

Kees the boy

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Theo Thijssen

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Author: Theo Thijssen

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© Translation from Dutch (2015), notes, chapter titles and map by
Bas Voorhoeve

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Ever so slightly abridged (less than 1% of the original text)
for an even more fluent read.

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*Un classico è appunto un libro
che non ha mai finito di dire
quel che ha da dire.*

*(A classic book is one
that has never finished saying
what it has to say.)*

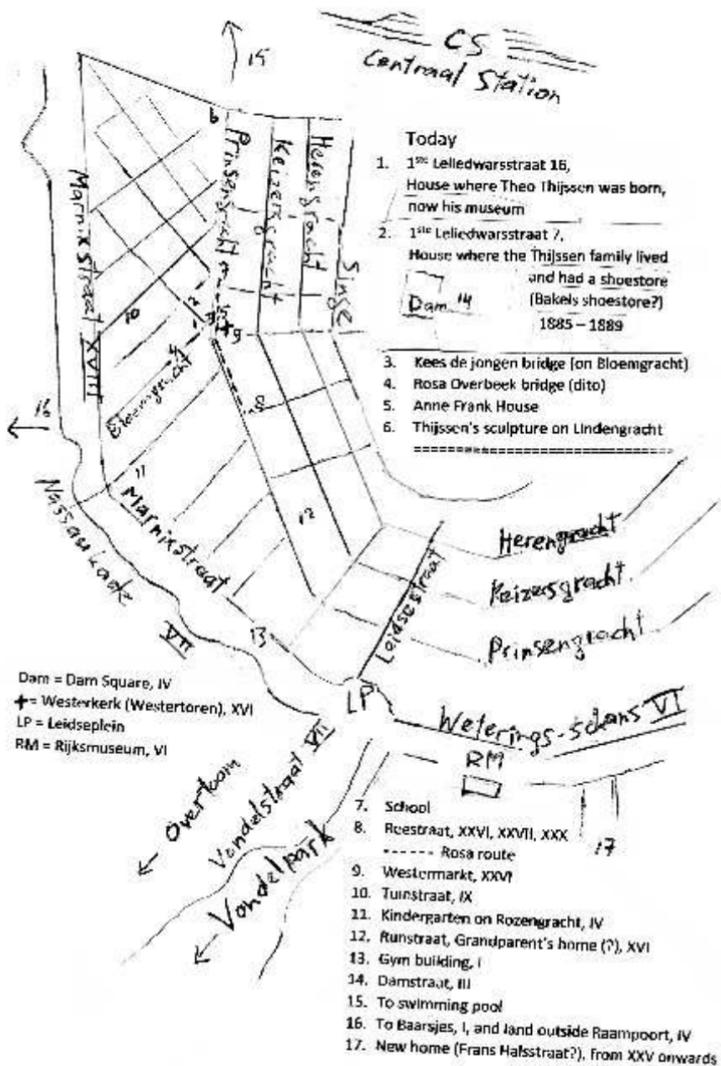
Italo Calvino

*An ode to the eternal youngster,
for weren't we, boys, all at one time Kees?
Unique, touching and, in places, uproariously funny.
A masterpiece.*

Geert Mak

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Dear reader

In November 2014 I did a long overdue rereading of *Kees de jongen*. After having, once again, been utterly spellbound, touched to the marrow and moved to tears (at times of emotion, at times of laughter) I found out that this gem has, astonishingly, never been published in English. My attempt at rectifying this deplorable situation has led to the book you are now holding in your hands: a Print on Demand book in search of a publisher who will take up in earnest the job of bringing this piece of human heritage to the English-speaking world.

So tell me, you say, why is it so good? Why should I read the story of a twelve-year-old lower middle-class boy in late 19th century Amsterdam, the story of his little concerns, fantasies, worries and preoccupations, his rather drab daily life and the daydreams that enable him to escape from it?

Well, in the first place, because these concerns and fantasies are universal. We've all had them at times (and still do, if we're honest enough to admit it). With its well dosed sentiment the story tugs at our heartstrings, but it is utterly convincing and true to life. Has the mind of a twelve-year-old ever been so intimately, so comprehensively, so compassionately exposed?

Next, the style is terse. The author is wary of florid writing, of giving his text airs and graces. He wants us to absorb the story effortlessly, without language getting in the way.

Third, it is funny. But the humour is not at anybody's expense, and it is not flaunted. A delicious irony pervades the book, an irony so subtle that at first it easily escapes notice. Thijssen takes his protagonist 100% seriously, sliding back and forth smoothly between (Kees') fantasy and reality (with events not always conforming to the way Kees had imagined them to

evolve), and in a truly masterful way makes us identify with the boy. We get carried away and - initially - forget to laugh. This is humour by stealth, humour-that-gets-under-your-skin, humour that tickles long after the fact. And this may be one reason why the novel has long been a cult book in the Netherlands. Had it been written by Chekhov, this novel would have been one of his major works. No less an authority than the current doyen of Dutch literature, Remco Campert, has deemed it one of the best ever written (and he wasn't thinking of Dutch literature only).

The novel has all the charm and *couleur locale* of Amsterdam at the turn of the 19th century, when winters were severe, lamps burned on paraffin and carriages and trams were horse drawn, but for sheer economy and pace of the narrative it could have been written yesterday.

But why elaborate? Please dip in and convince yourself!

Bas Voorhoeve, April 2017

PS Oh, one more question: is it autobiographical?

We have reason to suspect that it is, to a large extent. And the author, while denying the charge, has this to say: 'Due to a temporary slackening of the discipline that any writer of fiction ought to impose upon himself' (and we can see his grin here) 'some autobiographical detail *might* have slipped in here and there...'

