

A marvellously written book on growing up and friendship

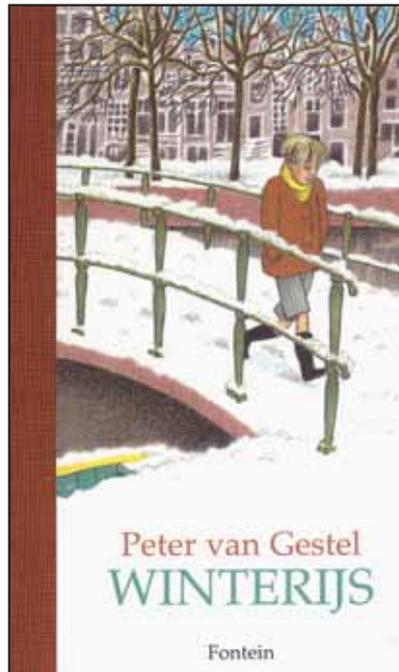
PETER VAN GESTEL

Winterijs *Winter Ice*

Ten-year old Thomas Vrij suffers from a great sadness. He hides it from others; otherwise they would just feel concerned about him. And he doesn't want that, quite the opposite. So he never complains about anything. Not about his cold knees covered in scabs, his hunger, or being bullied at school, nor the fact that his mother died from typhoid just after liberation and that his father has never got over it. He would rather make up stories about dogs stuck fast, frozen in the ice, using big words such as 'wretched' and 'marvellous'. His classmate, Piet de Zwaan, who is called Piem at home, is the prototype of a professor who knows everything but gives nothing away. Nevertheless, Thomas discovers that Zwaan was in hiding during the war in a room all by himself, somewhere in Deventer, and that his parents were taken away by the Germans.

The razor-sharp dialogue shows Van Gestel's great empathy with the soul of a child. The narrative style, seen throughout the book from the viewpoint of Thomas, (whom everyone insists on calling Tommie, much to his disgust), is effective and witty. Thomas refuses to allow anything to get him down; his classmates, the cold, things he doesn't understand. And there are a great many things he doesn't understand, because the whole world is just one big conspiracy. He comes to the conclusion that 'everyone has agreed not to tell me anything' and you can 'spend your whole damned life' finding out for yourself. This is the language of someone who wants to get ahead and dares to be 'infatuated' with Liesje Onderwater, who has little blond hairs on her snow-white legs, or with thirteen-year old Bet who is always rather curt, but unbelievably pretty.

During a hot summer, Thomas looks back at the coldest and longest winter ever. The expressive detail and the constant changes in time and place create a three-dimensional map of post-war Amsterdam which include the smells and colours of a crowded classroom, the living room with its coal fire, the drab, grey soap flakes in the zinc bath of lukewarm water, the hard, cold snow on the canals, the slippery ice of the Amstel river, the pink satin petticoats of the girls from the dressmaker's and the double bed in which Tommie and Zwaan sleep. But the underlying emotions are timeless; children like Thomas are still bullied because they are different and both children and adults alike still have to bear their solitary grief, because it is so difficult to share your emotions. This tale of a child who is physically and emotionally alone deserves a place amongst the great classic stories. JOKE LINDERS



Peter van Gestel (b. Amsterdam 1937) after attending drama college, he pursued a career as a dramatist for television and radio, and started writing, firstly for adolescents, then later for children. *The diaries of Ko Kruier*, earned Van Gestel both a Silver Pencil award and the Nienke van Hichtum Prize. In most of his books, the main characters are struggling with the gulf between

their private inner world and the expectations of others. The psychological subtlety of his stories, his tone of writing and the humour in his compact dialogues has earned Van Gestel the appreciation of a large audience. For *Winter Ice* Van Gestel won the Woutertje Pieterse Prize 2001.

A masterpiece.

NRC HANDELSBLAD

Van Gestel tells a wonderful, restrained story of growing up, the urge to survive, friendship and love.

DE VOLKSKRANT

A marvellously written book on growing up and friendship, sketched against the background of an old-fashioned, wintry Amsterdam.

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OTHER TITLES IN TRANSLATION

Stientje (Slapen en schooieren) Weinheim;
Basel: Anrich / Beltz & Gelberg, 2001.
Mariken (Mariken) München: C. Bertelsmann,
1998. Also in Greek (Psychogios, in preparation).

Die Prinzessin im Rosengarten (Prinses Roosje)
München: Tabu, 1998



An interview with Peter van Gestel

FALLING FOR GIRLS WHO SNARL

by Judith Eiselin (11 January 2002, *NRC Handelsblad*)

translated by Nancy Forest-Flier

Peter van Gestel likes to write about ears, preferably about ears that stick out a bit – pink and transparent, little ears that protrude through a girl’s straight hair. They’re reason enough to for Van Gestel’s main characters to fall in love. “Gaga,” as Thomas Vrij, the ten-year-old Amsterdam boy from Van Gestel’s latest book, *Winterijs*, calls it. Thomas himself even has a pair of those endearing ears.

The protuberances at the other end of the human body – the feet – are quite a different story. Van Gestel’s feet are usually terrifying. In *Mariken* (1997), a peevish old woman known as “the black widow” can’t sleep because of the sight of her own white toes. In *Winterijs*, Thomas’ Aunt Fie sprains her ankle. Her lower leg is lying on a stool, her foot is bare and covered with red splotches and looks “incredibly huge, much bigger than an ordinary foot.” Thomas doesn’t dare come close to it. “Aunt Fie was asleep. I was picking my nose. The foot was awake and decided I was disgusting.” “Look, my toes are completely purple,” says aunt when she wakes up.

