

**Excerpt from *Less Than White* by Astrid Roemer, trans. David McKay
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pp. 97–99 and 103–109

[In this first section (pp. 97–99), the teenage girl Imker has recently moved in with her sick grandmother Bee to care for her.]

Holding a rake, she stood in the doorway. Inside, Grandma sat at the kitchen table sipping something hot. She inhaled the sweet smell of the cigar. If smoking a cigar was her grandmother's greatest pleasure, then it was all right with her. The whole family knew that Grandmother Bee had been married off. Since she'd never had the opportunity to choose her own life partner, her husband Anton had become the man of her dreams.

At birthday parties, when the children and grandchildren gathered in the living room, the story was told and retold of the Frenchman who married the Englishman's daughter and later married off their own daughter, who had expected to become a nun, to a boy from a slave plantation somewhere along a river branch. But then Grandfather would mumble, "No white man was responsible for us choosing each other, right, Bee?" The territory was mapped out at least once a year and the family tree uprooted for inspection. And once again the adults would conclude that in any case they were all less than white. And they'd drink to that. There was something sad about it.

Bee's father Julien had sent letters and even food and supplies to his children by ship, but the voyage from Paris to Paramaribo was difficult, and everything arrived too late. That included the last letter from France, a death certificate, and a notification that Julien's son Napo had picked up all his worldly goods: two sea chests and their contents.

She looked at her grandmother. Grandma looked back at her. Imker wanted a bath. Clean clothes.

"I wonder where my daughter Ethel is." Grandmother's voice.

"Do you think of her often?"

No reply. She went up to the bathroom. So many questions in life are never answered. She called out to Grandmother that she was going to take a shower. She let the jets of water soak her through and through, like Grandma Bee's experiences, which made her think.

When the newborn Ethel had been held up for Grandmother's appraisal, she caused something close to a panic: the infant was almost jet-black and had hair without the least hint of a curl, just a couple

of shades from yellow. The midwife who had overseen all the deliveries called the baby “a pearl,” carried up from very deep in the network of bloodlines that connected such a variety of people. They were in the small military hospital. Anton had shown up in his army uniform to register the birth in Nieuw Nickerie. Ethel Vanta, he said with pride: the midwife’s first name and his own surname, which meant “black” on the plantation his mother came from.

He must have been exceptionally happy with the birth of this third child of his, because he treated everyone in the canteen at the barracks to more than one round. Less delighted were his wife’s relatives who came to see the baby. They stooped for a very close look at the child and shook their heads in astonishment. The older children, Winston and Louise, had turned out not too brown, but this time the balance had swung to an undesirable extreme. Grandmother was just as taken aback by what she had carried for nine months, and she blamed herself, maybe for eating too much of one thing or another: sugarcane, she was crazy about that, and especially liked to chew on the dark purple kind. But she held her daughter in her arms with loving care and took pleasure in nursing her at her ginger-colored breasts. And Ethel was such a sweet girl.

It did Anton good to see his wife pamper the newborn. He saw the baby as a reflection of the history and ultimate origin of his ancestors. He had tried to explain to his Anglophone brothers-in-law and to cousins of all sorts that Ethel was his masterpiece: “You’re all less than white, but all the colors in white light come together in her—yes, our Ethel is whole!” But who could make any sense of that explanation? The family remained disapproving: “Yes, Anton, little Ethel’s very black indeed!”

It was not an easy year in their household, but fourteen months later, when Laura came into the world in the proper shades, the rifts in the family were repaired, even though Anton kept stubbornly repeating that Laura’s arrival had been a terrible tragedy and that his wife had nearly died in childbirth. After too many glasses of gin and bitters, he sometimes swore to high heaven that after Laura no other child would ever be born in his house! His buddies in the barracks laughed in his face. They knew Private Vanta through and through, and he didn’t have it in him to go to the whores or cheat on his lovely wife. They predicted that one fine day he would once again see his wife give birth, and once again run over with self-pity.

And they were right. Years after Laura, another child was conceived, not anywhere near Grandmother’s relatives or his buddies in the Dutch colonial forces, but in Paramaribo, in the beautiful home of a Jewish family who had fled Hitler.

With a towel, she dried herself off and away from that chilly past. Fragrant jasmine oil on her skin. And Imker, washed, dressed, and fragrant, reported to her grandmother.

[Now we jump ahead a few pages to two sections (pp. 103–109) about Bee’s daughter Louise and her two youngest children, Babs and Audi. After that, the fourth and final section returns to Grandmother Bee and Imker.]

Mother Louise believed a man could have everything a woman wants in a husband but still be unattractive as a partner for life. Bohr had had an affair, and a child, with each of her four closest friends. He would never marry and made no secret of that; the thought of living with a woman scared him. Yet during his residency in New York, he had married an Afro-American lady who came to Suriname with him but decided she wasn’t willing to live there for any price or any man. He had soon divorced her and moved back in with his parents.

