, everybody would be looking up at her crotch, and she didn't want that either.

We put it aside for the moment, and looked what else was in the box. There was a pair of long gloves, of course also in black PVC, a fairy wand, a pair of shimmering tights, and a pointy hat with a brim. Attached to the hat was a wig with black hair, and also a sort of balaclava that left her face free, but covered the back of the head, the neck and throat, and then widened to rest on the shoulders. After a moment's thought, I concluded to Diana that this way she didn't have to worry about the hat blowing off by a sudden gust of wind - the hat and wig would automatically stay in place. She seemed uncertain again, but just nodded.

There was only one thing left in the box, but it didn't seem part of the costume, since it was white - a folded package of about 20 by 30 cm that was not PVC. Diana took it out of the box and folded it open. Then she uttered a startled yelp, dropped it and jumped backwards, "Yuck, that is a diaper!" Well, it had been thoughtful of my friend to include one, but not so nice of Marie-Anne not to have explained it to Diana. So I told her that she could choose not to wear it, but that she had to realize that she would be on top of a float for several hours, right in the cold and the wind, with no option to relieve herself. And even after the parade she would need a place where she could take the whole costume off. Marie-Anne always wore one, also because it would keep her private area warm and thus lessen the risk of a bladder infection.

"So you have one on under your costume too?"

"I have used one before, but this time I don't really need it. With this costume I can go to the toilet without fully undressing, and it is warm enough. I'll go just before the parade starts, and know that I can hold it long enough until it ends. And I'll be sitting in the cage, where only my upper body is exposed to the elements, while you will be out in the open, going up and down between the cooking pot and the cage I'll be in."

"Well, Marie-Anne is going to owe me big-time, but I guess I have promised her I would do it. I can't really be sure that I would be able to hold my pee long enough, so I guess I'll have to go with the diaper. Where can I change into the costume?"

Internally I sighed with relief. Looking at the costume with Diana, I was realizing that this was a lot to ask of someone who had never done something like this before, and combined with her conservative apparel, I had seriously feared she would back off. After all, that would mean the float we worked on for months would not join the parade – it would make no sense without a witch. Her decision definitely increased my opinion of her; perhaps she was not so dull as she first appeared, after all.

I showed her to the back room in the office, where she had total privacy, and asked if she knew how to put a diaper on herself. Not that I was so experienced, but the first time I used one on a float, I got some pointers that definitely helped me, so I shared them with her.

After a few minutes, she reappeared with the tights, shorts and, judging by the bulge, the diaper. The dress was on as well, but the back zipper was still open. "I can't seem to get it closed; can you see if it is just too small, or if something is blocking the zipper?" she asked. I tried for a moment, and concluded the dress was too tight on her. But the lacing at the back of the shorts was in full view, so I suggested that if she tightened those, it might still fit. She seemed reluctant to let me touch her, so I didn't offer to do it for her. But after a few moments of trying behind her back, she concluded she couldn't really do it by herself, and in a soft voice asked if I would help her.

I tried to do it as business-like as I could, not touching her more than necessary, but in the end I needed to exert quite a bit of force to reduce her waist enough that the zipper would go up further. I could hear from her breathing she had to get used to the restriction, but she didn't complain once. Then I lowered the zipper again, and remarked, "I think you should put on the hat and the gloves first: it looks like they should go underneath the dress."

She disappeared again into the improvised dressing room. That seemed a bit exaggerated to me, since she didn't need to take off the shorts, and I had already seen the bra strap, so it was not like she would be getting naked in front of me. Another clue that she was pretty shy about her body. Well, if that was how she felt, I wasn't going to do anything to make her uncomfortable, and risk her walking out on me at the last minute anyway.