Peter van Gestel doesn’t like frills. His writing style is colloquial, straight from the shoulder. He avoids complex images and comparisons. “If you’re all tied up with formulating things you might as well quit. This is the story, so you tell the story,” he says. “The fact that you’ve done your best should never be obvious. I cross out and I swear and I’m forever changing things in the hope that what I’ve done will be as inconspicuous as possible.” Most of his books are meant for what used to be called “the older youth.” They’re spare, with a melancholy undertone.

Van Gestel’s main characters – boys, girls, old women, animals – have changeless, “boy next door” qualities. They give you the impression that you know them, that they’ve always been around. Besides the work of Theo Thijssen, the books bear a remote resemblance to the stories of Simon Carmiggelt. Many of Van Gestel’s books are illustrated by Peter van Straaten.

Peter van Gestel is an Amsterdam writer. He was born there in 1937, and he lives there still with his wife Marjolijn and an aged cat that’s part Siamese. Since he made his debut in 1979 with *Schuilen onder je schooltas* (Hiding Under your Schoolbag), he has written juvenile books that are often set primarily in Amsterdam. *Winterijs* takes place on the Amstel River, the Lijnbaansgracht, the Reguliersgracht and the Wegeringschans.

At the request of Karel Eykman, Van Gestel began writing stories for the *Blauwgeruite Kiel*, the former children’s section of *Vrij Nederland*. “My wife said, ‘You? For children? Forget it!’” grins Van Gestel, combing his fingers through his gray forelock. From a distance he has the look of a rather severe grown man, but from close up he’s more like a sixty-year-old boy. “I haven’t done anything else since – well – I worked for twenty years as a writer for the NCRV broadcasting company, of course.”

He's not what you'd call a real children's book writer. His books can be read by children of eleven or twelve and older. "Once I tried to write a real children's book about a gnome in the human world who falls in love with a girl who's much too big for him," Van Gestel recalls. "What do I mean by gnome? Well, somebody very small. And everything was backwards. When the gnome woke up he had to make himself dirty with mud. That girl was his downfall. But yes, it was a children's book, so I had to make some things up. Nothing ever came of it."

Bland rehashes

Peter van Gestel himself read Bomans and Den Dollard at the age of twelve. "Den Dollard's *Wampie* was very erotic for the time, for a boy of that age." Van Gestel now reads quite a few books that are being written for children and young people. He finds many of them bland rehashes of existing books. He started *Harry Potter*, part one, but he got bogged down. "I did think it was funny at first. So much was going on, something new on every page, and anything can happen. Anything. If they happen to lose their way, something comes flying along and they just hop aboard."

Van Gestel, who's had a bit of training as an actor and even as a radio play performer (he dropped out of both courses), wrote the Dutch TV drama series *Het wassende water* (Rising Water) and *Armoede* (Poverty), after Herman de Man and Boudier-Bakker. He worked with Willem Wilmink on a film about his war years, *Het verhaal van Kees* (The Story of Kees).

Peter van Gestel has received a great number of prizes for his juvenile books. *Mariken*, a 1997 fantasy loosely based on the text of a late medieval play, *Mariken van Nieumeghen*, was successfully adapted for the stage and filmed, with a screenplay by Van Gestel himself. It's about a girl who grew up in a forest (the 'Forest of Illusion') and is searching for a goat, a mother and whatever money can buy in this life, although she already thinks she knows all there is to know.

"Mariken brought an end to my image as an adolescent writer," says Van Gestel. "But I didn't want to get stuck with that pint-sized medieval wench either. In the long run that kid had something to give me with her one gimmick: her naive look. Oh, she was a nice girl, don't get me wrong, but if she were my daughter I would have sent her off to a foster family pronto."

Mariken was followed by *Slapen en schooieren* (Sleeping and Panhandling), a fine book about cats and dogs in which people only appear as "the folk," a vague presence in the background. And now there's *Winterijs*. This book takes place during the icy cold winter of 1947, and it's about two boys. "At first I wanted something with a girl during a hot summer in Apeldoorn, I don't remember exactly what it was," admits Van Gestel. "Well, that didn't work out." The main character, Thomas Vrij, tells about his friendship with Piet Zwaan and his sharp-tongued cousin Bet, age thirteen, and how everything runs its course.

"I'm interested in exploring this intense friendship between the two ten-year-old boys who are still far from adolescence but a long way from kindergarden," he says. "They see themselves in each other, in the other's solitude. It's really more than love

between the two; it's a feeling that they don't know what to do with. Both of them know without really knowing that this kind of thing can't last. People disappear out of each other's lives, and there are always circumstances that seem to be the reason for it. In *Winterijs* those circumstances form a story in itself."

Street urchin

Piet Zwaan is Jewish. He lives with his cousin and her frequently cheerless mother in a fashionable house on the Weteringschans, the back of which looks out on the much poorer Lingbaansgracht district, where Thomas lives. His parents were killed by the Germans in Poland during the war. Bet no longer has a father. For a while Bet and Zwaan keep returning to the train station. "You never know. The Red Cross said that some people are coming back." But no one comes back.

Zwaan is a precocious, oldish little boy with an invisible laugh. Bet, says Van Gestel, "isn't all that stupid herself." "Her mind is full of things that she herself doesn't agree with, and that's not the way to cheer up. When she's away from her mother she can be a little girl who likes to jump rope and things like that. The situation forces her to assume adult cares far too early. You shouldn't start thinking about your parents until you're over twenty."

