Theo Thijssen

The Gray Child

(*Het grijze kind*, 1927)

English sample translation: Jonathan Reeder

(pp. 22-24)

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So now, I'm eight years old, going on nine, and I am in the fourth grade of primary school. This primary school is one for the better-off, because my father is an accountant, partner in the firm Verwulft & Van der Stadt. He is Van der Stadt. My sister Nel is twenty-three and engaged. To—naturally—the firm's twenty-five-year-old clerk. My mother is also still alive; at least, *she* thinks she is. We are a respectable family through and through, and we live in Amsterdam, on the Nassaukade. The firm's office is located on the Leliegracht, kitty-corner from where old Potgieter, the writer, used to live. The rest, you'll learn by and by. The name of 'the gray child', your faithful narrator, is Henricus. I cannot recall ever having given my name without having to add, 'Henricus, no 'd', and Van der Stadt with 'dt', yes, sir, Van der Stadt, the *der* with an 'r', yes.

There were more such inconveniences. For instance, my father's vocation. It's curious how often a boy is asked what his father does for a living. Having ascertained, on numerous occasions, that pretty much no one in the world had the slightest idea what an accountant was (I'm talking here of approximately fifteen years ago), and having no notion myself how to describe what exactly my father did, I contented myself with the vague pronouncement that Pa 'worked at an office.' Until one day my mother upbraided me for it: 'office'—*everyone* worked at an office, but Pa had his *own* office, and not just any old office, but an *accounting* office. Well, all right, I said, but that office isn't just Pa's; half of it is Mr. Verwulft's, surely. And what *is* an accounting office, anyway?

'Och, Ma,' said Nel, 'the boy doesn't understand a blessed thing.'

‘Now, you might say,’ Mother orated in my direction, ‘Nel’s intended, Christiaan: *he* works in an office.’

To which Nel was quick to retort: ‘You mean to say an *accounting* office.’

And they’re off!

‘Either way, what I mean is, he’s a *clerk*.’

‘You needn’t keep pointing that out.’

‘I don’t mean anything by it, pet.’

‘You just said “what I mean is”…’

‘Well, your father is in business for himself.’

‘Yes but Chris does all the work.’

‘Of course he does. That’s what he’s paid for.’

‘And Chris has passed his exam, so just you wait…’

‘Just wait for what?’

‘Until he’s passed the next one.’

‘I should hope so, dear, for your sake.’

‘Then the clerk will be the accountant, and the two bosses—’

‘— are the ones with the clients, and the clients know very well a snotnose is a snotnose.’

‘I suppose you think Chris doesn’t know his rear end from his elbow.’

‘Tsk, think of the boy, now.’

The boy thought: there they go again, but their exchange still shed no light onto what his father actually did. He gathered that it was a shaky existence at best, any measure of success being entirely thanks to Chris.

Every discussion between Nel and his mother eventually descended into this peculiar kind of verbal duel, and more often than not the upshot was that Nel had to ‘think of’ something. Either the boy, or the maid, or Pa; once, things got so heated that Nel was admonished to think of the neighbors.

On one subject, however, there was no dispute: Mr. Verwulft’s brood. Mr. Verwulft’s daughter, a few years younger than Nel and ten times more attractive, had always ‘looked ridiculous’. And as for his son Ferdinand, a boy my age, they both had their gravest doubts:

‘He’s not normal, that child.’

‘Definitely backward, anyway.’

‘No, worse, he’s retar—’

‘Tsss, think of the boy, will you.’

‘Have you noticed that look in his eyes?’

‘Gawd, my dear, I know. Just awful.’

‘And his mouth! Truly, he’s not all there.’

‘*Not* in front of the *boy*.’

‘And *that’s* their pride and joy!’

‘Och, it’s so sad, really. That’s why he’s at that school.’

‘Oh, I thought that school was more…’

‘Of course, for the well-to-do, they say, but obviously with what they call “remedial help”.’