This time it took her longer than I expected, and there was not much time left before we had to leave. When she reappeared she had the hat and gloves on, but the dress wasn't even fully over her shoulders. She explained that the thumbs of the gloves seemed stuck to the rest of the gloves, making it very hard to use her hands well. And since the PVC of the dress was folded inward at the sleeve ends, it stuck to the gloves, making it hard for her to get it on. I took a quick look at the gloves, but the thumbs seemed seriously stuck, and I didn't want to tear things, so I explained we just had to make do, because we had to leave for the parade starting point within 10 minutes. So I just pulled at the dress until the sleeves were in place, pulled the sides together, and zipped her up. The zipper encountered some resistance just below the top, but pulling a bit harder it closed fully, and she was in her costume.

Then I fiddled a bit at her sides, and she asked me what I was doing. I explained that I was pulling the D-rings on the shorts through slits in the dress, so that we could attach her safety line on the float. I could see this wasn't a familiar concept to her, so I elaborated that she was several meters above the ground, on a moving float, where she might be subjected to sudden gusts of wind, wheels hitting the curb, and so on. Because she would stand free, and move on the float between the cage and the cauldron, we had installed a safety line that was connected to a metal wire along the path she would be walking.

Now her costume was done, and I took a brief moment to inspect her. She had put some make-up on too, with dark purple eyeshadow and lipstick. All in all the transformation was stunning, and she looked really great. "You're gorgeous!" I exclaimed.

"Thanks" she replied, but it seems like she wasn't too happy to hear that.

Still I couldn't resist asking, "Then why do you hide it away with your normal clothes?"

"I don't really like the attention."

I could feel there was more to it than that, but realized that I was intruding on something sensitive for her, so I apologize, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't pry."

"That's OK. I appreciate the compliment, it is just a peculiarity from me that I prefer to keep a low profile."

"Yes, I can see that. But now you are in costume, and I'm sure no one will recognize you. So perhaps you can forget about that for the next few hours, and just enjoy the crowds admiring us?"

"You know what, I think you have a point. It will not really be me on the float, but just a role. I will try that."

"One more thing about your costume: could you take the glasses off? The fairy tale is specifically about the witch having poor eyesight, and thus being fooled by Hansel using a stick instead of his finger, so glasses are not really appropriate."

"I guess so. I won't be able to see much in the distance though."

"Perhaps that is even an advantage for you, not seeing individual people looking at you? On the float you probably don't need to see that much, as long as you can find your way between the cage and the cooking pot."

"Hmm, maybe. OK, I'll do without then."

We decided to leave the wand behind; with her limited hand agility, and the need to stir in the pot and feel my 'finger', it would only be in the way.

Then I took her up the float, showed her the cooking pot with the oversized wooden spoon, and the path to the cage, where the papier-mâché Gretel was already waiting for me to join her. There was a stick lying ready for me to stick through the bars, and a fake turkey leg to show that I was being fattened. I explained to her that there would usually be music loud enough that any speaking would not be heard by the public, so everything would be done in mime. Then I attached the safety line to the D-rings on her costume: a forked metal cable clipped to the D-rings with one carabiner on each side of her waist, painted black to draw less attention.

Next I went into the cage, and let Diana close the door. There was an oversized model of a padlock that went through a hasp, keeping the door closed. Of course it was not a working padlock, but it still needed to be removed from the hasp to open the door. Then I realized a construction mistake: the door opened on the side where the Gretel model was, and I could not reach the padlock without risking damage to my 'sister'. So when Diana put the padlock through, and closed it (it was held closed by some strategically placed Velcro), I was really stuck in it until the 'witch' released me, though of course in emergencies I could free myself. Diana had some challenges of her own though: without being able to use her thumbs, it was pretty clumsy, but she managed.

Then I signaled the driver that we were ready to go, and soon we started moving towards the starting point of the parade, and into the pre-assigned position. I could see Diana needed to get used to the movement of the float, and struggled with her footing for a little bit, but soon got used to it.