Thomas talks "like a typical goy," says Van Gestel. He has no idea what happened during the war. His own mother died from a severe case of the flu in December 1945; his father is a writer and out of work. Thomas swears a lot and likes to make up stories. He's lively, something of a street urchin. He enjoys himself "silly," as he puts it. Thomas is not one for pity. He's happy when the teacher at school no longer passes him by "when the smacks are being passed out."

Thomas Vrij doesn't feel sorry for himself and he's not awkward or fretful, either. This sets him apart from many of Van Gestel's other heroes. The most well known, Ko Kruijer from the books *Uit het leven van Ko Kruijer* (From the Life of Ko Kruijer, 1984) and *Ko Kruijer en zijn stadsgenoten* (Ko Kruijer and Associates, 1985), was a very different kind of boy. He was the kind of boy "who would offer you a licorice drop and then notice, only too late, that he didn't have any with him," the kind of boy who never goes in for sports, not even accidentally. "If he happened to be standing on a grassy spot in a park and a ball came flying in his direction, he'd step aside and just let the awful thing pass by."

There's one characteristic that Van Gestel's boys all share: they fall for girls who snarl. Says Van Gestel, "It's easy to go gaga, especially over a girl who talks to you and notices you and gets mad at you and thinks you're dirty. As long as you exist for someone, that's what it's all about."

Winterijs has many autobiographical elements. At first Van Gestel wrote the book as a retrospective of 1947. "That was unbearable. A bleating old man. This story has a tragic background, but it can't be allowed to wallow in tragedy. That's why I chose the directness of a ten-year-old. An invention, of course, letting a real ten-year-old do the talking, but I had to make sure I didn't think about it too much. After a page and a half of that I'd be bored to death."

Van Gestel always wanted to write about the years right after the war because it was such an intriguing transitional period. At the same time he found it “pleasant” to locate his book in that time frame. “So many things hadn’t come our way yet, and the things we did have were more intense. It’s true. No one will ever enjoy a film as intensely as Thomas did in a smoky movie theater in 1947, watching *Ali Baba*. That is authentic. And people paid much less attention to other things. Getting slapped with a ruler at school – who even took the trouble to look? It wasn’t such a big deal, and you never had parents threatening to go to court.”

Auschwitz

Winterijs is dedicated to “Daniel K.” “Danny was a friend of my brother, who was five years older,” explains Van Gestel. “He was taken away and he died in Auschwitz. I still remember when I was four, being at a birthday part with him at his house. There was a very pleasant atmosphere there in the Den Texstraat. I used that memory in the book. I was confronted with Danny throughout my childhood. We have his photo hanging in our home.” When Van Gestel was working on his book he accidentally stumbled on an article by Henriette Boas on the Jewish schools in the Stadstimmertuin. Thomas is enrolled there, at Van Gestel’s own former school. Peter van Gestel was completely surprised when, after Boas’s death, he read in the newspaper that another of her books on the Jewish inhabitants in Den Texstraat was being launched.

Winterijs takes place in the neighborhood where Peter van Gestel grew up, and Thomas lives in his parent’s house. He himself was ten years old in 1947: “And the fathers resemble each other. My father had freer opinions during those conservative years than many other people did. He wanted to write, but he had all sorts of little jobs, including that of censor for the English in Peine, Germany, and later he served a social worker in a cardboard factory in Apeldoorn, just like Thomas’ father.”

Peter van Gestel’s mother, on the other hand, did not die young. She lived to be eighty-four years old. After her death he consulted her diaries “for the weather conditions in my book.” “I found myself mentioned there. When I was three, she wrote, ‘With Peter it’s hopeless. He is impossible. If things go on like this, he’ll never amount to anything.’”

Peter van Gestel’s books are published by De Fontein.

Books and prizes

- Schuilen onder je schooltas (1979)
- Uit het leven van Ko Kruijer (1984), *Zilveren Griffel*
- Ko Kruijer en zijn stadsgenoten (1985), *Nienke van Hichtumprijs*
- Saartje en het blauwe huis (1987)
- Oef van de mensen (1988), *Vlag en Wimpel*
- Boze Soe (1990)
- De kater met een oor, en andere wonderlijke verhalen (1991)
- Mascha, de verhalen van Katja (1992)

- Lieve Claire (1994), *Vlag en Wimpel*
- Nachtogen (1996)
- Mariken (1997), *Gouden Uil, Jonge Gouden Uil, Zilveren Griffel*
- Slapen en schooieren (1999)
- Winterijs (2001)

Sample translation from

***Winter Ice* by Peter van Gestel (Baarn: De Fontein, 2001)**

Translated by Lance Salway

Dad goes to Moffrica

Saturday evening was a great evening. But it was also a horrible evening, because my father's suitcase was lying on his bed with the lid open, and it was bulging with old shirts and long underpants.

Voorland and Mosterd were sitting in a smoking chair. I sat on the chair by the window, and looked over my shoulder at the rear of the house on the Weteringschans. There was no light in Zwaan and Bet's back room. Or were the curtains drawn?

My father coughed. I could hear this because Voorland and Mosterd were waiting to see what was going to happen and had their traps shut for once.

'Er,' said my father, 'shall I read something to you? It's not really suitable for Thomas but I hate educators – they've caused enough misery in the world already.'

I laughed. I was the only one who did.

My father started to read out loud.

