

Jeannette K. Ringold – translator

Suggested title: **The Blue Bowl**

Marga Minco: **Nagelaten dagen**

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There was no point in trying to track down the Stelerius family. They must have left ages ago or no longer be alive. Too much time had gone by.

Even if I managed to locate a member of the family, which seemed doubtful, I could hardly contact them, not after all these years.

But I'd promised Eva. She wanted me to go and see them. She assumed that they were still there, still living on the same square, in the same house.

I hadn't been in that neighborhood for years. I had no reason to go there anymore. One time, out of curiosity and also because Eva kept insisting, I opened the phone book to the S. Apparently they were still living there. At the old address. Yet it took months for me to get around to calling the number. I kept putting it off. Sometimes I was overcome by embarrassment; at other times I was in the grip of lethargy. What could I say to them? There were also weeks that I didn't give it a thought. Until the date that I was to go to Los Angeles was rapidly approaching.

I dialed the number. In another half hour I would have been too late. I call Eva the same evening. Both of us are excited.

It all started with the letter from Miriam Weissbach from Jerusalem. I didn't know her and was put off at first by the three long, closely written pages in an almost illegible handwriting. I'd had plenty of experience with such epistles. They usually involved projects on which I was supposed to give an opinion, or else the letter writers believed they were doing me a favor by offering me the condensed contents of a fascinating life as though I were at a loss for inspiration. I glanced through it, until my eye was caught by my sister's name.

"Sit down and make yourself comfortable," wrote Miriam Weissbach. "I've discovered something that will interest you."

I sat down in the wicker chair near the garden doors. It was a rainy day toward the end of September, a dark morning that seems to presage an early autumn. At the back of the garden the gloomy branches of the birch tree, weighed down with rain, were whipping back and forth. Their

two white trunks, which made me think of the forelegs of a giraffe, could not keep the branches under control.

I continued to gaze outside for a while after I'd finished the letter. The rain had stopped suddenly. Blackbirds were frantically pecking at the grass, digging up worms; titmice were hiding in the shrubbery as if they were playing prisoner's base, only to fly off restlessly a moment later.

I once wrote a story about my sister. I dreamed of her regularly during that period. I'm back in the city of my youth; I wander around looking for her. I know she's come back, but I can't get to her. I have the impression she's avoiding me. Why is she avoiding me? I don't understand it at all and am seized by an intense sadness.

When we were still allowed to board a train like everyone else, I went to visit my sister in Amsterdam. She had recently moved into an apartment on Wedemer Square with Hans and his mother. I hadn't been there yet. If I'd put it off any longer, it would have been too late, because the travel ban was issued a few weeks later.

Mrs. Ruppin, who walked with a slight limp, an infirmity that oddly enough gave her an air of distinction, was a slender, gray-haired woman with a stern but dignified face. Her German accent, unlike that of most of her compatriots, didn't sound harsh. My sister briefly showed me into her room.

Mrs. Ruppin was sitting at a table on a high-backed chair in a dark back room, writing letters. While I greeted her and remained standing at the left side of her chair, just at the spot where dim light fell through windows covered with pleated lace curtains, I must have automatically looked around or at least have noticed a few things.

And yet, later all I could remember seeing was a single portrait in a silver frame and a few porcelain knick-knacks, no matter how hard I've tried to transport myself back to that time, back in the dimly lit room where I must have spent no more than ten minutes.

My sister had a narrow side room, with just enough space for a day bed, a small table, and a low chair. We sat down on the bed.

It's April 1942 and the last time I'm alone with her. She must have talked about Palestine; in all likelihood I asked her about it. She and Hans are planning to immigrate there as soon as the war is over. I can't imagine her wanting to be a pioneer and work on a farm. No

doubt I urged her to leave Wedemer Square, to go somewhere safer. But she says there's no need. She and Hans are on a list of exemptions. She says this softly, almost in a whisper, but with a confident look in her eyes. Nothing can happen to them. For the rest she says no more about it.

I refuse to accept this and continue to press her. "Can't we go somewhere together?" I ask. Just like we used to do everything together when we were young. She's the oldest and my mother orders her to keep an eye on me because I'm a small, timid child. She takes me to the kindergarten on Kasteel Square, shows me to my desk, sees to it that the other children won't cover me with sand in the sandbox or take anything away from me. At elementary school she protects me when kids threaten us and call us "dirty kikes," lashing out angrily with her schoolbag and landing hard blows.

I think of the summer vacations we spend by the sea, roaming through the dunes in the evening with boys who flock around her and would like nothing better than to leave me behind in the dark. But she drags me across the sandy paths and doesn't let go.

