Extract from *Het Jongensuur* by Andreas Burnier, pp-50-64, translated by Jane Hedley-Prôle

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WALLED CITY 1942

In the mornings, the walls and towers shimmer in the light. It gets hot very early.

After breakfasting alone at the table laid by Aunt Emma the previous evening, I set off for a walk. Theo's already gone out. Aunt Emma's hard at work at the bottom of the garden. Their parents, Uncle Hein and Aunt Saan, are tired. They sleep really late – till eleven o'clock. Aunt An and Uncle Wiebe aren't coming back till tomorrow. Uncle Hartog's gone on a journey, they say.

At the end of the street I turn left, heading for the old city. I'm thrilled at how much freedom I get here. Nobody keeps an eye on me. Uncle Hein and Aunt Saan are too old. Their children, along with all their husbands, wives, friends and acquaintances, are a confusing, ever-changing group of people, none of whom is especially interested in me. The only one who feels a bit responsible for me is Aunt Emma. She sees to it that I have a bath every Saturday. But even she doesn't tell me to go to bed at night, or what I should do during the day. I'm eleven years old but they treat me like a grownup living in lodgings. I'm supposed to tidy my room and keep it reasonably clean. For the rest I can do what I want. I'm just not allowed to go to school.

In the old part of the city, there are still some buildings that date from the Middle Ages. Well, bits of buildings at least: some low walls and two round towers. There's a stretch of wall that's so wide you can walk along it. The left tower is where a boy lives. He's the son of the king. His father has banished him to the tower because of a quarrel. The son wanted to fight the enemy that's threatening the kingdom. The king says: 'No, we must wait.'

The son doesn't want to wait. He's young and rash. He hits his father. The father imprisons his unruly son in the tower, though it hurts him to do so.

'Sancho, you'll stay here on bread and water until you repent. Then maybe I'll pardon you,' the king says.

Sancho's sad at being locked in the tower, but he's still angry that his father won't let him fight the enemy.

'I want to escape so I can beat the enemy, and then my father will be amazed and grateful, and the kingdom will be mine.'

Last week I promised Sancho I'd help him escape. Every morning I take something from the breakfast table. A crumb of cheese, a crust of bread, a sugar cube. I bury it near the tower, so that Sancho will have something to eat once he's free.

I also carve secret messages with my penknife on the tree trunks along the road leading landwards from the towers. And I chalk signs for him on the pavements and walls.

[...]

Some evenings the house is full of people and it feels cosy. All the family are there. Theo and Aunt Emma play guitar and everyone sings along. Socialist songs.

Before Hitler banned it, they were all members of the SDAP, the Social Democratic Workers Party. It was a good party that wanted poor workers to be better off, and the children of poor parents to be able to go to university if they were clever.

I'd never heard of it, but Uncle Hein explained it to me very well.

That just shows you what a bad man Hitler is. If you ban a party that wants poor people to have more money and nicer jobs, and workers' children to be able to go to university too – if you're against that, you must be absolutely crazy. Sometimes I'd like to go and see Hitler and just speak to him in a friendly way and explain it all to him. Then surely he'd understand, and perhaps he'd stop murdering Jews if he saw that they were just ordinary people. Then the war would be over and I'd become famous.

Whenever I think this I also feel disgust, as if it's a dirty thought. I don't know why.

The socialist singsongs are nice. The group all sings together at the tops of their voices, and if it gets late everyone sleeps over. Straw is spread out on the bedroom floor and sleeping bags are laid on top of it, and we all lie there, men and women together, sometimes as many as eight of us.

Everything's different here. I'd like to play a guitar like Theo's, decorated with ribbons. But I don't have anything here. No school, no books, no toys, no musical instrument, no friends. Only Sancho, and he's not real, of course.

[…]

One evening, as we're all in the front room singing songs to the guitar, there's a sudden ring at the doorbell.

'Simone,' Uncle Hein says.

I run to the back room where it's dark. The front room's brightly lit. I can see the people in the front room, but they can't see me. If you look from the light to the dark, the sliding glass doors are like mirrors.

A man in a leather coat comes in. I try not to make a sound: not to cough, not to sneeze, like I've been told.

'Hello Toon. Come in, have a seat. Would you like a cup of tea?'

