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People Like You Don't Go There

by Pia de Jong

'Has it already been a year?' My father raises his voice at our neighbor, who stands at the front door collecting money for the St. Vincent's Society for the Poor. I never see this neighbor, so when I do, I am always surprised he still lives next door. His son Lucas stands behind him, hiding in his shadow. Lucas is 12, my age, but he looks like a 7-year-old. In his outstretched hand he holds a brass collection tray, which he mechanically shakes up and down.

"Nina, come here," my father says gruffly. He is tired. He has been working long nights, on overtime, at the paper mill. The creases in his face around his mouth seem deeper than usual, his lips are pale.

My father fishes some coins out of his pocket and let them trickle into my hand the same way he does every Sunday in church when they pass the collection box. He then pushes me forward with the flat of his palm on the small of my back. To avoid looking at Lucas, I quickly bend over to peer into the collection tray. At the bottom is a threadbare piece of green felt that curls at the edges. The tray is completely empty.

Suddenly Lucas crumples over, clutching his hand to his stomach, as if I've punched him. He lets the tray fall to the ground. Then he grins at me with his crooked teeth, his face as pallid as someone's who has not been outdoors for months. The body odor around him makes me step back, and I let the coins spill on the floor.

Luke giggles, then makes a farting noise. "Nina poops in her pants, Nina poops in her pants," he cackles at me, then spins in a circle like a deranged acrobat. "Luke, stop!" I shout, terrified that he will fall and crack his head open. "You could hurt yourself."

He grabs both of my hands and looks at me pleadingly. "Nina," he says, "Nina, Nina," and he begins to sob.

"Blessed are the meek," my father says, laughing, and slaps the neighbor between his shoulder blades.

The neighbor shrugs but doesn't twitch a muscle. He wears corduroy trousers and a matching jacket, as if this were Sunday morning and he was going to church. "Lucas, pick up the money," he whispers. The boy drops to his knees on the tiles. He clumsily searches for the coins among the weeds. Then he lets them fall into the collection tray beside him. I stand there, frozen, watching the sun play through his blond hair, as coarse as grass after a long hot summer.

"Nina, get the candy drum," orders my father.

The drum is actually a tin jar for candy and cookies with an engraving on it of the Grand Palace in Brussels. It is full of licorice and caramels and chocolates that my father gathers from everywhere. It is a recurring point of disagreement between my parents. My mother thinks that the body is a temple only natural things should enter. She finds sugar to be dangerous. It is bad for your teeth, in addition to causing you to get fat and giving you cancer. My Aunt Ellie who was way too fat got cancer and died within three months.

My father, on the other hand, believes that candy is God's delightful gift to humanity. He feels he has a right to enjoy unlimited sweetness whenever he feels like it. Especially if he is up in the attic absorbed with his inventions. Every minute when he is not at work in the mill, he is upstairs tinkering. The mill puts food on our table, but every other breath he takes is about his inventions.

"Mark my words, Nina," he often says. "One day, one of my patents will make us rich." That day he will finally be recognized as the genius he is.

"Daddy wants to give candy to crazy Luke," I say as casually as possible to my mother. She is ironing my father's underwear. She bends over the ironing board, with a red face. Her wispy hair is tucked under a scarf, because she finds nothing more annoying than hair falling in her face during ironing. Beads of sweat glisten on her upper lip. She wears a green-and-white checked apron over her skirt. It's the only apron she wears. I once gave her another one for her birthday, embroidered with red tulips, but she never wears that one. On the kitchen table sits a laundry basket with a pile of wrinkled trousers in it. Next to it is a neat stack of folded clothes ready to go into the cabinet.

"Well, for heavens sake," she says. "Dad, again." She slaps the iron down with a bang, then plucks a wrinkled apple from the fruit bowl and pushes it into my hand.

"Here, give him this one."

The apple is soft. When I press it with my thumb and forefinger, dark juice, smelling like vinegar, seeps out. I know Lucas does not like apples. He loves to suck on magic balls, which he keeps at night in a jar for the next day.

My mother goes back to her ironing. Beside her on the table is a bowl of carrots. She nibbles on them throughout the day, like a rabbit, because she thinks carrots contain every vitamin a person needs.

"Well," she says. "Are you going to take it to him?"

"It's disgusting," I answer.

"There's nothing wrong with that apple," she says. "It is still full of Vitamin C. Don't be so cheeky."

"I have to do my homework," I say, walking out of the kitchen. From the top of the stairs I call, "Daddy is still outside, waiting for the candy drum."

Looking out of my bedroom, from behind the curtains, I can see my father still talking to our neighbor. Now it's about one of his hobbyhorses: believers who attach more importance to

the rules of the church than to the direct contact with God. "They cling to some loudmouth on the altar," says my father. "While it is actually as simple as this. God listens to his people, but you have to make yourself heard." My father knows what he is talking about. He tells me that he often gets direct messages from God, helping him out with his experiments.

Lucas sits on the ground, still holding the collection tray with his dirty fingers. He hums a song whose words I remember from long ago. We used to play every day with each other, Luke and me. In a photo that is somewhere in my parents' closet, you can see us sitting together on a blanket in the garden. We wear the same shirt and pants, and the same sun hat.

Lucas and I would walk together to kindergarten. He was a head smaller than me, but I proudly walked with him and showed him off to everyone. I used to introduce him as my little brother. If anyone thought him strange, I would give him an elbow in the stomach. Lucas would then clap his hands for me.