‘So actually more like an institution?’

‘Well…”institution”… they still call it a school.’

‘But not a one of them is right in the head, are they.’

‘Hush now! The *boy*… One of these days he’ll let something slip.’

(pp. 88-89, 93-94)

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Our family life—to kick off a new chapter—our family life, or what is supposed to pass for one, had, in my mother’s view, a few weak points. Put another way: behind our skyrocketing respectability, year after year, our ever-growing semblance to what one refers to as ‘the upper crust’—behind this, alas, a secret and inconvenient truth stubbornly dug in its heels: we had vulgar relatives. Ach, no one was more convinced than Mother that you couldn’t be held responsible for these things, but still we were saddled, for example, with a grandfather who made my poor Mama despair that she would ever be able to relax into unassailable respectability.

This grandfather, seen as a familial disaster, had, in Mama’s eyes, one redeeming feature: that he wasn’t *hers*, but rather was from my father’s side of the family. Her own parents were altogether of the same ilk, but as they were already long dead and buried, Mama had (and made good use of) the time and opportunity to upgrade them, so that they were more or less on par with her own current position. Nevertheless she never spoke of her ‘Mother’ or ‘Mama’, as I had been brought up to do, but of ‘Ma’, which rolled quite naturally off her tongue.

But should you think that my father was in any way handicapped by having to compete with Mama's now-legendary parents and own up to his living, uncouth father, then you are sorely mistaken. My father's lucky stars had provided for the existence of Mama's sister Neeltje, and this Aunt Neeltje of mine was at least as compromising a relation as my grandfather.

This was an accommodating and useful balance. So often, when my grandfather had once again 'misbehaved' and Mama could then, at long last, launch a well-aimed reproach at my father, Papa would ever so tactfully begin a reference to an incident, just the previous week, involving Aunt Neeltje or her husband. Mama would retreat and Papa no longer needed to complete his report.

The main beneficiary of this situation was Nel. She had a father *and* a mother with dubious kinfolk and was herself unimpeachable, because her Chris came from a family that expertly flaunted the air of ancient but impoverished aristocracy. So to speak, of course, because who had ever heard of nobility that went by the name of 'Stockmans'…

But now to this grandfather of mine.

Theoretically, a grandfather is a kind of sage, good-natured saint; and I know darn well that many readers will now be thinking: hah, finally, something refreshingly upbeat in that boy's cast of pitiful characters. A beaming graybeard, a jolly old man, the only one in that child's circle with any *heart*. In short: the grandfather.

I cannot deny it: this would have been nice. And then described with such pathos: the intimate bond, the touching confidence between them; the poor lad finding love only in the company of this defenseless and despised old fellow, who had but one comfort left on this earth: his grandchild.

Alas, that sorry story of mine is a different one altogether. My grandfather was as unattached to me as I to him; and as for his wisdom, his mild, insightful, well, his traditional grandfatherly wisdom—seldom have I met such a stupid, narrow-minded, pig-headed individual. No, the bright spot in this wretched tale, the contrast that must be introduced soon, according to the rules of fine literature, of which I am well aware, this was my Aunt Neeltje. But she will get her turn soon enough.

[…]

My grandfather's many eccentricities were a constant nuisance to my family. Thanks to him, the Vondelpark was forbidden territory; my entire youth was dictated by the ban: you stay out of that Vondelpark, because your grandfather prowls around there, etc. and so forth. When I was very young this decree evoked fantastical visions. For instance, that my grandfather was the *capo* of a sort of street gang that had installed itself, outrageously attired, at the park entrance. As soon as I set foot in the park, in the company of a few other decent boys, the gang would surround us, spewing the most vile profanity, and the grubbiest one of them all, brazenly sullying the pristine lanes of the park with his chew juice, would say, 'Well what do you know, if it's not my grandson Henderikus. There you have him. Say, Henderikus, could you spare us a cent for a dip of tobacco, and your pals, surely they'll have some pennies on them? Come, you little newt, hand it over!' We would only just manage to escape, but my chums would say, 'That can't be your grandfather—that drunken geezer must've been lying through his teeth. But how come he knew your name, and why'd you go all red?'