Aunt Saan sounds pleased to see him, but that doesn't mean the man is good. He might be a member of the NSB[1] who they're just being extra nice too, to be on the safe side.

'Go on then. Just a quick one, because I haven't got much time.'

The man drinks the tea Aunt Emma's poured out for him. I see that Theo's left the room too. He's probably lying low in the cellar.

I try to see from the man's face whether he's good or bad. He has red cheeks, a big nose, thin sandy hair, blue eyes and a big groove in his chin. It's hard to say.

'I've come here to warn you,' the man says. 'It's like this. Look, I don't want to cause any unpleasantness, seeing as how we've known each other so long. A little bird told me you're hiding a Jewish kid here. So it's my duty to report that. But you've always been decent to me.

[1] *Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging in Nederland.* A Dutch fascist party that actively collaborated with the German occupying forces.

You've always been good neighbours. I don't want to get you into trouble after all these years.

What I'm saying, Hein, is just make sure the Jewish kid goes this evening. So when I report it tomorrow morning and they come and check, it'll all be hunky dory. It's not that I've got anything personal against the kid, you know. I really don't want you and her to get arrested or anything. But if I know where Jews are hiding it's Party rules that I report it. I swore that to our leader. So as long as you get rid of her pronto you won't have any trouble from me.'

Uncle Hein has gone deathly white. I get the impression he's furious, but he replies in a tight, icy calm voice: 'All right, Toon. Terrifically kind of you to warn us. We'll do as you say. Thanks for stopping by.'

He goes to the door, so that the man Toon has to get up and follow him. As soon as he's gone everyone starts talking at once. They forget to call me back and so I stay where I am, not daring to go in.

Uncle Hein comes back into the front room.

'Before he left, the dirty little rat said he could tell Hartog was Jewish too. You're going to have to leave as well, Hartog. Theo too, otherwise they'll take him for the *Arbeitseinsatz*.[2] That damned swine! Come the liberation I'll personally wring his neck.'

'Don't get so het up, Hein,' Aunt Saan says. 'You know it's bad for you. It was nice of him to warn us, at least.'

'He's not the worst of his kind, but his kind's no good,' Aunt Emma says.

At last, Aunt Saan comes to get me. It's already eleven in the evening. Theo will go into hiding at Els' house. Uncle Hartog will leave for Amsterdam. Uncle Wiebe will take me on the bike to his house, in a neighbouring town. It's about a three-hour cycle ride. The curfew's already started, and they've only got one bike, so Aunt An can't come with us: she'll come tomorrow morning, by train.

[2] Forced labour in Germany

Uncle Wiebe's house looks a bit more like what I was used to at home. There are books, regular furniture, beds in separate rooms rather than a floor covered with straw and sleeping bags.

We've cycled for hours in the night, in the cold, sometimes getting off and hiding behind trees by the side of the road if we thought we'd heard something.

I'm stiff and cold, and it's already well into the night. Uncle Wiebe tells me to get washed and put on one of Aunt An's dressing gowns and come to the kitchen. He's going to make us hot milk.

I scrub my knees, which used to get grimy every day when I buried food for Sancho. I suppose I won't get dirty knees anymore now. Sancho will have to live on the supplies that I hid for him. And he'll have to escape from the tower by himself.

Suddenly I remember that I've left the green exercise book in which I'd written the story about Sancho under my mattress. It was a safe hiding place during the day. In the evenings I used to write down what we'd done that day. Will they find the exercise book now? I console myself with the thought that as a household they weren't big on cleaning, and Aunt Emma certainly wasn't the type to turn mattresses. By the time they looked under the mattress the war might well be over.

'I teach at a school here,' Uncle Wiebe says, when I come down to the kitchen to drink milk with him. 'Perhaps I can help you with your lessons. I'd have you join my class, but I'm afraid it's too dangerous – some of my pupils come from NSB families and you never know what they tell their parents. You saw what happened this evening. We were lucky it ended well.'

'Mightn't they come tomorrow and take away Uncle Hein?'

'I don't think so. He's so old. Of course, Theo will have to go into hiding now that he's eighteen and due for the *Arbeitseinsatz*. No, I think it'll all be ok.'

'I'm so scared, Uncle Wiebe,' I say.