She ran her fingers through Audi’s hair in search of knots. Bohr had been born somewhere in Europe, Italy, maybe Poland—no one knew exactly, he always dodged the question—and fled to Brazil with his parents, ending up in Paramaribo, in a luxury riverside home next to the hotel run by Babs’s paternal grandparents, and grew up with Babs’s father like brothers. Louise and Laura knew him from the medical school. Always chasing girls and always joking about his addiction to Creole women,* because the housekeeper attached to his parents’ home was the sweetest human being he had ever known; in fact, he dedicated his medical diploma to her.

Lost in thought as her fingers went on burrowing through Audi’s hair, her face tightened, and her moist lips bulged and quivered. He had pursued her for years, unsuccessfully. He had come to the housewarming party in the “big yellow house” where she lived with Babs’s father, and one day, in an unguarded moment, he had cornered her in her own bedroom and screwed her. My God, how she’d puked the next morning and cried. A pregnancy that blew up her little dream of domestic bliss from one day to the next, like a hand grenade. But when the midwife said, “It’s a boy, Louise,” she understood that at last a man had come into her life to stay. And she would love him unconditionally.

Her fingers combed through her son’s thick hair. Audi didn’t make a peep. They never talked during his haircuts, and he’d picked a spot where the mirrors in his mother’s room couldn’t reflect any of

*In relation to Afro-Surinamese people, the term “Creoles” refers to the descendants of freed slaves, as opposed to the Maroons, the descendants (often darker-skinned) of slaves who escaped into the rainforests. The more general term “Afro-Surinamese” is now usually preferred.

their intimacy. She knew it was all the same to him, haircut or no haircut, as long as he felt his mother's hands on his head.

She let go of him for a moment to go to the living room and cough pointedly, a sign of authority; Babs and her boyfriend Aram were watching TV where she couldn't see them. "Are you still inside?" she shouted, because it was so quiet. The sound of Babs laughing, as if that would reassure her that none of her rules were being broken.

Then Aram appeared in the hallway with a friendly "How do you do, Mrs. Vanta?". That was good enough for her. When he asked if she'd heard from Heli, she didn't know what to tell him and gestured that she was in the middle of cutting Audi's hair. She took in the onrushing autumn sky through the window, catching a glimpse of celestial refuse passing out of view in colorful streaks of light. Her eyes fell on Aram's sports car. She drew a deep breath.

Then back to the scissors, the clippers, the gown, and Audi, who had slid to the floor so that she could sit. She helped him put on the gown; he shifted restlessly and grumbled, "I can just tell you're thinking of my father, Mama." She let out an exaggerated sigh: "You should know better than to bring up a subject like that when a person is standing right behind you with sharp objects in her hands!" Audi slapped his thighs with laughter. The haircut could begin, and as she took hold of the first lock of hair: Everyone thinks you're a fool when you're heavily pregnant and you leave a man who's as soft as a three-minute egg to move in with your family in a childhood home just bursting with strong opinions. She craned forward to see her beautiful boy's face. The first lock of hair slid to the floor. Mother Louise hummed a remembered tune whose words she had forgotten.

For years, Babs had been saving a black-and-white photo in which every member of the Mother Louise family looked dazzled by the photographer's flash. A square of paper with serrated edges, the size of her palm. She studied herself as a toddler. She could see how Imker had looked at the age of seven. She had a good laugh at the squinting face of Heli, whose tenth birthday they had been celebrating, but what really disturbed her was the sight of her mother with baby Audi on her shoulders. The photographer had blundered straight into the depths of her mother's misery at that terrible time, the low point in her life.

And who was that golden-haired girl in among all the little cousins and neighborhood children? It was Josje, the adored child of a Dutch couple who ran a popular bakery and pastry shop in a swank shopping street. Heli and Josje went to the same school and were inseparable, Babs's mother had told her, and Josje's father had taken the photos on special occasions, startling everyone with his flashbulbs. The

pastry shop had delivered all sorts of treats, but what really had the guests talking was the huge birthday cake: chocolate, with whipped cream and lit candles for the lucky girl to blow out in a single puff—a gift from Josje and her parents.

Heli was beside herself with excitement, but Mother, preoccupied with her deep troubles, was relieved when the kids went home satisfied, taking along her handmade party favors: an assortment of candies in colorful parchment bags, each carefully knotted shut with a festive ribbon. A street-organ grinder had provided music, and there had been magic tricks that made the children shriek with laughter. And more than enough to drink. The bicycle that Mother Louise had promised Heli would just have to wait.