Theo Thijssen (1879 – 1943) was a left-wing politician and a writer, but above all a gifted teacher, whose views on education were about 75 years ahead of his times. Throughout his life he battled old fashioned teaching methods, denouncing rote learning, cuts on education, jam-packed classrooms, disgracefully paltry teacher's salaries and the sin of not taking children seriously.

Schools throughout the Netherlands are named after him.

‘Our profession entails protecting the small and frail, and stimulating their growth. Our profession confers on us this strange passion for development, for making strong what is weak.’

Theo Thijssen



Hans Bayens' sculpture of Thijssen on Lindengracht shows him doing just that.

From the author's preface:

(...) But oh, so utterly unknown Kees may in the end turn out not to be, for many. I rather imagine that, when I manage to get into my stride with this description, some readers will say in places: 'Oh, *that* boy? Come to think of it, yes, I do remember now. Why, certainly, I used to know him too. For a while he even was a special friend of mine!'

It is to those readers that, with a wink, I dedicate this queer book.

Theo Thijssen, 1923

I A special kind of trot

As a young boy Kees had made several stupid mistakes, some of which he didn't even remember himself. He was reminded of one of them one day, when he was admiring the nice cloth binding with golden lettering his father used for keeping birth certificates and similar papers. It had been the cover for a book on Dutch History, and you could tell how thick a book it must have been by that cover. 'Yes, Kees' his father had said: 'That's from instalments to which I had subscribed, but it was a swindle because there was no end to the instalments. It all got twice as expensive as that salesman had said, and then I quit. And you then cut out all the pictures and played with them. And ruined all the instalments of course.'

'What a pity,' Kees sighed. 'Why didn't you rap me on the knuckles when I touched them? Fancy having all those instalments now...'

'Not me!' his father laughed. 'Your mother was far too happy that you were being good with them. Only the wrapper I kept: came in handy for papers and such.'

Kees shrugged. What use was a single wrapper? Good to provoke you; had seven coats of arms on it: the seven provinces; needn't ask what a fine Dutch History could have been in it!

'Up to where did those instalments go?' he then asked wistfully. And that the father didn't remember exactly.

'Was Napoleon in them?' Kees asked.

No, his father was sure *he* wasn't. But Michiel de Ruyter¹ was, he thought.

¹ Dutch naval hero comparable to Drake and Nelson. Caused the English considerable bother in the Second Anglo-Dutch War (1665-1667).

‘Ah god,’ said Kees, ‘then I could’ve had the whole Eighty-Years War.’²

As a small child you sure could do stupid things!

Another mistake he could clearly remember. That was when he had been invited to Christmas-tree at Cousin Breman’s. Quite a posh cousin, rather, at least at the time. They had a piano, and the two nieces had lessons on it from a special mistress. On Boxing Day a whole bunch of children had been invited. First they played games, like forfeits, with all that horrid kissing, but at the end there was a lottery, and he had won a packet of colour crayons. And his cousin, Dolf, who was now in secondary school, sturdy boy, mind you, had won a flying top. And then, how could he be so eternally stupid, he had been very little, not even at the big school yet, - then he had swapped with Dolf, and had come home with this humdrum flying top, the hook of which of course broke off within two days. And then the top, because of its shape, wasn’t even a decent *normal* top! What an ass he’d been. Because they had been really thick sticks of colour crayon, a pack of sixty cents at least. What fine landscapes he could have made with them. He could simply have gone out a-sketching, to the allotment gardens, where painters often sat, too. One of them would be apt to notice him. Would say:

‘Hey, that’s not bad, what you’re doing there. Here’s a better piece-a paper; try do it on *that*.’ And he’d draw. The water with

² Traditional name for the conflict that began as a series of revolts against Habsburg rule. The wars of 1568- 1648 hastened the decline of Spain, whereas the tiny Netherlands grew out to be an independent country, and even, briefly, *the* world hegemon, comparable to the US today. In the Glorious Revolution of 1688 England took over the relay baton. See Amy Chua 2009: *Day of Empire: How Hyperpowers Rise to Global Dominance - and Why They Fall*.

little waves, with shaded sides. The painter would call another one. Where'd ye learn to do that? Nowhere. - You're lying. - No sir, just at night-school drawn blocks and things, and once a jar. - Go tell the marines. But in the end they had to believe him of course. As a joke they'd let him try with *their* paint.

Wouldn't believe he had never held a brush in his hands!

And so he'd start visiting the painters at their homes and make good progress. Some of his paintings would be hung on the wall at home, with his name on them; and who knows how things might have gone on from there.

No chance of that now, what with all the obstruction he had encountered on entering night school. The teacher had then said: you will bring with you tomorrow night: one feather, a box of pastel and a piece of india-rubber; and practically all the boys got their father's permission to buy that. Cost thirty cents, if you wanted it good.

But his father had started grumbling. That the school should take care of that. That those were educational appliances, that that was what he paid his precious school fee for. You give this teacher my compliments, he had said, and tell him it's not my business. In the end I'll be paying for pens and exercise books, too. What nonsense, wasn't it? The school *did* give you things, but precisely this nasty stuff, with which you could never do any decent drawing: old feathers of earlier boys; those queer pieces of black rubber, 'horse rubber' the boys called it, that practically didn't erase; crayons that gave off dust, and if you broke a piece you'd be raked over the coals, too. Only the down-and-outs made do with it. But nearly all the boys had a box with their own stuff, and *those* were the boys who became the best at drawing.