It's not quite true. I'm sure the Germans won't find me here – not tonight, at any rate. But I've lost Sancho, the walls, the towers, my exercise book under the mattress. At Uncle Hein

and Aunt Saan's place I felt very alone among all the grownups. But here in this cold, empty house, it's even lonelier.

As if he can read my thoughts, Uncle Wiebe says: 'You know what, come and sleep in my room tonight, in Aunt An's bed. Then you won't be on your own, will you?'

Lying next to Uncle Wiebe in the dark in the twin beds, I hear how, after a while, he starts moving. I know what he's doing. Once, in Theo's bookcase, I found a little book, and one of the things it said was that big boys often do mansturbation on themselves, and that it doesn't make you ill and that it's not so bad. I'm comforted to think that Uncle Wiebe is doing his mansturbation while I'm here, as if he already knows me really well and trusts me like a pal.

Met opmerkingen [J1]: Translator's note:
The Dutch word for masturbation is deliberately spelt wrong to reflect the fact that the 11 year old narrator only saw the word on that one occasion and doesn't remember it correctly

When he heaves a deep sigh, I give in to sleep.

Aunt An and Uncle Wiebe are socialists too. But they're a generation younger, about thirty, I think, and you can really tell. The way they live isn't so different to my parents ('bourgeois capitalists', I've been told). They just give me a bit more freedom.

I'm allowed to read anything I find in their house: novels by Zola in Dutch translation, books on psychology, on stuff to do with sex, on astronomy, on politics.

And I'm allowed to roam alone around the walls of the old fishing harbour of this city. The air there smells of rope and tar and old skippers.

Every morning I ask Aunt An permission to go for a walk in the harbour area. It's readily granted: housewives prefer things to children, order to chatter, getting stuff done to a child underfoot.

The gates and walls around the harbour provide material for new daydreams, but these gates fail to become peopled. I stay outside, gazing at them, while I think up stories about boys who run away to sea, about distant lands and exciting discoveries. The white ramparts contrast nicely with the blue sky.

As I walk my daily rounds at speed, wool-gathering and muttering aloud, I'm haunted by something I've read: a Dutch translation of *The Mine* by Zola. It's repeatedly been shown that children don't actually read what's on the page. Instead, whatever book they happen to come

across has the effect of unlocking their own ideas and feelings. I never dared re-read *The Mine* in later years, but this is how I remember it:

Night. It's always night. People feel their way through a world of dust, grey pipes, rusty scrap metal and black ore as if they were blind. Lift shafts take them down, down into the darkness. Then they're carried along in little carts, through shafts so narrow and low you almost suffocate. The only light is at the coalface: a ruddy yellowish glow in which people have to hack fresh ore from the walls with a pickaxe. The ore is loaded onto the carts and carried upwards, into the night.

When the miners come up to the surface they stand there dazed in the darkness: their eyes, nose and ears full of dust, their lined faces covered in dirt. Once home, they throw themselves exhaustedly on their beds, which are just heaps of rags.

Sleep is followed by darkness and more toil.

Among them there's one lone woman. She works like a man, looks like a man. She's the only one of these debased beings who can think a bit, who can remember the light. One day she's creeping through the mine shaft and a man comes up behind her and copulates with her like a dog.

The Mine is about the descent and crucifixion of a female god.

It was during one of these walks in ever more hurried rounds: along the quayside, through the gate, along the other quayside, back round the gate, and then past the fishing boats again, past the water on which sunlight glittered in sparks, faster and faster, that it happened.

I wake up on the sofa in the sitting room. Surprised not to find myself in the blue and white of the harbour, not to smell tar but urine. Pain everywhere. Sore head.

Unlce Wiebe's standing next to me

'You fell, Simone.'

I don't understand.

‘You were found on the street, by the harbour. A skipper who knew you brought you home. Are you in pain?’

I’m nursed by Aunt An, and Uncle Wiebe explains that it’s too dangerous for me to go out alone anymore. I might fall again, and while this time it had been a skipper who’d found me, it could just as easily have been the police.

For now, I have to rest on the sofa for six weeks or so because I might have a slight concussion. That’s what the doctor said. He can be trusted, he’s a friend of theirs from a different town. He’s going to come and see me again, but first I need to rest for a good long while.