Or to be on the safe side I would go on my own, without my friends. But just for a short spell, a few steps. Get nabbed by some shabby beggar and led over to grandfather's bench. 'So, Henderikus, how's about you spend the day with gramps here on the bench, have some fun. And tonight we'll all bring you home and stay for a bite to eat.'

I pictured myself heading up the Nassaukade, surrounded by granddad's gang. Followed by watchful policemen and curious delivery boys. A commotion, as though there was a fire. All the neighbors at their windows. The stoop of our house promptly brown from the tobacco juice. And so as to keep the scandal to a minimum, Mama, for heaven's sake, letting the whole gang come in. What had I done, what had I done…

As I got older, I disputed the Vondelpark ban. I could just avoid that one bench. Surely Granddad couldn't be everywhere at once? But Mama and Nel maintained that he wandered here and there, and just when you least expected it, there he was, and then it was too late.

And they managed to utter that *and then it was too late* with such menace and foreboding that for years thereafter I steered clear of the Vondelpark.

(pp. 125-129)

Aunt Neeltje. It gives me particular satisfaction to be able to just type it out, without shame: Aunt Neeltje. For years, Aunt Neeltje has been a *persona non grata*. When I was very, very young, yes, back then we still had official contact with this woman and her entourage, those were the days when I was taught to say 'Tante Neeltje'. But soon enough, at home I would only hear her referred to by various other names. 'Her from the Bloemstraat,' Mama first called her; later it became 'that one from the Jordaan.' And my father, if he had to speak of her at all (but oh, when did he need to?), always referred to 'the Zeeman woman.' And Nel took it a step further with 'you-know-who, that baggage from over there.'

What, in fact, lay behind the disfavor into which Aunt Neeltje had fallen with my family? Aunt Neeltje, if she should read this, would be quick to retort, 'Well, pardon me, but you're twisting things around, y'nitwit: you bunch fell out of favor with *us*.'

And there you have the crux of the … let me put it in neutral terms … of the estrangement: Aunt Neeltje and her family's stubborn lack of accommodation for our social standing. If only the Bloemstraat branch of the family was open to protective almsgiving, if they had been even a tad appreciative of hand-me-down yet still perfectly usable articles of clothing, if they had accepted the benevolence of us well-off Nassaukade residents and had, with fitting humility, allowed Mama's generosity to lighten some of life's harsher burdens, then the rift would not have been so acute. Then Mama could have created a separate department of glory: extending a helping hand to hapless but decent folks, who, if you looked closer, turned out to be distant relatives to boot.

But nope, that Bloemsstraat pair—Aunt Neeltje and her husband, Uncle Karel—and their children, were utterly unobliging, they refused to be do-gooded, rejected their role as the poor relations, didn't give a hoot about our affluence: in their own estimation they were not the least bit poor, and did not want for anything. And they took every opportunity to demonstrate their impudent theory that the Bloemstraaters could keep up with their Nassaukade (chic segment) kin without corrective measures.

It took some time for me to get a grasp on the situation. If I had to put my hand on my heart and pronounce which of the sisters, my mother or Aunt Neeltje, had made the greatest success of her life, then as a youngster I would have unreservedly said: Aunt Neeltje. The simple fact that all eight of them sat down at the table every afternoon had something regal about it.

[…]

And then there was Uncle Karel's goat cart. I can still picture him one fine Sunday, in a loose-fitting vest and stiffly-ironed long-sleeve shirt, sashaying alongside that handsome

billy goat and smoking one of his eight Sunday cigars through the large clay pipe decorated with a complete deer hunt. Perched in the cart are three children flaunted like fancy dolls: two girl cousins and their little brother, the still not potty-trained Kakie. My uncle sees me and lifts me into the fourth spot, and one of the cousins pops something sticky into my mouth, sweet and sour at the same time. I often wonder: why didn't the world just come to an end following that afternoon? What more, after that intense pleasure and supreme pride, could life possibly offer?