He tried to explain this to his father, but his father wasn't exactly cooperative, because he kept saying: you give the teacher my compliments, and this, and that... things he daren't say to his teacher anyhow.

At last his mother had given him a ten cents piece, so he had at least been able to buy a good feather. But the piece of rubber he had, after a long search, bought in a small bookshop had been turned down by the teacher, because it “devoured paper”; and the cylinder of thin colour crayons at five cents, why, that had been really vicious stuff, scratchy, and far worse than the school crayons. He had fairly spoilt his drawings with them.

And of course, by degrees, it had arranged itself. By swapping and betting and playing at marbles and in a hundred ways he had managed to supply his drawing box with extra stuff, and nowadays he had colours, man, fabulous: a piece of violet he had, all the boys were jealous of it, so delicate... And he had a piece of rubber, ink rubber, the thing they use in offices! But meanwhile the other boys were ahead of him, he was in this crappy second group at drawing, and the teacher let him be, who knows for how much longer... How different things might have been if only he'd had equal chances from the outset. In order to become really famous you had to start from an early age, just like Rembrandt. Yes, where had this Rembrandt gotten all his brushes and paint from at so young an age? Definitely had had richer parents than *he* had...

But painters shouldn't take you for a layabout. Had to see, of course, that you were a decent boy.

Lately, one Wednesday afternoon, he had gone along with Jansen from seventh form. Was he bleak, he already wore some kind of trousers, with short men's socks and queer underpants with strings! *His* mother had better not try that on him, Kees! He'd as soon stay home every day, until his mother simply *had* to give him decent clothes. But Jansen was from the country, and peasant boys all wore this men's garb...

If they made sure they were standing at the Baarsjes by two o'clock, then two painters would be passing by. Jansen had

often gone with them. OK, they were there, and at long last one of these painters turned up. You should have seen Jansen act dumb: May I carry for you sir, may I carry for you sir. Take this then, the painter had said, and Jansen was made to carry the box and the little stool, just like some beggar boy. Kees, by contrast, showed the man he was Kees, and courteously took off his cap. The painter didn't notice. So there they went. You take this stool now, Jansen said. Well, Kees took it, of course, or else the painter would've said: why is that boy coming along.

They stopped diagonally opposite a wharf. The painter began to draw, and all afternoon he went on drawing, this couple of rotten barges on that wharf. Every few moments he made a mistake, and he was continuously erasing things again. Kees doubted if he was a real painter at all.

The boys sat down in the grass. It was rather boring. The painter said to Jansen: here's a ten cents piece. You go get two ounces of Maryland for me, forgot me tobacco again of course. Jansen ran off. And then Kees was alone with the painter. How great it would be, he thought, if the painter would only start asking. If he, too, had ever painted. If he wanted to become a painter. For of course he would long have noticed that Kees was a different kind of boy from Jansen.

Kees got up and began to study the sketch long and earnestly. Ha! The painter looked at him: 'That imp wouldn't have run off with me ten cents, would he?' he asked. 'Oh no,' Kees stammered with an effort. And he began to walk up and down. Thought of an answer. That Jansen was at his school, that he knew where he lived, and that the painter could, if need be, go to Jansen's father. That he'd find it a vile theft... And so the conversation might have got going. But he didn't very well dare begin, and the painter muddled on, on his sheet. Behind them there was a fine scenery, and Kees started looking admiringly at *that*. 'Hey,' he said at last, fairly loudly. 'Is he coming?' the painter asked. 'Not yet, sir, Kees

answered politely. The painter muttered; didn't even notice how Kees was appreciatively taking in the scenery!

At last Jansen came back. The two cents he could keep, and he didn't give Kees one of them. He would have said anyway: 'I'm not taking any dosh!'

Otherwise the afternoon was dull. The paint box remained closed, the painter didn't get on well.

For boredom Kees and Jansen started jumping back and forth across some ditches.

At half past four Kees had to go home; luckily he could just see the spire of the Westertoren. Jansen remained until the painter left as well. 'Well, bye then,' Kees said, and for the painter he took off his cap. That did make him look up at last, and he said: 'Cheerio, eh.'

And Kees understood, while he walked, that the man would be watching him go. Maybe, he thought, maybe he'll ask Jansen about me. If only Jansen would be honest then, and tell him that Kees so loved drawing, and had done so from childhood, but had poor parents. Who knows if the painter would not then send along a message for him...

But the next day Jansen didn't have a message, and when he related with relish how he had escorted the painter all the way home, all the way to Tweede Jan Steenstraat, Kees spoke: 'Well I'd rather be spared being the coolie boy for a splodge painter like that.'

'Because he didn't give *you* any money, eh?' Jansen said.

'Oh bumpkin,' Kees said contemptuously, 'I don't need anybody's brass, you lout, you go and be a beggar when you grow up, just wait and see what *I* am going to be.'

No, of course a painter had to see you paint. Not that you followed him like a doggie, but that you were drawing in your sketchbook, your solid, thick sketchbook with its grey cover... And of course if he, Kees, would later be sitting in the open

with other painters, oh well, yes, then they'd have these boys, like Jansen, whom for a couple of cents they made do everything. These shabby boys in trousers...

Only it was so difficult now, Kees thought, to get hold of a proper sketchbook. His mum and dad would see him coming! They never gave anything just like that. It always had to be his birthday, or Santa Claus. And *that* would be stupid, of course, *then* to ask for a sketchbook. Then you could get more than something of under a guilder.

Besides, if he should get something on an ordinary day, there were a hundred things he needed more than a sketchbook. For example: gym shoes!