Babs hung on to every word of her mother's stories about her troubled life. She had a reputation for asking questions that were blunt and impolite, and when she didn't get a straight answer, she would keep insisting until she got herself in trouble. Then she would cry in her bed, not because she hadn't gotten her way, but because she had pushed away someone she wanted to be with. Sometimes she felt as if she'd fallen from the sky into a house that would never be her home. Impossible to handle, and always contrary, that's what she was. Unfriendly and bullying. Other people said that about her, and she didn't have the chance to tell them they were wrong. At school, she would stamp her feet when seated next to a "black girl," and when she was assigned to a "black homeroom teacher," she started refusing to go to school at all.

Her father Boys had stepped in, enrolling her in a private school where everything was different from everyday life. That gave her a new perspective on her family, a greater distance—more distance than she could handle. Everyone in the house was a little afraid of her, and even her sister Heli had kept her distance before she went away, even though Babs was as soothed by Heli's presence as everyone else was. So she'd felt not a twinge of guilt at taking over Heli's vacant bedroom and transforming it into something that suited her better.

She said goodbye to Aram and waved as he drove off. Then she went to her mother's bedroom, where Audi was having his hair cut. She couldn't bring herself to go in. She planted herself in the doorway. She watched. Her eyes grew moist. She had meant to ask if they wanted some of what Aram had brought her—Dutch apples, dark grapes, and maybe a piece of Gouda cheese—but it was as if she couldn't talk. She went to a window in the living room and stared outside, where the evening was starting to look like night. Babs thought, There must be someone I can truly love? Someone I can connect with?

Grandmother couldn't shake the thought of her daughter Ethel, and for the first time, she didn't feel like "blowing off steam." This surprised her granddaughter, who realized that keeping quiet and staying at her side would help more than anything else she could do. "Sometimes I have the feeling she's looking at me, Imker. My confessor says it's the voice of conscience. He could be right." She'd been attached to Ethel, she explained, but it hadn't taken her long to get over her loss. After all, she'd had another baby girl, who drew all her attention away from Ethel and the others.

The children had grown fast. As a mother, she was short-handed, and Anton had suggested that one of his cousins could come and help her to keep house and care for the four children. As if he hadn't known she would refuse! It led to more than just a quarrel. The air was thick with curses that made the mouths of Winston, Louise, and especially Ethel and little Laura drop open, as they listened with eyes that bulged with fear. That must have been the day Anton made his decision—not only to spend his nights in the attic of their house from then on, far from the conjugal bed, but also to liberate his favorite child from the situation that he himself couldn't handle. And he found an opportunity sooner than expected. She hadn't thought her accusations would cut him so deeply that he would lose faith in their marriage. She shook her head in self-reproach.

"What did you shout at Grandpa, Grandma Bee?" Her granddaughter slid over to her, coming as close as she could.

She took a deep breath and spat it out: "Slave, negro animal, spade, devil spawn, Satan! And he replied that he was none of that, and then I pushed him over to the huge mirror in the drawing room and asked him if his reflection looked human to him." A desperate act.

Imker, a horrified look on her face, grabbed her hand and whispered, "You have to ask Grandpa Anton for forgiveness, Grandma! You have to go his grave and say you're sorry!"

But she pulled her hand away; she could see him strutting off in his uniform the next morning, leaving their home without breakfast, and that night after the children had gone to sleep he returned, Private Vanta, half drunk, having frittered away the hours in bars where gold seekers and fishermen went to drink and gamble. He ignored the plate of food she'd kept warm for him. He refused to answer her questions. One afternoon he came for Ethel.

Grandmother went to the faucet and drank some water without using a glass. And Imker said, "So you thought my grandpa had come to pick up the child who looked most like him so that the two of them could go and live with his relatives on Lustoord Plantation, but instead he returned to his family without Ethel!?"

Grandmother said nothing and looked for a different place to sit, a little further away from Granddaughter Imker, so that she could tell her own story, and she threw herself back into it. “So many times your grandfather had said to me, ‘Wife Bee, a slave is for selling, a negro animal is for beating, a Satan is for cursing, and a monster is for killing!’” He had given away his child because he wanted a better life for her than he could offer in our family. To punish his wife for her “big talk,” everyone had refused to tell her where her daughter Ethel was living. Not wanting to give her granddaughter another shock, she didn’t mention that she herself, and her relatives, had blamed her father Julianne for marrying off his “one and only daughter” to the lowest of the low: the offspring of a slave.

“You’ll pay for what you say!” Anton had told her once, straight to her face, and after that he had never spoken about the Ethel question. Even if he had stayed married to her. Even if he had gone on loving her. On his deathbed, he’d whispered to his granddaughter Heli, “Your grandmother’s the only woman I ever loved. Tell her Anton Vanta sends his regards.” If that’s not forgiveness...

Imker nodded: “But even after all those ugly words, you and Grandpa had one last child together, didn’t you, Grandma?”

No response. Exhausted, she was. Hungry. She’d had a hard-boiled egg for dinner and nothing else. To sleep, that’s what Grandmother wanted, long and deep.