It was beautiful, that book of his. Whenever he had read to me before, it had sounded as if he was just chatting, but now that he was reading from his own book it was almost like singing, and sometimes he whispered with his eyes half closed. I noticed his fingers, yellow from smoking, I saw Voorland licking his lips with his fat tongue, I saw Mosterd tugging at a little hair in his nose. I understood nothing of what I heard, it had been the same with my mother's recorder music, I hadn't understood that either, just that it gave me a bloody great pain in the ears.

Some things were clear to me, though: it was raining the whole time in that beautiful book of my father's, a dense mist hung in the streets, shoes let in water and someone

was dying all the time, an awful lot of people died in that book of my father's, you lost count of just how many in the end.

I looked at the deadly serious faces of Voorland and Mosterd. It was as if I'd been locked up in a creepy house, a house where I didn't know which way to turn. Every now and then I gave a little shudder of pleasure.

I started to dream.

I felt a strong awareness of the house behind my back – the house on the Weteringschans with the dark back room. People had spoken about my mother in that house yesterday. The three men here in my own house never did that, no, they never did that. I actually thought that was really rather nice of them. Now it felt as though my mother was rummaging in the kitchen just as she used to. Any minute now she might burst into the room, with her hair untidy with anger and with her arms wet from washing up. Then she would really give us what for. Especially my father. 'Stop wasting your time with that bunch of loafers,' she'd shout at him. 'We need bread on the table, we've no clothes left without holes, do you expect me to go out scrubbing and polishing somewhere, Johannes Vrij? Or to go and beg in the market?' Oh dear, she suddenly caught sight of me. 'And you, young man, one two three to bed, or else there'll be trouble.'

'And dark were the days of Cornelis Oudenboom,' sang my father so loudly that I had to open my eyes.

Mosterd had fallen asleep.

My father saw this and closed the thick notebook with a bang.

Two seconds later Mosterd gave a start, woken by the silence.

'Lovely,' he said, 'it put me in mind of – ' Then he said nothing more.

Voorland didn't say anything either.

My father lit a new roll-up with a tiny burning dog-end.

I wanted to tell them about the beautiful house on the Weteringschans, about Zwaan and Bet and about the skinny woman who liked it when I shrugged my shoulders.

Suddenly they started talking briskly to each other, taking no notice of me.

Perhaps it was better that way. They wouldn't have believed me anyway.

In bed before I fell asleep, I thought for the first time not about Liesje Overwater but about Bet. I pressed her handkerchief to my nose.

After that I dreamed.

I was walking beside the canal in the twilight. I saw the house of Zwaan and Bet and stopped. Behind a window in the back room I could see a woman or girl in white. She looked at me. Oddly enough it wasn't Bet, but my mother. Sometimes you can remember a fragment of a dream, why is that, do you suppose?

On Sunday morning Aunt Fie and I took my father to the train. He had to go to Tilburg, that was where he was billeted, and on Monday he would have lessons on the German postal rates, and later in the week there was censoring in Peine.

We walked through the hall of the Central Station. My father was carrying a suitcase and a hold-all, Aunt Fie a frayed shopping bag in which were washing gloves, Uncle Fred's worn-out slippers and two bottles.

'Why are you looking so glum?' I asked my father.

'Wouldn't you look glum if you had to have lessons on the German postal rates?' my father said. 'I'm not sure if I'm going to get on the train.'

'You have to.'

'Why?'

'Because you've just bought a ticket.'

'Have you got the platform tickets, my boy?' asked Aunt Fie.

'The little brown things?' I asked.

She gave a relieved nod.

'Made of cardboard? With white stripes?'

'Yes, yes, those are the ones.'

'I've got them in my back pocket.'

I felt the back of my trousers.

'Oh dear,' I said. 'I don't have a back pocket in these trousers, I forgot. Where can they be?'

Aunt Fie looked at me in disbelief.

'They're in your jacket pocket,' said my father. 'Why do you always have to play

the fool, Thomas?’

‘It’s all right, he didn’t fool me for one moment,’ said Aunt Fie.

‘I really hate practical jokers,’ said my father.

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘Tonight I’ll be sleeping in a shed.’

My father was looking as though he’d seen a ghost.

‘Is that so terrible?’

‘There’ll be other fellows sleeping all around me,’ he said. ‘They’ll belch, they’ll fart, they’ll tell each other disgusting jokes. I won’t get a wink of sleep, I know that already.’

‘You’re either a soldier or you’re not,’ I said. ‘Is it really so much fun in that shed?’

My father pointed at Aunt Fie’s bag. ‘What’s in those bottles?’ he asked kindly.

‘Cold tea,’ said Aunt Fie.

‘Tea!’ said my father in amazement. ‘The English try to poison you with tea, everyone knows that. You don’t take rice with you to China or caviar to Russia.’

‘I only meant it for the best,’ said Aunt Fie.

On the platform there was so much to look at. It wasn’t all that crowded with people but there were trains all around me. Not far away was a magnificent diesel engine – this was not for my father. The steam locomotives were much more beautiful – they were sighing impatiently and steam was curling from their funnels.

And I only had a platform ticket.

None of the trains was for me, I had to stay here, even though I wanted to go away too, I always wanted to go away when I saw a train, I’ll go mad with misery if I can’t get into a beautiful train like that, if I have to stay behind on the platform.

I looked at my father. He wasn’t smoking and had put the suitcase down beside him. I was jealous of him because he would soon be going in the train.

Aunt Fie pulled open a carriage door. I jumped inside.

‘Come back, Tommie my boy,’ she shouted. ‘You’re too quick for me.’