For these days Kees worshipped a friend who was in a gym club. The friend had white gym shoes and white trousers, and on Thursday evenings he walked in the street in them. Kees then accompanied him up to the door of the gymnasium. There was always a crowd of boys, and nearly all of them wore the white trousers, the glorious white trousers, and all of them had white gym shoes on their feet. Not one of the boys would be standing still. They all stood trampling and jumping on the comfy shoes, and Kees found this only too natural. It wouldn't have surprised him at all if one of the boys had suddenly flown right across the canal. On his own feet he felt his leaden shoes.

One of the boys had a red and white striped shirt on his naked body, and loosely on top of that his jacket, and Kees found that even the jacket sat on him in an extraordinary way. The shirt had a name on it: 'The Batavian'.

'He's a foreman,' Kees' friend said, and Kees answered: 'Obviously, eh.'

'You should feel his muscles!' the friend then swanked.

Then the gym coach arrived and unlocked the door, and the boys went in. All except for Kees.

He hung around the building for a bit, and listened to the gym coach shouting his commands. But the windows were too high

to look inside, so Kees just walked off and mused on the gym shoes. He stopped to look at every shoe-shop window. Eighty cents they cost, the real gym shoes with gutta-percha soles. A shame, that they didn't sell this handicraft in *their* shop. Otherwise a pair might have been left over for him sooner or later, one that had some fault that you didn't see anyway. You cleaned them every week with pipe clay. Chalk would ruin them. Oh, they could last you a long time.

At home he would put out a feeler, when his shoes were broken: much better to buy gym shoes than have the shoes repaired. But his mother said that *that* would be out the back door. And when he gave it a little try and said that you walked so smoothly on these shoes – he dared not call them gym shoes – his mother retorted that he would *then* in all probability hang out in the street the whole blessed day. He might be grateful that he got whole shoes on his feet in time...

This friend had picked up a peculiar way of trotting at the gym club. Had learnt it from a 'foreman.' Whenever you wanted to make good time you inclined forwards a bit, as if falling at every step, and then you just swung your arms back and forth. To this way of trotting Kees specially applied himself. It *ought* to be done on gym shoes, of course, but the main thing still was that your arms went back and forth. He imported this kind of skating at school and had great success with it. For weeks on end the boys of that school could be seen practising the new trot with serious faces. When between twelve and two they went to the swimming pool they were always in a hurry, and then the skating came in handy. The boys told each other to the half minute how little time it had taken them to get from school to the swimming pool, and started dubbing it the 'swimming pool trot'.

For Kees the swimming pool trot was a bliss in his life. Whenever he had to go on some distant errand and was trudging along the canal as any insignificant boy, he would, all of a sudden, set off in the swimming pool trot. And truly, he would then imagine many a one watching him go. He imagined having gym shoes on his feet; gradually felt himself dashing forth in white gym trousers. Sometimes he even came to the point of imagining a flashy name printed on his shirt. The name 'Vitesse' appealed to him. He had seen it on a small boat on the Amstel once. Locomotives could also have such exquisite names!

One day Kees was going with his mother on an errand. The mother walked rather fast and Kees, quite a small boy still, for his mother was a big woman, Kees took the swimming pool trot. He spoke not a word, but enjoyed it in silence. Ever more energetically his arms went; everybody would certainly think: look, that must be a boy from the gym club...

Suddenly his mother stopped dead. 'What's wrong with *you*?' she asked cruelly. He said nothing was, and they walked on; Kees calmly skating at first, but by degrees his motions became more sensational, and the mother ordered: 'For *goodness* sake, stop waving your arms like that! You look like an afflicted. The *one* time you're out on the street with me can't you behave yourself?'

Kees didn't answer. The swinging of his arms he left out. But still, furtively, he kept trying to give something special to his gait. Oh well, that his mother was grumbling about the swimming pool trot he could understand. In that he felt her usual hate against gym shoes. For surely, that would have been possible, instead of repairing? Would save some costs again, after all...

So he kept his peace. Didn't even explain that it was the swimming pool trot. Then he saw a shoe shop, one with gym shoes in the window. He blushed. Fancy that his

mother wanted to surprise him and said: Well, Kees, let's just step in here.

But oh yes, they walked right on. After all, you were bleak when you walked with you ma. Only a drear did...

What was fortunate: the gym teacher at school was very impartial. Some of the boys would come to school in their gym shoes, and with their shirt, the striped shirt, under their blouse. And they thought they'd get good marks because, naturally, they could do all the tricks better than the other boys, like Kees. And they thought that because of the good marks they would walk first in the row again the next month. But lo, the gym teacher would then give precisely no marks at all, and simply say: 'Don't give yourself airs just because you happen to be wearing a pair of gym shoes: they won't cure you of your hunched back if you sit slumped, or of your pale face if you smoke fags.'

Very impartial the gym teacher was, and because of that Kees regularly walked with the first three in the row. And when the teacher once asked: 'Who can run an errand for me this Wednesday afternoon?' and practically all the boys raised their hands, then he immediately selected him, Kees.

It was a nifty errand. With a message to the 'gym-building'. There he was let into a large hall, an enormous hall, with eternally high horizontal bars, and from a special storage box the caretaker got him two fencing masks, a whole bunch of those funny, thick gloves and a bunch of floppy foils. All of this had to be brought to the gym teacher's house. 'Don't you play any tricks with them, mind,' the caretaker said, and Kees smiled: the very thought was akin to blasphemy to him, and with a head filled with glory he set out on his journey. The swimming pool trot was a bit awkward now, because with one hand he had to hold the masks and the gloves, which dangled over his shoulder, and in the other he held the foils, that would

better have been bound together with a piece of string. But some gymnastic-like quality he did manage to put into his gait. Nearly all the people stared. Thought, of course, that boy is on his way to his fencing class. Is bringing his own foils, that he's so accustomed to.