Now I feel as if I need to protect her. I'll manage to find a place where we can hide, the way we used to do when we played hide-and-seek, sneaking into a closet and huddling together, quiet as mice, among my mother's dresses, which smelled faintly of perfume, so that nobody would find us.

Later, when I wind up in a narrow, jam-packed space where I barely have enough room to turn around, I realize that she could easily have moved in with me. After all, wasn't she already used to a tiny room?

I say to her, "They won't find us." I don't take Hans into account. Do I ignore him deliberately? Am I jealous? Afraid that my sister cares for Hans more than she does for me? Do I imagine that he's taking her away from me?

I threw my arm around her in the realization that our roles had been reversed.

I left my sister and bleached my hair.

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So far no one had come to open the door. It dawned on me, while I stared at the faded curtain behind the glass panel and tried to catch my breath after having run up the tall staircase in the entryway as if I were being chased, that what I was doing was wrong. What was I getting into? It would be better to turn around this instant.

“You can come over now!” the voice on the phone had exclaimed. “I’ll be here for another half hour.”

Without thinking I threw on my coat and raced over to Amsterdam South, as if responding to an emergency. For the second time in a short while I circled the small public garden on Wedemer Square.

There was still time to turn back. No one had opened the door. She must have changed her mind. Why should she let a stranger into her house? Let someone she’s never met look around her place, perhaps even a potential burglar?

You can come over. Had she simply taken my word for it? Didn’t she think it was strange that someone had phoned about something that had happened long ago and that she might not want to be reminded of? Hadn’t she found it alarming?

I couldn’t hear it in her voice. It’s in connection with my sister, who used to live next door to you. In the same building. On the same landing. At the top of the same stone staircase, which now seems to have more steps and to be even taller. It’s in connection with the items that were temporarily left with you by neighbors who thought they’d come back someday.

Come on over. It had sounded natural. As if she’d expected me.

“Call on them and take a good look around,” Eva had written when she’d brought up the name Stelerius in one of her first letters:

“... And now I’d like your opinion. You need to know that the Stelerius family lives next door to what used to be my mother’s apartment, at the same entrance on Wedemer Square. Before my mother was deported by the Nazis, she placed her most valuable things in safekeeping with them. I’m sure you’re familiar with the expression ‘safekeepers’...”

I wrote back that I had my doubts, but she ignored my objections or pretended not to have noticed them, and to encourage me she sent a card by return mail, written in large, heavily underlined letters: “Of course they’re still there!”

Just as she herself was still there. Just as I had turned up for her. There was no possible doubt: I would find them. At the same address. She described various objects that I should look for, including an antique blue Japanese bowl with a lid, the family treasure. She’d been very attached to this bowl and really wanted it back. “Be sure not to leave without that bowl,” she wrote. As if, assuming I’d even been able to find the Stelerius family, something I couldn’t imagine, I could just waltz in and tuck the bowl in my handbag. I’ll take this one.

For months I’d been dragging my feet. I had no illusions about managing to track down a descendant of the Stelerius family, and certainly not one on Wedemer Square. And even if I did, what then? I explained to Eva how things had gone in the Netherlands in those days. She must have known that after the war those who’d been all too willing to take care of your belongings were almost always loath to part with them years later when the owners showed up at the door, having unexpectedly survived. Hadn’t she experienced that herself?

“Do come in.” A slender woman with a light-brown complexion and narrow, somewhat slanted eyes stood in the doorway. Around her head she wore a tightly wound green scarf. She held out her hand: “Attie Stelerius. Don’t mind the mess. I’m clearing things out.”

The hall floor was covered with boxes and plastic bags; shoes had been thrown in a heap in front of an open hall closet as though someone had been trying hurriedly to find a matching pair.

“I’m emptying the closet, as you can see. There’s a trunk in the back that I want to get out, but it won’t be easy. It looks heavy, doesn’t it?”

“Perhaps I can help?” I stepped over a couple of boxes and peered into the closet. It was deep and I saw several fur coats hanging in the back.

“What do you think, should the fur coats come out first?” She threw me a quizzical look, as if my purpose in being there was to provide a decisive answer.

“We may not have to.” I took off my coat and hung it on the coat rack, right underneath a wooden deer head.

Attie Stelerius pushed away the stack of boxes and shoved the pile of shoes to the side. We crawled into the cupboard under the coats. Their fur ruffled my hair. The strong smell of camphor nearly took my breath away. It was dark in the back. I groped for the trunk, grabbed hold of a handle, and pulled.

“Wait a minute,” her smothered voice called out from behind a fur coat. She threw herself across the trunk, as if to protect it. Had she changed her mind? Did she think it was better to leave it where it was, or had I been too assertive?