When my father starts coughing, the neighbor says, "You understand, of course you do ... but we need to move on, you see ... we have more people to visit today, and well, my son ..." He taps his forehead as if he were tipping his hat. My father bites his lip. When he is upset, his face flushes and his eyes widen. He looks that way when he comes back from work and his boss has done something he does not agree with.

"Luke, we're off," our neighbor says and takes his son's hand. But Lucas pushes him away.

"Come on, boy," he says, now more firmly. "We will continue to collect money for St. Vincent."

"Where is Nina?" Luke suddenly cries out. "Nina, Nina, Nina!" His voice squeaks like chalk on a blackboard. I cover my ears with my clammy hands.

My father sneezes now, loudly. "It is because of all the pollen," he says, hacking. "It's made worse by modern fertilization techniques."

"I want to see Nina!" Luke screams now. "Nina, where are you!" Then he lies down on the ground, huddled up like a baby, and starts to cry.

My father glares at him. Then he shouts, "Where the hell is Nina, with that goddamn candy drum?"

As I roll my bike out of the garage, I can picture the scenes that will follow next, as if it's a movie preview. My mother will pull out the plug of the iron and grab the candy drum from its shelf. She will grudgingly give it to my father. He will then shake it up and down in front of Lucas' face until he grabs for a piece of candy. Then my father will plunge his hand into the candy drum, pulling out fistfuls of his beloved chocolate fudge. Smacking his lips, he will then say to the neighbor and his son, "Unless we become like a child, we will not enter the kingdom of heaven."

But, by then, I already am riding my bike as fast as I can as far away as I can. I ride down our street, past the railroad track, down the long path along the canal. Here there are no farmers' houses, just sheds with some animals huddled inside. The sun is shining, and the pedals spin so fast that I am gasping for air. But the farther from home I get, and the longer the wind blows through my hair, the calmer I become. After fifteen minutes I'm out of town, and I finally start cycling slower. Here, the greens in the fields are softer, and the sky is brighter than the sky outside my bedroom window. Even the trees rustle differently here in the wind, perhaps, maybe, because they are not pruned.

I'm off to see Manfred, who lives in a different world. I begin to notice the smell of burned tires around me. Now I have to pay attention. I almost miss the road — there is no sign for his place — stopping so fast I fall off my bike. When my father drove in his car past this place, he would always say to me, "People like you don't go there."

I take a moment to lean against a tree. I can see Manfred's rusty trailer hidden between piles of junked cars and scrap metal. Scattered everywhere are nails, screws, and pieces of broken tiles. I step carefully over a few worn tires.

Manfred, as always, acts as if he has been expecting me all along. He sits in front of his truck on a wooden stool. "Coffee, missy?" he asks, and puts two dirty mugs on an upside-down beer crate. He finds a spoon encrusted with dried sugar.

Manfred plays by his own rules, answers to no one. Rumors say that he fathered a child with his own daughter. A made-up story, of course. I cannot imagine him anywhere else than in his car junkyard. I drink my coffee with small sips and then wander around between the rusted cars. I imagine I am driving in Monte Carlo on a wide boulevard and a boy in a car with an open roof waves at me. His teeth gleam in the sunlight.

I love to look through glove compartments and in the hidden pockets behind seats. I have found so many wonderful things. Torn maps with circles drawn around the names of cities I have never heard of. Keys that fit houses where people live that I might someday meet. Wrappers of chocolate bars and handwritten shopping lists I try to decipher. Also, my most precious find: a silver ring with a red stone. Manfred keeps my treasures in a jam jar in his trailer.

"Is the jar still there?" I often ask him, and then he nods.

"It is there and it remains there."

Manfred lives off the land, of what he sells occasionally and what an old friend brings him when it suits her. I go back and find Manfred dozing on the couch in his trailer. He cuts a piece of gingerbread for me and gives me a fresh cup of coffee. At home I never drink coffee because my mother thinks it is unhealthy for kids my age.

He looks at me with his pale blue eyes while I eat and drink. When I am finished, I sit down next to him, leaning my head on his shoulder. I can't help crying. My tears wet his sweater but Manfred does not care. He puts his hand on my hair, caressing it softly.

Soon the afternoon comes to an end. The colors now are different; the light is slanting across the grass. I have to go home, my mother gets upset if I'm late.

By now she will have peeled the potatoes the way she always does, leaving long corkscrews of peels, and, while cutting the vegetables, she will look constantly at the clock wondering where I am.

"May I see the jam jar, Manfred?" I ask.

He points to the shelf. "Over there," he says, "you know where to find it."

I carefully turn the screw cap. Inside, wrapped in a gray cleaning cloth, I find the silver ring. I roll it between my fingers, tap my fingernail on the red stone and then try it on. But even on my little finger, it is too tight. It must have belonged to a child. I spit in the cap and screw it back into place.

"I'll go now, Manfred," I say and run towards my bike. I must ride as fast as I can to be home

before dark.

"Nina, Nina!" I hear him calling behind me. I look around. He stands on a stack of worn tires and claps his hands. "Come back, you forgot something."

But there is nothing I could have forgotten, since I brought nothing with me.

Pia de Jong is a Dutch novelist and newspaper columnist who moved with her family to Princeton from Amsterdam in 2012. She writes a weekly column, 'Flessenpost' (Message in a Bottle), for the Dutch newspaper NRC Handelsblad and is at work on a memoir about her newborn daughter's fight against a rare form of leukemia.

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