A boy stopped him: 'What's them there?'

The ass didn't even understand what fencing masks were. Kees had never seen them either, and yet had understood at first sight.

'Masks,' he said curtly. 'You put 'em on when you go practice fencing.'

'Put one on me then,' the boy asked.

'If I were batty,' Kees said, 'I'm far too careful with my masks,' and he walked on.

So the gym teacher was a fencing teacher too, he thought.

Fancy, quite possible: presently he'd arrive at his house.

'Well, Bakels, you there already? Just hand them over, thank you. But don't run off now so fast. You're not in a hurry, are you?'

'No sir, I've got all afternoon, we only eat at five.'

'Well, then I might as well teach you some fencing.

Or can you do it already?'

'No sir. Did hear and read about it, though.'

'Put your head into this, then.'

And the two of them would put on their masks.

'Come with me to the garden, we'll have space there.'

And they'd start.

'You've been telling me tales, Bakels, you've done it before. I'm hard put to you.'

'No sir, honestly.'

'Well, you're talented then, boy, very talented. Let's pause a minute. Tiring, isn't it?'

And they both sat panting on a bench in the garden. The

teacher's wife or mother or some such brought them a glass of lemonade.

'Don't down it too fast, that's dangerous when you're sweating.'
Of course, Kees drank carefully.

Again a boy stopped him.

'Are those real swords, kid?'

'No, they're made of candy,' Kees said, and he walked on.
The idea, that he'd be walking with wooden foils!

'Right, gloves on, masks on and at it again,' the teacher would say. (Had taken them off, obviously, to drink that lemonade.)
Came the Mrs with a box of biscuits.

'No, thank you madam, I don't fancy biscuits.'

'Come on now, silly boy, no need to pretend.'

'No really, madam, I don't much care for biscuits.'

'Why, you're just like your teacher!'

For he, too, would decline, naturally.

Then they fought another game. It ended a draw.

He was there and rang the bell. Third floor, he saw by the name plate. So no garden.

In the attic then of course: the teacher had a large, spacious attic, specially fitted up for it. Who knows flying rings would be hanging there, too.

It was the teacher himself, in his shirt sleeves, who opened the door.

'Well, Bakels, that *is* fast. Can you carry it up for me as well?'

Of course, Kees was already climbing the stairs. Clumping a bit, because they were narrow stairs, but he got there.

'Right, put 'm down there, will you? Thanks a lot, eh. And... wait a moment.' Kees saw him reach for his purse.

'No sir,' he said hurriedly, 'no sir, no thank you, that's not what I did it for.'

'Oh come.'

‘No sir, I can’t take any money: my parents won’t have it. I’m not allowed to.’

‘Well,’ the teacher said pensively, slowly putting away his purse again, ‘why, that’s a pity, boy, and I haven’t got anything else to give you.’

Kees groped his mind for a way of explaining, to convince the teacher that all thought of accepting money had been far from him, then to intimate that he had long been a silent admirer of the art of fencing; but he couldn’t find the words, and, sighing sheepishly, he said:

‘Yes...’

‘Well,’ the teacher cut the Gordian knot, ‘in that case, just thanks an awful lot, Bakels, and I’ll see you later this week.’

Kees took off his cap and went.

How stupid he had been, how darn stupid he had been again! Couldn’t he simply have said: ‘Accept something for it I won’t. But I *would* rather like to find out more about fencing, and actually see it done.’ Or if he had just run his fingers over the foils, and said:

‘Fine foils.’

Then he might now have been fencing in that spacious attic.

But who knows...

‘I’ll see you later this week, Bakels,’ the teacher had said.

Who knows...

He came home and gave his mother a short account.

‘Fencing masks?’ she asked. ‘What kind of things are they?’

And Kees explained it all minutely, described the foils, too.

But much impressed his mother was not: ‘I don’t see what such roughhousing is good for,’ she said.

And Kees understood: if ever he were to become a great fencer, it would all have to be done in secret.

II Rosa Overbeek

Kees had long felt that he was really *more* than the other boys in his class. That he was actually degrading himself a bit by joining them in playing games.

And then a new child came into the class: Rosa Overbeek. She had been at a posh institute and had learnt about pronouns and worse things.

Kees noticed that this Rosa kept an eye on him from her first day onwards. She didn't mix with the other girls. Well, understandably not. And she must be wondering, Kees thought, why *he* still *did* rub shoulders with the boys. He, too, would do this no more. He would go his own way as a reclusive sage.

At night, in bed, he thought very deeply about this. Rosa Overbeek and him, two superior minds, elevated high above all the others. Something like that it had to be. Only, it was a bit difficult to put this into effect for him. It was an easy enough job to become a real drear, one that nobody wanted to have anything to do with, but *that* was not how Rosa Overbeek was. Had she wanted to, she could at a single stroke have become the chieftain of the girls, so to speak. But she didn't want to. And yet she had a kind of grandeur, and that kind of grandeur he, too, wanted to have.

But what a tough job this would be! There was, in the first place, his clothing. He had miserable clothes, that kept going to pieces. Nor did his garb constitute young gentlemen's attire. He could feel that, for example, on Mondays, when he went to school in a stiffly ironed blouse. It wasn't refined, you see. Young gentlemen, the likes of which she must have been used to at the institute, had these suits of thin material, that gave when you inclined. That was the kind of suit he needed.