Being on a float in a parade with the people looking at us with enjoyment and wonder, and cheering, is great fun, but unluckily there is also a lot of waiting involved. It took at least half an hour before

the parade was fully assembled, and all had reached their positions. Diana came over and we chatted to kill the time, and it didn't take long before we felt like we had known each other for much longer than we did; we had a number of shared interests, and seemed to intuitively understand each other.

I felt almost disappointed when the parade finally started to move, and the marching bands made conversation impossible. So we assumed our roles, and I started to pretend to try and get out of the cage, eat the turkey leg, and use the stick when the witch came over to check if her fattening me already had the desired effect. Of course she was disappointed each time, and then returned to her cauldron, which she stirred with the huge wooden spoon. At first she was a bit hesitant, but soon she got into her role, and even started improvise a bit and scare the public. Some of the time we also dropped our roles and just waved to the spectators.

One time I saw Diana stop moving and sort of trying to hide behind the cauldron with a tense look on her face, which after a while relaxed. I recognized the behavior: she hadn't been able to hold her pee any longer and had to use the diaper, which was of course hard enough by itself for someone not used to them, but a lot harder still with hundreds of people watching her. I guessed the need must have been pretty high for her to manage to let go.

Even during the parade there were occasional pauses, when movement stopped for one reason or another, but that was all pretty normal, and after a few hours we reached the end, and the parade broke up. Of course there was still a lot of congestion, and more waiting until we finally reached the hall where we had started. But this time I didn't mind at all, because Diana came over again, and we resumed our chat.

When we were finally back, Diana tried to undo the carabiners on her safety line, but without the use of her thumbs she could not exert enough force. And I could not free myself either. Well, with the parade behind us, I could of course force Gretel out of the way, but the floats were still on display for a couple more days, so I really didn't want to. Luckily I didn't have to, because Diana could still undo the padlock, open the cage door, and then I could remove her safety line.

Once we got down on solid ground again, Diana asked me to help her out of the costume. But the float driver was already calling us to go have a few beers, and I tried to persuade Diana to join us. She still wanted out of the witch outfit, but she didn't have another costume, and she could hardly join the carnival in her own clothes. Reluctantly she looked at her hands in the gloves that disabled her thumbs, her waist being compressed by the high shorts and dress, and her thickly wrapped private area. I could definitely understand that she didn't feel that comfortable and wanted out. But then she would probably just leave, and I didn't want to her to, so I looked at her pleadingly, and asked her to at least have one with us, to celebrate her successful debut on the float. To my surprise she agreed, and we left for our regular pub. She put her arm in mine, and we walked arm in arm, because she felt unsure without her glasses. I was tempted to put my arm around her lovely small and compressed waist, but didn't, because she still seemed shy and uncomfortable with touching.

Again we had a great time, and one beer became two, and then three. Diana had to use both hands to hold her beer, but she never complained. Slightly tipsy she told me I looked cute in my lederhosen, grabbed hold of both shoulder straps, and pulled me towards her for a kiss. But halfway she seemed to realize what she was doing, stopped, and said, "Sorry, I can't do this. Could we please leave now?" She seemed in genuine discomfort, so of course I consented and took her back to the hall.

On the way back she explained to me that she had been raped, a bit more than a year ago now, and that since then she had realized that good looks and a nice body were more of a curse than a blessing, and had decided to make herself as inconspicuous as she could. By now she was doing reasonably well, but it was still hard for her to get physically close to men. Of course I offered my deepest sympathies, and totally understood why she acted this way now. Thinking back on my own actions, I didn't think there had been moments I should have acted differently, which was a relief.

Back in the office she turned her back to me to open the zipper, which of course I did. Or at least, I tried to. But it wouldn't budge. At first I thought some fabric might be caught in it, and I felt along the zipper on the inside if there was some folded fabric, but instead I encountered something hard just below the zipper pull, that stopped it from going down. I couldn't budge it, so I explained what I found to Diana. She tried by herself for a moment, but with the tight dress she could hardly bend her arms enough to reach it, and of course the gloves prevented her from gripping the zipper pull tightly anyway.