She pushed the bags and the suitcase inside, I jumped out, turned to my silent father, gave him a gentle punch in the side, and shouted: ‘Can I come too, can I come

too?’

‘Yes, my boy,’ he said. ‘It’ll all work out all right, won’t it?’

He looked at me.

‘I really can’t leave you here on your own,’ he said. ‘No, that would be really bad of me.’

‘Terribly bad of you,’ I said.

My father nodded approvingly. He never liked to hear me swear. I was used to it from him.

‘Everyone here can get in the train,’ I shouted. ‘I’m the only one who can’t.’

‘Fie can’t either,’ said my father. ‘Where is she, by the way?’

‘She’s in the carriage,’ I said. ‘She wants to go too.’

But Aunt Fie had got out of the carriage again.

‘Everything’s neatly on the rack,’ she said to my father. ‘Now don’t worry about a thing, Johannes. I won’t spoil him too much.’

‘He likes to read in bed,’ said my father.

I had to force back a tear. Crying on the ice on the Amstel was one thing, but crying on a platform, no, I wasn’t having that.

My father stepped slowly into the carriage. He closed the door, pushed the window up. I walked towards him, Aunt Fie followed me.

‘Johannes, I’m proud of you,’ said Aunt Fie. ‘Try and make the best of it.’

My father’s face was so sad that he looked just like Mosterd.

‘I’m going to the land of Beethoven and Goethe,’ he said wearily.

Aunt Fie sniffed. ‘I can think of a few other names too,’ she said.

‘Forget it,’ said my father. ‘Er – I’d like to say something to Thomas. I hope you don’t mind, Fie. I really don’t want to offend you – ’

Aunt Fie said nothing but she looked daggers. Then she gave my father two sloppy kisses, gave his grey hair a stroke, and walked briskly away, stopping by the stairs that led below.

‘I failed Physical Education,’ I said.

‘What’s that exactly?’ asked my father.

‘Oh, you know the sort of thing, climbing ropes, hanging on the rings.’

‘Do they bully you at school?’ he asked.

‘Never,’ I said.

He nodded vaguely.

‘Do you know any people called Zwaan?’ I asked.

My father was looking right past me. I don’t believe he saw anything at all in the distance.

‘What’s that go to do with it?’ he asked vaguely.

‘Piet Zwaan sits next to me in class.’

My father sighed.

‘The train will be leaving at any moment,’ he muttered. ‘Must you start on about that now?’

He looked at me.

‘You really are a dead loss, aren’t you? Aren’t you fed up with it?’

‘It doesn’t worry me.’

‘I’ll tell you everything later on. But what does later on mean exactly? You could say later on tomorrow too and a lot later on you could still say later on, there’s no end to it, it’s now ten seconds later than it was just now.’

Because he was always talking nonsense, I was only half-listening.

‘Have you still got all your twenty-five cent pieces?’

I’d forgotten that I was richer than ever, I laughed and nodded.

‘Buy a bar of soap for your aunt.’

‘Right, I’ll go and buy soap,’ I said. ‘I’ll keep my eyes open for some.’

‘You can be a real brat sometimes, Thomas, I wonder where that comes from? I’m going to miss your wonderful stories.’

‘Uncle Fred hates my stories – he thinks they’re all lies.’

‘Ah, lies,’ said my father. ‘Does anyone say anything at all without telling lies? I tried it once. After ten minutes I got a blinding headache and had to take at least three painkillers. Do you believe me?’

I nodded.

‘Well, none of it is true,’ my father said cheerfully. ‘I’m even telling lies now.’ ‘What is telling lies?’ I asked angrily.

‘Er – talking, I’d say.’

‘Really?’

My father grinned. ‘May my nose grow into a point if it isn’t true,’ he said.

‘You’ll be going away on the train any minute now,’ I said.

‘Yes, but not to Paris or Rome. I’m going to Tilburg, and then I have to go to that godforsaken Peine. And I hate censorship. It causes all sorts of misery. How are things with Liesje?’

‘Liesje who?’

‘Liesje with the swimming costume –you know her, don’t you?’

‘Who says so?’

‘You told me yourself – a few days ago. Mum always said you had an eye for the girls.’

Now that he was in a train that was about to leave at any moment he had at last said something about Mum. I was going mad with longing for a long journey in a train. I decided that I would never go to a station again unless I could get into a train.

‘Did she really say that?’ I asked.

My father sighed.

‘Liesje Overwater’s got skinny legs,’ I said. ‘Bet wears glasses.’

‘Bet? Oh, you mean Bet Zwaan.’

‘Yes.’

‘God help me, I really don’t want to go – ‘

‘ – to Moffrica?’

‘ – no, to Germany.’

A man in a cap blew a whistle very loudly.

‘You have to say something else,’ I said.

‘What must I say? I’ve no idea.’

‘You have to say: will you be good?’

‘You must be joking. I don’t even know what that means.’

‘Well, if I’m not good, then Aunt Fie’s hair will turn grey.’

‘She’s already got grey hair. Is that all your fault then?’

‘Yes, it’s my fault,’ I said with pride.

The train gave a jerk, steam escaped with a long-drawn out squeal.

‘I wish I were dead,’ said my father.

Slowly the train started to move away.

‘Will you be good?’ I shouted.

‘No,’ said my father. ‘I’m damned if I will.’

He hung out of the train window and waved to me. Except that it didn’t really look like waving. It was as if he was brushing a troublesome fly from his head.