And then there was his hair. That was the barber's fault, the miserable barber, who laughed when he asked for a quiff and

always gave him a crew cut, because his mother never wanted to give him more than five cents. And what kind of trouble would it have been?

There was one bright spot: he had a good-looking tie. Indeed, a somewhat dignified tie, made of stuff that never wrinkled. True, it had a little hole in it, but you could make that disappear in the knot. And that tie was the starting point for his fantasies when he lay in bed: if, to go with that tie, he'd only have a flat collar, then already his blouse would look more refined. And then he'd arrive at school with this profound gaze. 'Are you still playing?' the boys would modestly ask. He was deep in thought and said: 'Eh?' And the boys would slink off to start their game.

He walked calmly on and encountered Rosa Overbeek. She would then think: 'Oh, there's this boy who contrasts so with the others. How has he got to be at this school where he doesn't belong? What will he be when he grows up?'

He made as if he didn't notice her, and yawned involuntarily in passing. And she thought: 'He doesn't feel at home among these children, just as I do not.'

Later she'd be famous. A singer probably, and he a flute player. Some flute players could with their playing bring tears to your eyes. Then they'd meet again. Or perhaps, again, he was a captain. Then he'd have a sailor's walk, and shake hands with her with his callous grasp. In any case his name would be in the paper one day, and then a footman would come to tell him that there was a lady who wished to see him... The lady had heard about him, and was now so exceedingly curious; if he'd only tell her if he was the Kees who, as a boy, had been at such-and-so school. And he, in a strange voice, would say: 'Yes, Rosa Overbeek, that Kees am I.' She started for a moment. And then they'd tell each other the story of their lives.

One Tuesday morning Kees was in front of the school very early. There were as yet few children about, not a single boy from his class. A few girls, yes, but not Rosa Overbeek. A pity, thought Kees, and he felt if his pretty tie sat well, with the hole out of sight. He looked around a couple of times. If she were approaching in the distance he would certainly happen to be heading that way. Didn't she always come from the direction of Westermarkt? Very composedly he set out in that direction, and bravely and decidedly he told himself: 'I'll just go and head for her.'

But at Leliegracht he was almost run down by four boys from his class.

'Why dash, where are *you* going?' one of them asked. Kees turned around without answering and walked back with them. Good thing he hadn't progressed any further than he had, for then they would surely have noticed something!

He sat down on the steps near the school, stroked his forehead, said 'Dear me' and yawned. She still wasn't coming. The boys started playing leap-frog. 'Don't feel like it,' Kees said, and he remained sitting on the steps.

'Come on, you drear!' the boys called.

'Oh, go to blazes,' Kees said, and once more he yawned.

The others let him be and went on playing.

Then Rosa Overbeek passed, with her satchel. Not one of the other girls had a satchel!

She looked at him and Kees blushed. It was very sticky.

'Come on now, drear, come and play!' one of the boys shouted.

'Fraid you got to give a back again?'

'Get lost!' Kees called. 'What if I've got a headache?'

And he followed Rosa Overbeek with his glance.

But suddenly he imagined that the others might have noticed.

He got up and stretched himself.

Once more he looked in the direction of Rosa. Then he grinned and said:

‘Seems this girl of Overbeek pretty well stinks with conceit.’
And he gave the boy who stood stooped a push and said:
‘All right, I’ll give a back. May make me head pass.’
So there he stood; and again and again he felt the hands of the boys heavily on his bent back. And meanwhile he had a nice opportunity, past his elbow, to watch Rosa Overbeek go...

Two girls from their class approached her, and the three of them walked on with arms locked. Well, she did that also to arouse no suspicion of course. They walked... where would they turn around? Ha, there: they turned. They were coming his way again.

The boys kept jumping. The last one never forgot to say ‘foot,’ and then Kees had to go and stand one foot further on. He had just stood up for that when the girls passed them. ‘Well, come on, give a back again now!’ one boy impatiently ordered him. Kees clearly saw Rosa Overbeek smile, and he felt he had to uphold his honour as a boy.

‘I won’t be ordered about by you,’ he said, remaining defiantly upright. But then all at once he felt that that miserable tie had come loose. He dared not feel with his hand, but the hole must have come into view. So *that* was why she had smiled, half pityingly. Yes, he had clearly seen that... And submissively he stooped again and let the boys jump over him until the school opened. Meanwhile he lugged the tie a bit, and made sure the hole was invisible again.

When the school was in he had picked up courage again. Rosa walked past him, and *they looked each other in the eye*.

‘Bakels!’ one of the boys hollered.

‘Hullo,’ he called back, echoing down the corridor. He turned back and gratifyingly passed Rosa Overbeek *again*, and *again* they gave each other a glance. But he walked straight on to the boy who had called him and began a conversation with him, a very lively one, to forestall any suspicion. He’d be just as clever as Rosa, mind you.

That morning they happened to have gym first, so Rosa swiftly receded from Kees' mind. But gym had been going on for half an hour or so when the headmaster came in, with Truus, Kees' little sister, by the hand.

All gym immediately stopped, and Kees took the worst fright of all. Of his own accord he left his row and walked up to the headmaster. 'Bakels, someone has come to collect you. Just go with your sister, the lady is waiting outside.' And he nodded in the direction of the door. And while the headmaster walked up to the gym teacher, to explain, no doubt, Kees went out onto the corridor with his little sister.

In the street stood Miss Smit, their neighbour. She was half crying, gave Truus a kiss and said:

'You must come home with me immediately. Your father has come home so bad.'