So I told her I would call my friend that the costume belonged to. But he was not answering his phone. Not surprising really - of course he would be celebrating carnival too, and would probably not even notice it ringing. So I left him a voice message, urging him to call me back as soon as possible.

Diana read on my face that I hadn't been successful, and so we started to remove the rest of the costume, hoping I would soon be called back. But the top parts of the gloves were inside the tight dress sleeves, and the PVC stuck together, so we didn't get anywhere. With the hat/wig combo it was the same. The bottom part of the hood ran down to her shoulders, and the collar of the dress also had PVC on the inside. When I tried to pull harder we heard a stitch pop, and Diana called 'Stop'. She didn't want to damage the costume. The shorts had the corseted waist and the shoulder straps, which the dress prevented us from getting to as well, and they kept the tights and the diaper in place. So in the end we couldn't remove a single piece of the costume.

What now? I suggested getting a pair of scissors, and cutting her out, but Diana really didn't want to destroy the borrowed costume, and suggested we at least wait for a while if my friend would call back.

Going home was not an option for her now, because she would need help to get the costume off, even after we found out how to get the zipper down. With the hat she probably wouldn't fit in the car, and with the gloves and the beers it wouldn't be safe to drive anyway. When she left Marie-Anne, her friend was going to bed with a fever, and so she didn't want to impose on her. We weren't exactly in the mood for rejoining the festivities either, so I offered her she could come to my home with me to wait for the call, realizing she would probably be too uncomfortable with men to accept. She did hesitate for a moment, but then gratefully accepted.

"That is very kind of you, and it seems the best option for the moment. You've been so gallant today, even before you knew about the rape, that I trust you. And somehow I feel safe in this costume - if we can't get it off, there is no way you will be able to force yourself on me."

That made us both laugh, that those downsides of the costume suddenly became positives, and it took a long while before we could stop. Apparently the stress of all that happened today, combined with the beers, made it hard for us to get a grip. But finally we got ourselves under control again,

and I took her back to my apartment. Of course she brought her regular clothes along, although surprisingly she left her glasses of, and took my arm again. It wasn't a long walk.

Back home I checked my phone again, but nothing yet from my friend, so I sent him a text message as well. The later it got, the more unlikely it seemed that we would still hear from him, but I kept those doubts to myself. I wasn't certain where this was going, but for now Diana was still with me, and that was fine with me, although of course I wished she didn't have the disadvantages of the costume. I turned the heating down a bit, because it would probably be warm for her in her fleece-lined outfit. I was prepared to keep my costume on too, to share the discomfort, but she insisted I changed into something more comfortable.

I got us something to drink and heated some pea soup, since we hadn't really had dinner. Diana seemed increasingly comfortable in her costume, and in using her hands without thumbs. When necessary I had no objection to helping her; actually I enjoyed it so much that I wished she wasn't quite so capable on a few occasions. We spent the rest of the evening talking and watching a bit of TV, but never heard back from my friend. When Diana started yawning, I offered that she could spend the night if she wanted. She could have my double bed and I would take the couch. Her leaving still didn't make any sense, but I doubted she dared to sleep in the same house as a single man. She didn't answer immediately, and so I took a dining chair with me into the bedroom, to see if it could be used to block the door, and when it worked I showed it to her.

She touched my face for a moment and said, "You're so sweet, Erzo. But actually I wasn't too worried about sleeping here - the costume is my armor, so I know nothing is going to happen. I was just wondering how I could sleep in this outfit, especially the hat." Oh yes, the brim might prevent her from putting her head down. We tried to see if we could fold it out of the way, and indeed it was flexible enough to bend one side upward far enough that she could lay down her head. Obviously it wouldn't be ideal for the costume, but still a lot better than cutting it up.