Listening twenty times to Sonny Boy

Sunday afternoon. My father would have reached Tilburg by now. In the tidy sitting room of Aunt Fie and Uncle Fred I longed for the station and the train.

It was quiet outside.

The neighbours’ radio was playing much too loudly.

Whenever I looked at the still life photographs on the walls, I nearly went crazy with boredom. The trains and the bustling travellers seemed a million miles away now. It was smoky in the sitting room with here and there an empty ashpan not for dirty overcoats but for Brussels sprouts. I was sick of cauliflower and broad beans, and I was practically dying from sprouts.

‘Don’t pull such an awful face,’ said Aunt Fie.

It wasn’t yet five o’clock and we were already at the table. Uncle Fred was staring dreamily into space, he was wearing his dust-coat on which were pale yellow stains.

‘You’re not setting Tommie a very good example,’ Aunt Fie said to Uncle Fred. ‘You shouldn’t come to the table on a Sunday dressed like that.’

‘Did you go to another of those nature films this morning?’ I asked Uncle Fred.

‘Pardon?’ he said.

‘You know – with Zulu maidens with nothing on.’

‘Excuse me,’ said Uncle Fred, looking at Aunt Fie with his big stupid eyes. ‘Exactly what have you been telling that boy?’

‘Yes, well, I’ve done it now,’ said Aunt Fie. ‘Of course, I never go to that sort of film myself.’

I looked at Uncle Fred. He had smeared Brilliantine on his head, his black hair was shining like a coal bucket. Mum once said about Uncle Fred: ‘He’s ten years younger than Fie, she gives him an allowance, and if he doesn’t wash behind his ears with the flannel, he gets fined twenty-five cents.’

‘Empty your plate, Shock-headed Peter,’ he said.

I ate a few sprouts, and then, nearly retching, stuck a chunk of meat ball in my mouth. Even the potatoes tasted like sprouts. I blew my nose in Bet’s handkerchief and damned if her beautiful hankie didn’t smell of sprouts too. I was going out of my mind at that table, I just had to get away from there.

‘Er – I’ve left my book behind,’ I said. ‘Can I just go and fetch it?’

‘No,’ said Aunt Fie.

I almost threw up through my nose.

‘All right then, but just listen to me now,’ said Aunt Fie. ‘I’m always too quick to say no. But make sure you come back right away. You mustn’t stay there on your own for too long, do you follow me, you’ve got to get used to being here, haven’t you?’

‘I just wanted to say,’ said Uncle Fred, ‘that if you clear your plate properly now, you can come to the dark room with me.’

‘He’s been in Tilburg a long time now, hasn’t he?’ I said.

‘We all have to get on in the world,’ said Aunt Fie. ‘Your father can’t afford to lag behind. Your uncle will be getting a rise at work before long.’

‘I’ve heard whispers,’ said Uncle Fred. ‘Nothing more than that.’

‘I must buy an air cushion,’ said Aunt Fie.

‘What for?’ I asked.

‘You’re not supposed to ask that sort of thing,’ said Aunt Fie. ‘It’s a grown-up thing – you’re lucky not to know anything about it.’

The whole world is one big conspiracy, I thought, everyone has agreed among themselves that they’re not going to tell me anything at all. I can tell by the sly expressions on their faces. If I don’t look at them, they whisper among themselves, they say: he doesn’t know a thing, does he? Look out, he mustn’t know anything about it, not yet. I must ask Dad exactly what is going on.

I emptied my plate like a good boy. Aunt Fie deserved that at least.

I didn't fasten my coat when I got outside, I took a deep breath of freezing air, I had to get rid of the smell of vomit in my nose.

I felt really rotten.

I stuck my hands deep in my trouser pockets. Peering down at the hard layer of snow, I strode briskly along Van Woustraat, not caring if I bumped into men wearing stupid ear-muffs.

I really didn't need to look for anything in the house on the Lijnbaansgracht. It was cold there and my father had gone, the smell of tobacco had gone, he had taken it with him to Tilburg.

So what was I doing there?

I'd often been on my own at home, why was I getting so upset about it now?

I paced through the rooms, standing first at the window at the back, then at the windows at the front, and after a while it seemed as though the rooms had grown smaller.

That evening when mum wasn't there because she was lying dead in hospital, I'd found the rooms ridiculously small then too.

Dad isn't dead, I thought, he'll be far away in Germany soon. You may not have had very much to do with him but at least it was better than nothing. A long time ago you took him to the station, do you remember?

Yes, I can still remember.

I took *The Sunny Youth of Frits van Duuren* from under my pillow. I turned the pages. Childish. Feeble pictures. I couldn't care less any more about the death of that wretched little dog.

I took another look outside.

The street lamps were burning. I could just see them in the twilight. A light was shining in the back room of the house of Zwaan and Bet.

I didn't want to go back to Aunt Fie's house just yet.

I stood on the bridge at the Reguliersgracht for quite a long time.

It was evening but even so you could still see everything, like the bridge by the

Amstelveld, the bare trees – if you looked closely, you could even see the black bicycles by the lamp posts.

I didn't know which gave the more light: the burning street lamps or the frozen snow.

Not far from me a shabby dog was peeing against a tree. He was shivering as only a dog can shiver. I felt cold just looking at him and I started to shiver too.

Poor animal, I thought, he knows nothing about the winter ice, he has no idea that the ice and the winter could stay for ever and always.

But I knew. Because I knew Piet Zwaan. He had told me.

With the book under my arms, I shuffled towards Den Texstraat. There was no sign of life – deserted. None of the curtains were closed. An old man in braces saw me and shook his head, in another room further on a little boy tapped his forehead.