'Slap, an accident,' Kees thought. An accident with his father, and who knows if that hadn't occurred the very moment when he was exchanging glances with that miserable girl.

'What happened?' he asked.

But Miss Smit didn't answer him; she just kept saying 'there now, there now' to Truus, who was crying ever worse. 'Miss, what's wrong with Dad?' Kees asked, who was now beginning to get nervous too. But Miss Smit again didn't hear him. And suddenly Kees thought: what a fool I am, to keep walking so slowly with this lot, when I can be there twice as fast. And without saying another word he ran ahead. Who knows how his mother was waiting for him now, to get medicated cotton-wool or something. He ran and ran...

There was nobody in the store. Through the passage he rushed. At the entrance to the room he stopped. His mother stood at the bedstead and softly slid the curtains to. 'Then I'll be back shortly and have another look,' the doctor was just saying. He lumbered into Kees for a second, and then was into the passage and gone.

Mum saw Kees. He suddenly couldn't speak from fear. His mother lifted him up and gave him a kiss. A sob shook her body. Then she pushed him through the passage, towards the kitchen.

'Go and get ice quick. Here, here's a bucket. For a quarter ice, you know where, over the bridge.'

Kees took the bucket and carried it so that it wouldn't jingle. Hop, out the door, onto the bridge...

The way back he couldn't walk so fast: there was one big chunk of ice that kept wanting to slither out of the bucket. His mother stood at the door to take the bucket. She gave Kees a slip of paper, he recognized the prescription and was on his way again.

To be on the safe side he held his hands as at gym, at the double march, and breast forwards. He must now hold out, his father was in danger and could perhaps be saved... There was that stitch in the side, he had also felt it just now. Bother, just brazen it out, as if you felt nothing. Was the spleen played that trick on you, the teacher had told them; that was why some runners simply had their spleen surgically removed... Ouch, now it began even worse. Just walk normal for a bit, until it was gone; just push your hand firmly into your side, that usually helped. So, and now stealthily get into the double again, as if you wanted to fool that spleen... Ouch, why, this was just too bad. He had to stand still for it. Shame, shame, that that stitch should be there; he wasn't tired yet by a long shot. Why, he was hardly panting!

What if he'd just push on regardless? He'd perhaps drop dead at it. What a boy, everyone would say: ran himself to death because of his father...

He started again, slowly at first. The stitch was gone. Or no, it was still half there, ready to strike again as soon as Kees would get into the double. Little test: ouch, blast, too damn bad!

He *had* to stop again. It wouldn't work. He actually had to walk, walk leisurely, as if he was in no hurry at all! Well, fortunately, here was the pharmacist's.

'Collect in an hour,' the employee said. And Kees politely answered 'Yes sir,' and left.

But out in the street he was sorry. This must be a mistake. This wasn't possible.

Collect in an hour! He balked at it, but he had to: he stepped back into the pharmacist's.

'I'm sorry sir, but isn't there some mistake, wasn't it a... an emergency prescription or something?'

The employee gave him a brief smile: 'No, boy, collect in an hour, no sooner.'

And Kees was back in the street again. No fighting *that*. But he had warned that it was an emergency prescription, and if the medicine would come too late for his father, well, he would bear witness that he had expressly come back. But perhaps the doctor had come again. *He* would know at once.

At Miss Smit's Truus sat playing in the window with Thomas. So the children couldn't stay at home, for the bustle of course. All, it was quiet in the house. His mother was in the kitchen.

'Collect in an hour,' said Kees. 'What next, Mum?'

'Nothing,' his mother said. 'But how you've been running, Kees.'

She sat down on the kitchen chair and pulled him against her.

'How's Dad now?' Kees whispered. 'Asleep?'

'I think so.' And she sighed, and again squeezed Kees.

'Has Dad had an accident?'

Because he didn't really know a thing yet.

'Yes,' Mum said, and again she sighed, and Kees felt her trembling. 'Dad has coughed very badly, a terrible coughing

fit... and then he was very sick... a handkerchief full... of blood... from the coughing...' 'Of course,' Kees understood. 'And now he needs rest, an awful lot of rest, today he's not allowed to move at all, actually.' She got up suddenly and sneaked to the room. Kees remained in the kitchen. He drank some water, for the running had made him pretty thirsty. He felt slightly relieved at what his mum had told him. Sick for coughing, well, that could happen. And you could very well cough your throat to pieces, too...

He went up to the door of the room and looked inside. My, how *very* carefully Mum handled those curtains!

In the afternoon he went to school again as usual. Truus was so happy to be sleeping at Miss Smit's. Simply childish...

The teacher looked at him intently. Didn't trust it, perhaps, that he had stayed away all morning?

'Been running errands the whole morning, fetched ice and been to the pharmacist's twice.'

'Yes, all right,' the teacher said. 'And how is your father doing now?'

'So-so,' Kees said. 'Needs a lot of rest.'

'I see,' the teacher said, still with this mistrustful look on his face.

They had reading. The boy next to him gave him a nudge.

'I know what your father got.'

'Oh yeah?'

'Spitting blood!'

'Ah,' Kees said, suddenly furious. And he gave that boy a kick as vicious as he had never before kicked any boy: purposely in his ankle. The boy barely managed to keep silent.

'And if I get you in the street I'll knock you to jelly,' Kees hissed.

And then he ostensibly joined in with the reading, all the while hoping just one thing: that he could keep himself from crying, that he could please keep himself from crying...