So I gave her a towel and a new toothbrush, and let her use the bathroom first. In the mean time I collected what I needed to sleep on the couch, and then did my own bedtime routine. I checked once more if she had everything she needed, realizing I didn't have to be careful to walk in on her in a state of undress. But she was fine, and so we wished each other good night, and I made myself comfortable on the couch. Well, as comfortable as I could. It was just not long enough to stretch out fully, and of course quite a bit narrower than my bed, but lying on my side it wasn't too bad. For a while I kept thinking of Diana, still feeling the touch of her gloved hand on my face, but it had been a tiring day, and it wasn't long before I fell asleep.

CLANG! Suddenly I woke on the floor. After a few moments I realized where I was, and that I must have rolled off the couch in my sleep. My leg hurt - it must have hit the coffee table on the way down, which probably made most of the noise that woke me.

"What happened? Are you OK?" a sleepy but concerned voice came from my bedroom door opening.

"I must have fallen from the couch in my sleep. But I think I am fine - just must have bumped my leg on the coffee table, which made a lot of noise, but not much damage, I think."

"I'm sorry. Now I feel bad confiscating your bed."

"Nonsense. You already have quite enough to cope with, in a stranger's apartment with a weird costume you can't take off."

She was silent for a few moments, while I installed myself back on the couch. "Please go back to sleep. I'm fine."

"Erzo ..." she started hesitantly. "why don't you come sleep in the bed too?"

I stuck my head above the back rest of the couch and looked at her flabbergasted.

"I mean, not to have sex, obviously. But I have been trying to move past my bad experience, and looking for ways to stretch my comfort zone. You have been so gallant today, and the costume makes me feel safe, so you could really help me take another step."

Then she shook her head, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked. It would not be fair to ask you to lie next to me, and yet refrain from things like cuddling or kissing, which I don't think I am up to yet."

"You know, I'm sure half of my bed is still more comfortable than the couch, and less likely for me to fall out. So what if I just sleep on my half and pretend you are not there? It will be weird to be in bed with such an attractive woman and ignore her, but I'm sure I can do it, if that helps you."

She just smiled and nodded.

So I took my pillow and duvet back into the bedroom, made myself comfortable on one side of the bed, deliberately turned my back on her, and tried not to think of her. Which of course failed miserably, but I was determined to at least not act on my feelings for her. In the end I must have fallen asleep again.

The next time I woke it was already getting light, and I was cuddled up to her, with one arm around her, holding her close. I was seriously startled that I must have done something like that in my sleep, and betraying her trust in me. I quickly pulled loose to resume a safe distance, but my shock must have woken her, and she took my arm and held me in place. "Please stay", she asked.

I was not fully awake yet, and her reaction did not register initially in my confused state and shame, so I started apologizing.

"Shush. Don't apologize. It was me who pulled you against me. When I woke earlier, and noticed you next to me, I realized how lonely I had felt this past year. I suddenly felt such a need for a strong arm around me that I just took your arm and held it close to me. I am the one who should apologize - it was not OK to use you like that without your permission."

"Oh, don't worry about me. In normal circumstances I would definitely have tried to get intimate with you, although of course I would never force myself on anyone."

She turned on her back to look at me, bit her underlip, and asked softly, "Would you put on those lederhosen again? They looked so cute on you, and it feels a bit weird to be the only one in costume."

Of course I consented. I considered for a moment if I should strip before putting them on, but decided that might be going too fast, and so I just put them on over my sweat pants and t-shirt. Then I quickly crawled back into bed. It was obvious we weren't going back to sleep, so I started to tenderly stroke her face, the only part of her body not covered by the outfit. She seemed alright with



that, until I noticed she was weeping. Of course I stopped and asked what was wrong, but she just asked me to hold her. I did, and bit by bit she told me that it were happy tears, more or less. This was the first time since the trauma that she could be held and stroked by a man, and feel relaxed and happy about it. Although of course it also evoked unpleasant memories, but those were not as prominent, and it felt to her like she was getting ready to build positive memories on top of the negative ones.