Very slowly I walked along the Weteringschans.

I came to a stop outside the house of Zwaan and Bet. I looked up. There was no light in the front room. I could ring the bell and I could also not ring the bell.

I rang the bell.

When the door opened, I shouted up: 'You don't have to see me, you know!'

'Hey, Thomas,' I heard Zwaan say. 'Come on up quickly.'

I almost whimpered with relief.

Zwaan wasn't wearing any shoes, just socks without holes.

An ancient atlas was lying open on the wooden table in the back room, beside it stood a glass of tea. I put my book down on the seat of the chair, pulled off my coat and hung it over the back.

Zwaan was nervous.

'Hey, that's really funny,' he said. 'I thought someone had pressed the bell by accident. But it was you.'

'Oh,' I said. 'I just happened to be passing your house.'

'And so you thought: I'll just ring their bell.'

'I haven't much time, I won't stay long. Were you having a snooze?'

'No. What gave you that idea?'

‘Your eyes are all screwed up.’

‘I was reading.’

Zwaan closed the atlas.

‘I’m at home by myself,’ he said. ‘Aunt Jos and Bet are visiting someone who’s sick. Don’t ask me who – Aunt Jos has a whole lot of sick old cronies. It’s really good that you’re here, what would you like to drink?’

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘I’ll have some tea too.’

The tea was cold, I liked it like that. At the same time I nibbled a café noir, when it was mixed with the tea the biscuit became a lovely soft mouthful.

‘Hey, you’re swilling down your food,’ Zwaan said cheerfully.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Drinking and eating at the same time. Aunt Jos can’t stand it. Are you feeling miserable, Thomas?’

‘My father’s in Tilburg. Tomorrow’s he’s having a lesson on the German postal rates.’

‘You’re living with your Aunt Fie now, aren’t you?’ said Zwaan.

‘Yes, that’s what I’m doing. Any more questions? You’re making me nervous.’

‘I won’t ask anything else.’

‘Pity Bet isn’t here.’

‘Are you keen on her?’

‘What a stupid question. What makes you think I’d be keen on a skinny thing like her?’

‘Are you only keen on fatties then?’

‘I’ve never been keen on anyone,’ I said proudly. ‘How about you?’

He shook his head vaguely.

‘Why were you looking in the atlas?’

‘For fun, that’s all.’

I put my book on the table with a bang.

‘My favourite book,’ I said.

He picked it up, examined it carefully, paged through it and then peered closely at the cover.

‘A sunny youth,’ he said. ‘What’s that exactly?’

‘Well, it means that you have a lot of fun, I suppose.’

‘So it isn’t about the sun shining all the time?’

He waited patiently for my answer.

‘You’re an idiot, Zwaan,’ I said.

‘I’d like to borrow it,’ he said.

‘Fine by me.’

‘You shouldn’t speak too soon.’

‘Why not?’

‘What if I don’t give it back?’

‘Then I’ll come and fetch it.’

‘And if we don’t know each other any more?’

‘Well, then we wouldn’t know each other any more. It wouldn’t make any difference to me.’

‘No,’ said Zwaan. ‘Me neither.’

‘I’d know other boys,’ I said.

‘Me too.’

‘And I’ve got other books. Books without pictures. Have you ever read a book with no pictures?’

‘I’ve read plenty of books without pictures,’ said Zwaan.

‘Show off.’

Zwaan gave an embarrassed grin. ‘How about a game of draughts?’ he said.

‘I shouldn’t really,’ I said. ‘I’m bloody good at draughts, I’ll beat you easily.’

We played three games. I lost the first two. By the end of the third game, when I had just one piece left and he had three kings, I got really angry. I swept the pieces from the board.

‘Bloody hell,’ I said. ‘I’m not myself at the moment, you can see that, I’ve had a really rotten day.’

‘Calm down,’ said Zwaan. ‘Bet always loses to me. She gets terribly angry. But she doesn’t swear.’

‘I’m surprised to hear it.’

‘I don’t think much of swearing.’

‘My father swears like a trooper.’

‘You like your father a lot, don’t you?’

‘None of your business.’

‘It’s nothing to be ashamed of.’

Zwaan was giving me a strangely glassy-eyed stare.

‘Why are you looking at me like that?’ I said.

‘Come with me,’ he said. ‘It’s high time you saw my room.’

His room was quite narrow. There were piles of books everywhere on the floor. On a small table stood a pair of really beautiful inkwells. A tall cupboard of unpainted wood blocked half the window. He had a narrow bed that you could fold up.

Zwaan’s room was a mess but at the same time it was a tidy mess. And it was damned cold too.

Zwaan passed me a jersey and said, ‘Put it on.’

‘What about you?’

‘I’m wearing two vests, one on top of the other.’

I slowly put the jersey on. I really don’t like other people’s clothes. I also don’t like having a sandwich from some classmate’s grubby lunchbox. Zwaan’s jersey was nice and warm.

‘Sit down,’ he said.

‘Where?’

‘On my bed, Thomas.’

I sat down on the bed.

‘Do you like music, Thomas?’

‘Do I like what?’

‘Music.’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘I had violin lessons for a couple of months once. And then my father wanted to hear me play something. Well, it screeched like crazy. No, said my father, you’re never going to be a Menuhin. Don’t let that worry you, Sonny, we’ll stop the lessons. I don’t

want you ending up fiddling in some low class dive.’

‘Your father calls you Sonny, does he?’