I see myself arriving home drunk on the splendor of it all, but upon issuing my report I read only horror on the Sabbath faces of Mother and Nel; and when I speak of 'Unk' Karel—for that is simply what one is on the Bloemstraat, Unk and not Uncle—Mother and Nel launch into a jeremiad, demanding to know who on earth talks like that: *Unk,* for pity's sake. I say that Pa is *their* Unk Henderik, but this only elicits a fresh chorus of indignation: 'Hendurik, Hendurik, don't you know your Pa's name is Hendrik and not Hend*u*rik?' Ach, and they were only warming up…

I see myself paying a visit to the Bloemstraat one evening; Unk Karel is late, had to work overtime at the factory; he gets *stamppot* with Savoy cabbage for dinner, straight out of a flowered dish; and when he's had his fill—to me, it's just a plate of food—he starts dishing it out: each one of us in turn gets a mouthful. When it's my turn I take such a greedy bite that I choke, and I sigh 'heh' with such satisfaction that Aunt Neeltje decides that I get the honor of scraping the dish clean at the end. 'Neel, where's my after-dessert,' asks Unk. 'Behind the counter at Roeraade,' Auntie replies. 'Now then, let's have it, on the double,' he says, pulling out a ten-cent piece from his vest pocket, and my cousin Riekie's already grabbed it. We hold a spirited and noisy vote what it will be this time: 'candidates' or shelled *kersausies* or dried chestnuts. I have no idea what candidates are, but I wholeheartedly veto the kersausies and the chestnuts. And I am elected to accompany Riekie to the renowned Roeraade, four blocks down and over the bridge… The bag, the giant bag of sticky *candied dates* you got for that dubbeltje! And in your mouth, all the way back, the dried chestnut they gave you for nothing.

Then the division of Unk's after-dessert, all of us crowded around the round table that would tip so alarmingly from us leaning on it…

My fingers stuck together from all this sweet-gobbling, but no one said anything when I (slyly, for sure) dipped them into my tea and licked them off, to get rid of the gooeyness.

And then with the tea we all got a slice of that crispy bread that Auntie had just fetched, a whole apronful, from the shop across the street. Smeared with that delicious white butter, which only later did I recognize as margarine…

Nearly bloated from overfeeding, when I got home I asked Nel if she also liked candied dates. She didn't know what they were, but my mother, by virtue of her dubious past, did know, and asked anxiously if I had actually … *eaten* those things.

I saw what was coming and opted for the safe route, and replied, 'No … but they were talking about them over at Aunt Neeltje's.'

'Well, mind that you never eat that rubbish,' Mother said with a shiver, 'there's no telling what frightful diseases they'll give you.'

'Just say so, if you did eat them,' said Nel. 'Say so in time, then maybe something can still be done.'

But I wasn't that easily taken in, not even back then; *that* wasn't a risk I was prepared to take, so I lied shrewdly further:

'No, but they were talking about them over at Aunt Neeltje's, that some people eat them, you can get them at Roeraade.'

Ach, fresh consternation on my mother's part, over the nonchalance with which I dropped that address. But Nel said, 'It's just something he overheard and doesn't understand a thing about, as usual, what in heaven's name is that, Roeraade!'

And then I was given a proper but measly cup of tea, with a (my mouth having been spoilt with sweets) tasteless biscuit.

But when I lay in bed and experienced the slightest pang of, well, strange aftertastes, a certain uneasiness crept into my soul: might I have not been more or less poisoned? And even though the queasiness was vague enough for me to stay in bed, I wouldn't be able to enjoy it so blithely next time Unk Karel treated us to an after-dessert because he had worked overtime.

translation: Jonathan Reeder, 2020