For days I only see the pale brown furniture against the pale grey wallpaper instead of the harbour, the white ramparts, the blue sky, the sun on the water, the black boats, the brown skippers. The blue woollen blanket I’m lying under is nice to look at, but for the rest everything’s pale brown and pale grey. For the time being I’m not allowed to read.

After a week of this I manage to get Aunt An to put the sofa at an angle so I can look out of the window and see a thin strip of the ramparts near the harbour. Now I can make up stories again, I think, about boys who run away to sea. But the stories are increasingly being crowded out by reality.

It feels strange, not having learnt anything for months now. Back when I lived with my parents – I sometimes get a letter from them, but they haven’t yet been told that I’m ill, so as not to upset them – I used to work hard at school and was keen to learn. Now I forget more and more. I’m stuck in the book of sums that Uncle Wiebe brought home for me, and he doesn’t help me like he said he would. At this rate I’ll soon have forgotten everything I’ve learnt. I’ll have to become an errand boy, then at least I’ll earn some money.

Now I’m a bit better I’m allowed to play on the sofa, but not yet read. At my request, Aunt An buys me cardboard with my pocket money. I use a thick sheet as the base. In it I make slits, and wedge thinner cardboard shapes and figures upright in them: houses and people, a city.

I’m not allowed to write to my parents very often, because of the risk, and their peace of mind. But I can send them the cardboard city as a present for their wedding anniversary next

month. It'll be a festive city, full of brightly coloured houses and people. Around it I make a wall, a strong wall with towers.

On the last day, when Aunt An says she'll take the parcel to the post office that afternoon, I add another figure: a boy. He's standing outside the walls and is beating against them with his head and hands. On the other side, invisible to him, is a small gate.

[…]

I'm still spending a lot of time on the sofa when one afternoon a visitor arrives: a girl of about ten.

'Someone's come to see you, Simone,' Aunt An says.

The girl's called Goetheer. Gerrie Goetheer. She stinks of the slum she comes from, but she's docile and friendly. They must have told her I'm still ill, because she agrees with everything I say. I suggest games and dictate the rules, and decide when to stop and do something else. It's all fine with Gerrie Goetheer. After a couple of hours, I'm tired of games and ask if I can tell her stories.

Yes, she'd really like that.

Gerrie comes and sits close to me, perches on the edge of the sickbed, her peculiar stench wrapping itself round me like great wings. I tell her about boys who run away to sea, and about adventures on remote treasure islands. Then it's six o'clock and she has to go home. But from now on she'll come every afternoon, if she doesn't have to help her mother.

With Gerrie Goetheer as a sounding board I made a rapid recovery. The fall and the long convalescence were soon forgotten, and we played outside together. I wasn't allowed to go out on my own anymore, though the reason why was already getting hazy.

I showed Gerrie my special places at the harbour: the walls, the gate, the quayside, the cables and the bollards, the fishing boats. She took me outside the city, to an abandoned rubbish dump she knew. It was a great place to hunt for treasure. To get in, you only had to jump over a ditch and squeeze through a hole in a ramshackle fence. Some children had found watches, money, cameras and other valuables just lying among the rubbish, Gerrie told me. We never found anything except dirty, broken objects whose value we hyped up to each other.

When we got tired of hunting, Gerrie would squat down on the ground among the rubbish and I was allowed to grope her. I found this remarkably pleasant. We usually played that I was her master, and she the servant suspected of theft. After I'd searched her thoroughly, Gerrie sometimes wanted me to hit her. Once or twice I did, but it held no charm for me. What I found so thrilling were the body searches, which always started out shyly but soon became bolder. After a while we didn't go to the harbour anymore, but made straight for the dump. And instead of wasting a lot of time looking for gold rings and fountain pens, I'd ask Gerrie to lie down right away, to which she had no objection at all.

Aunt An and Uncle Wiebe were delighted by my friendship with Gerrie. As high-minded socialists they couldn't object to her slum origins, and the fact that I spent much less time playing alone, reading or wandering around in a dream satisfied their modern views on education.

When Gerrie suddenly stopped coming, I was distraught. Aunt An inquired on my behalf as to the reason: did she perhaps have to help her sick mother? No, that wasn't the case. After school was over and she'd done a few household chores, Gerrie was still leaving her cramped little home every afternoon to play outside. So where was she? Why had she suddenly stopped coming to fetch me?