Zwaan nodded.

Now that I was sitting on his bed, I had to look up at him. I didn’t mind that. I didn’t mind it because I liked sitting on his bed. I watched as he carefully closed one of the inkwells with a glass lid.

His father called him Sonny.

His foster-parents – whoever they were – called him Piet.

His aunt and Bet called him Piem.

I called him Zwaan.

I was jealous. I felt really deprived because I only had *one* name. Tommie I didn’t count, Tommie was a dope who had his hair pulled at school – Tommie had nothing to do with home because I was called Thomas there, so yes, I really did have two names, but why was I thinking about all that now?

‘This is cosy,’ said Zwaan.

He wasn’t just an old bloke, he was an old granny too, saying this is cosy. Your aunt said cosy and when she said it, it wasn’t cosy at all. My father was right: talking is telling lies.

‘Do you think that talking is telling lies?’ I asked.

‘Who said that?’ asked Zwaan.

‘My father. Where is your father? Has he gone? Has your mother gone too? Is that why you’re living with your aunt?’

‘I want to play you a record,’ said Zwaan. ‘We’ll be saying too much at this rate, that can all wait till later on.’

‘Dad was talking about later on this morning,’ I said. ‘I’m a half-orphan. Dad said that there’s no such thing as a half-orphan.’

Zwaan laughed out loud now.

‘That’s a good one,’ he said. ‘Come on, I’ll put a record on – you won’t believe your ears.’

He took a portable gramophone from the cupboard.

Zwaan put the gramophone on the table in the back room, opened the lid, took a really fragile record out of a square envelope, and laid it on the turntable. He took hold of the starting handle and turned it like mad for a while. Then he pushed a knob to one side and the record started to turn. Cautiously Zwaan lowered the gleaming head until the needle touched the record.

Over and above a sharp scratching noise I could hear a raucous sort of twang. Someone was singing really tearfully about some Sonny Boy or other.

Zwaan pursed his lips as he listened. It made him look like an idiot.

‘I can’t understand a single word of this,’ I said.

He put his forefinger to his lips.

‘It’s really sad, is it?’

He shrugged his shoulders.

When the record was finished, Zwaan scratched his chin for a moment.

‘He’s a Negro, is he?’

‘No,’ he said, ‘it’s Al Jolson, not a Negro but a Russian Jew in America, he makes his face black with make-up and so he isn’t a Negro, a coon singer they call it, he’s singing about his little son who died very young. My father got the record from his brother Aaron. He lives in America. In the middle of the 1930s Aaron was in Holland for a month, then he gave my father the portable gramophone and ‘Sonny Boy’. Could you hear it? He sings about the angels who are feeling lonely and so they want Sonny Boy back in heaven, it’s very sad and beautiful, oh well. My father said, he said: Sonny, the angels aren’t having you, they can think again – tomorrow we’re going to Deventer by bike.’

‘All the way to another town by bike?’

‘Yes, he didn’t think the train was much fun and he really wanted the day to be a lot of fun. Do you want to hear the record again?’

‘Ten times at least.’

Zwaan laughed and said, ‘I’ve never played it for anyone before, well, no one from outside, that is.’

‘Am I from outside?’

‘Not any more,’ said Zwaan.

We played the record of ‘Sonny Boy’ at least twenty times. Zwaan cranked himself into a daze and had to change the needle twice.

As I trudged along the dark Van Woustraat, I thought about Aunt Fie. I hadn’t the faintest idea what time it was, but without a doubt she would know exactly what time it was. All I knew for certain was that it wasn’t night yet, just a very long evening.

I hope that she’s furious, I thought, I hope that she really gives me what for. But she won’t. Her eyes fill with tears if I so much as sniff.

Aunt Fie wasn’t angry, just reproachful.

‘You must never do this again, Thomas,’ she said. ‘I was terribly worried, it’s very bad of you, you’ll come to a bad end, would you like a glass of warm milk?’

I nodded.

She didn’t clip me round the ears. And now I had to carry her distress with me to that cramped spare room. Mum used to clip me round the ear, right and left, two red ears and everything was kept in perspective. An angry mother is better than a sorrowful aunt.

Aunt Fie clapped her hand in front of her mouth in fright.

‘My boy!’ she shouted. ‘Where on earth did you get that jersey?’

Oh dear, I thought, I forgot to take the thing off.

Luckily the small side room didn’t smell of sprouts. The lamp above the door gave hardly any light, not enough to read by.

I crept into bed and thought about Zwaan’s room.

Everything was different here. The marbled floor cloth was full of tears, those damned still life photos were hanging on the wall – they didn’t look as boring in the half-light, one showed a vase with two handles, beside the vase lay two pears. If I looked at it with my eyes half closed, I could see two eyes and a nose with crazy big nostrils, it was as if some scary bloke was peering at me, and then I feel asleep.

In the strange bed I kept hearing ‘Sonny Boy’.

In the house on the Weteringschans I wasn’t someone from outside any more. To my father I wasn’t someone from the outside either, but then what use was an old fellow like that?

Al Jolson loved his son so much, it made you feel upset but upset in a nice way.
The crazy thing was that I could vaguely remember having heard the song before.

I pulled the blankets over my head.

‘Sonny Boy’ droned on inside my head, with my eyes wide open I dreamed about
Den Texstraat. I saw the old man in braces and the boy who tapped his forehead.

What was it about the Den Texstraat?

I looked at the jersey for a moment or two. It was hanging none too tidily over the
back of a chair. I pressed Bet’s handkerchief to my lips.