At geography, fortunately, his nervousness was over. They did the two maps of the world, eastern and western hemisphere. One by one the teacher pointed out all the countries to them, and Kees observed with great satisfaction that he was now learning all those nice, distant postage-stamp countries. When would they get to Guatemala? But it was four o'clock ere they had done half of the countries; for the teacher might well have said that he would restrict himself to pointing and naming, but he kept forgetting and would start telling anyway...

Because of Truus Kees couldn't walk fast, or else he would have rushed home. But now that his father was ill he had to walk together with Truus. The silly child was once again happy that she was to go to Miss Smit's again, for the peace. They would eat so good at Miss Smit's, she and Tom. Kees played along with her childishness:

'Wonderful, eh Truus, lovely eh? Yes, I wish I could come too.' But boy, was he glad he could go to his own home. How many ages it was since he had last seen his father, he thought. Not since yesterday evening at dinner! And suddenly this became his nearest wish: to be with his father, however briefly, even if only for a few seconds. He'd ask straight away if he could...

Mother was in the kitchen. 'Hi Mum. Mum...'

He wanted to broach the subject, but dared not.

'Hey Kees. You know, Dad is a whole lot better, and if you'd come to the bedside for a moment. But no bustle, mind.'

There, see. Did he or did he not have one hell of a father. Strong man all the same, you see, to get better so fast – and Kees didn't even answer but tiptoed to the room. The curtains of the bedstead were wide open, Kees saw his father lying there. Gee, not at all ill he looked. He even laughed at Kees, and said: 'Well, boy.' True, he spoke a bit softly, but that was only logical, wasn't it? His one hand lay on the covers, and it

stirred. Kees understood immediately, and grasped his father's hand. 'Hi Dad.'

There was a brief silence. The father laughed at Kees again, and, somewhat at a loss, they squeezed hands once more.

'When will you be well again, sort of?' Kees asked.

The father gave him a reassuring nod.

'Was the ice good?' Kees asked. He was a bit curious to know *where* his father had put the ice, but his father just nodded.

'Had the continents today, Dad.'

'Crimy,' the father whispered. And his hand stirred again, and then held on to Kees' hand.

'Ought to have an atlas now, really,' Kees said. His father squeezed his hand and nodded yes.

'But there's no hurry at all, you know. None of the boys 's got an atlas yet, except for Koppe, but that's an old rag that I wouldn't even want to have.'

Then Mother came in.

'Right Kees, Dad needs his rest again now. And you have to do some shopping for us.' Kees gave his father's hand one last squeeze, his father gave him a wink, and then Kees followed his mother out of the room.

All right, he thought, so the accident is in fact over now. Dad will be ill for a couple of more days, but he'll soon be quite well again. Marvellous. And he did the shopping a-whistling.

III Passage Damstraat

But get well again very soon Kees' father did not, and in the ensuing weeks Kees had to go to the doctor and the pharmacist's almost every day. He found it essential to make a good impression on these two people. At the doctor's that was difficult: he had this thick doormat at the entrance to his consulting room, which Kees never managed to step across in a casual way. If he kept ostentatiously wiping his feet on it the doctor would shout at him if he had any plans of ever shutting that door? And then, mercilessly, this mat would get caught in it.

It was also irksome that the doctor always listened with only half an ear, and thus got him confused. Then Kees felt himself a clumsy stammerer; *he, Kees!* On his way to the doctor, and also in the waiting-room, leaned against the wall, he often resolved for this once to enter very much at ease; to have his cap off immediately, to wipe his feet while softly closing the door, meanwhile saying: 'Compliments from...'. But this light-and-airy entrance never succeeded.

At the pharmacist's things went better. For one thing, he could propitiate the man by always remembering the empty bottles. Then he had only to hand in the slip of paper and say: 'A prescription, please sir,' and then to wait. Usually the employee told him to be back in an hour, and then it was a matter of simply saying: 'Thank you, sir.' Sometimes, again, he had to await the preparation, and then he settled down on the brown sofa that stood against the wall, and read the inscriptions on all the boxes and bottles. That was sublime: he then felt himself being watched with interest by the pharmacist himself, who sat in the room behind the curtains, and as with a supernatural thirst for learning he let his gaze rest for a minute on every Latin

inscription. Any moment, surely, the man could emerge from his room and ask: 'You would like to learn Latin, wouldn't you laddie?' He'd stammer yes sir, and they'd come to an agreement: one lesson every week for free. In this way he would in secret be learning Latin, too...

His teacher at school was easy-going. Kees was late repeatedly, because it was always so crowded at the doctor's. Then he'd just say: 'Been to doctor,' and it would be OK. Every now and then the teacher would say: 'Oh, by the way, how *is* your father now?'

But well, what could he say, improving steadily, but very slowly. Everyone got used to it; the boys had even forgotten that his father was ill. And at home, too, the gravity had worn off. Truus and Thomas were back and could play again, just as if there were no sick person.

Only, every other day after dinner Kees had to go to his grandparents, to tell them how Dad was doing. That was a bothersome job, because he never really had anything to tell them. If he left too soon his granddad would say: 'Are you on pins and needles again?' And if he stayed a bit longish, playing with the cat for example, that had learnt some tricks, then his grandma would ask:

'Can your mother do without you so long, now that your dad is ill?'

You just couldn't please them.

And it always smelled so stuffy there, with a kind of old-folks-smell that sometimes made him queasy. The tea warmer usually smoked, too. Then he would warn his grandmother, for he could smell it even at the front door.

To go there with Truus was out of the question. She couldn't keep still, laughed too much, and sometimes would even begin to sing. And then Granddad would say: 'Aren't you ashamed, what with this illness of your father, to make such a hulla-