We continued stroking and holding each other for a while. Not surprisingly, my body wanted more action, but that was not possible of course, and she wouldn't be ready anyway. But the tenderness we shared was quite enjoyable in its own way.

Then our intimacy was rudely interrupted by my mobile ringing. I could not ignore it, in case it was the costume owner, and indeed it was. After I explained the issue with the zipper, he apologized for not mentioning it before, and told me that the zipper initially wouldn't stay up well, which had really been a problem on the last parade it was used on. The wearer offered to fix that afterwards, for the next time it would be used. Apparently she had added something of a blocking feature that made sure the zipper stayed up, which worked like a clothes pin: you needed to press the hard part sticking out to the right of the zipper inside and outside at the same time, and then the blocking part would be moved away from the zipper, and you could lower it.

Relieved that we finally had our solution, I went over to Diana, explained what was told, and indeed I managed to get the zipper down. She let me help her out of the dress, the hat and the gloves, but then thanked me and told me she'd manage from there on. So of course I left her alone.

I took the opportunity to set up some breakfast, and when she emerged from my bedroom, she was in her drab and sensible outfit once more, with the oversized glasses on. But knowing her better, I was easy for me to see the lovely girl underneath. She was really glad to be out of the costume - especially the diaper that she had been really worried about would leak. And it was nice to hold her cutlery normally again for breakfast. But she also was more stand-offish again, and even flinched when I touched her shoulder for a moment.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to. It is just a reflex; I guess without the costume I don't feel protected anymore," she explained.

After breakfast she explained that she really needed to go home; she needed to feed her cat, and had an appointment in the afternoon. Of course I had my own things to do too, but it was disappointing that she was already leaving nonetheless.

"I really would like to see you again," she started sadly, "but it would not be fair to you. As you noticed just now, I still have a long way to go, and it might still take months before I'm ready for sex again. I could never ask that of you."

"Oh Diana, sex is only one part of a relationship, and it feels so right to be with you that I still would like to see you again even if that would never happen. Of course it would be frustrating sometimes, but just talking, being with you, enjoying your company is already so wonderful that I would be willing to forego the sex. But moreover, how are you ever going to get ready for sex again if you don't have someone to work with on your limitations?"

"Oh Erzo, would you? That would be so wonderful!" She came to me and gave me a hug. But I could start her feeling to shake, and after a few moments she had to stop and step away again. "You see,

this is really going to be hard on both of us. Somehow without the costume it feels like I'm all the way back to square one, even with you."

"Well, the costume has to go back, and anyway I don't think it would be a good idea to date someone dressed as a witch all the time, especially not if we go out." After a moment's thought I continued, "But perhaps you could construct something like your own armor? Something that would make you feel safe like the costume did?"

"You mean perhaps something I could lock on, and leave the key in the car, or even at Marie-Anne, so that I can be sure that nothing will happen? Perhaps something that is not so very conspicuous, and I might be able to wear under normal clothes? Hmm, that might be an idea. I'd have to think about what I could do, but it is definitely worth looking into."

"It probably wouldn't be wise to use it all the time though, and get too dependent on it. But it might make it possible for us to be alone, cuddle and such things that you would otherwise not be ready for. Next to that we could also have dates where we will be among people, where you would also feel safe without wearing it. Like having dinner, town walks, perhaps even a museum or exhibit. Then we could practice holding hands, and see if we can build from that."

"That sounds really wonderful. I'm so glad Marie-Anne got us to meet. Oh, that is horrible of me, glad for her to be ill. But you know what I mean."

So we swapped mobile numbers, she gave me a quick kiss on the cheek, and then was out the door, promising I would hear from her very soon. I was left behind with my head in the clouds, causing the butterflies there to take refuge in my stomach. I didn't get much done that day, wondering when I'd hear from her again, and what sort of 'armor' she'd come up with.