Perhaps it contained valuables. Objects belonging to Mrs. Ruppin, Eva’s mother, and stored for fifty years. That’s why she’d hastened to clear out the closet after I’d phoned. She wanted to see what was in the trunk, because she no longer remembered.

“It’ll be easier this way.” With both hands Attie Stelerius pushed herself off against the back wall. I followed her example. The two of us lay face down in the back of the closet, halfway across the trunk with our legs outstretched, and pushed ourselves away from the wall with all our might. The trunk moved suddenly, causing me to slide off it with a jolt. I crawled backward on my knees. After more pushing and pulling, in the course of which I skinned my elbow painfully on the side wall and almost got my hand caught beneath the trunk, we managed to haul the monster across the threshold and into the hall.

It was a green iron trunk with brass fittings, brass hinges and locks that showed rust spots here and there, the kind of chest that passengers bound for the Dutch East Indies used to take on board.

“I don’t think it’s locked.” She stared at it pensively, then raised the lid an inch and stopped, as if the hinges wouldn’t budge anymore. She seemed to hesitate. Perhaps she didn’t want me to see the contents. I stepped back discreetly. She let the lid fall back into place, put her feet together, took hold of the brass locks, and resolutely lifted the lid. It creaked. The lid was lined with gray-and-white striped paper that reminded me of the wallpaper in an old-fashioned office. Once again I was overwhelmed by the smell of camphor.

“Look at this!” Attie Stelerius exclaimed, surprised. “What have we got here!” She bent over the trunk, reached into it, pulled out a dull gray dress and immediately let it fall back into the trunk. “It’s full of old clothes.” Disappointed, she began rummaging around and fished out a fur hat. “My sister-in-law saved all her fur hats.”

“Your sister-in-law?”

“She’s in a nursing home, has been for a long time. You’re lucky that I happened to be here today.”

“So you don’t live here?”

“Me? In this apartment? Of course not. I live somewhere else. I only came here to clear out a few things.” She used her sleeve to smooth down the brim of the fur hat.

“And Mr. Stelerius?”

“He died about ten years ago.” She smiled. “I never wear fur hats. Do you?”

“No. Me neither.”

“I almost forgot why you came.” She walked over to the door of the living room and flung it open. “Look around. See if you can find anything belonging to you. Take your time.” She left me alone.

The room seemed small because the furniture was arranged so close together. Heavy dark plush armchairs, plant-stands, a sideboard with glass doors, a cupboard filled with porcelain and silver objects. I hesitated in the doorway.

I suddenly had a sinking feeling. I had been through this before, had found myself in the same situation and in the same kind of room, looking at objects that had once been in my parents’ home. Objects that had lost their familiar glow in those strange surroundings. I’d had to make an effort to block out everything around them in order to look at them without suspicion. Everything seemed to repeat itself. If you waited long enough, the same situations would come and go with a certain regularity, like the tides.

I walked over to the window and pushed aside the lace curtain. Out on the grass, some children were running around the bronze sculptures, with a spotted dog barking and chasing after them. Across the street a window opened on the third floor and a figure leaned over the windowsill; I couldn’t tell whether it was a woman or a girl. I let the curtain fall back into place and turned around.

That evening when I phoned Eva to report on my visit to the house on Wedemer Square and mentioned the few objects that might have belonged to her mother, she exclaimed, "Make a list!"

I had already done my best to make quick sketches in my pocket calendar of a few items from the sideboard that I'd set out on the coffee table. Like an appraiser charged with doing an evaluation, I examined silver hallmarks, ran my hands over small copper and wooden boxes, lifted the lids of ceramic bowls, and picked up vases. Once I'd started, I became reckless, turning the keys in the buffet doors, moving objects aside so that I could look behind them, rummaging through drawers as if I were searching for something. But for what? None of this meant anything to me. I looked around undecided, like a child in a toy store who is unsure of what it wants. After I'd put everything back in the sideboard, I couldn't resist taking a peek inside the china cabinet. Perhaps I was hoping to find ordinary things for daily use, objects which had no special meaning for me.

The shelf directly in front of me contained several sets of dishes, stacks of dinner plates and soup plates of various kinds, dinnerware for a large family that set an elaborate table every day. On the shelf above it I saw decanters arrayed like a display in a shop window, gracefully shaped bottles of finely polished glass with round and conical stoppers. The decanters seemed to have caught the faint light from the room in their bulbous crystal shapes when I'd opened the cabinet door, making the room in back of me appear to go dark and giving me the impression that someone was standing behind me. I hurriedly shut the door of the cabinet and turned the key. I'd seen enough and put an end to my search.