

The Grandfather

by Louis Couperus

As the old man watched the child playing at his feet, his thoughts turned to the father.

The large room was draped in the dusky velvet of twilight, and the fire in the hearth cast a fierce light through the gently sifting ashes below. Although the single lamp illuminated little more than the book in the old man's hands, his eyes kept drifting to the child. On the bearskin by the hearth, the boy was playing with a little brown felt bear. No doubt in his imagination he drew a link between the little bear and the rough bearskin, and perhaps the little bear was the cub.

The grandfather watched the child playing, sometimes with a half-murmured word, lit by the blaze of the logs. The boy was nearly seven years old, frail, with a wan complexion, and his gestures had an almost morbid charm, as he played with the little brown bear in the shaggy softness of the large bearskin. In his gray velvet suit, his blond curls tumbling to his shoulders, in the afternoon twilight shot through with the occasional fierce flame, the child seemed otherworldly, a graceful gnome, a tiny sprite, and his game took on an aura of magic, as if it were not just a child's game.

The grandfather thought of the father, who was dead, like the mother. He saw him, his own son, as a young man; he saw him as a child here in this very room, playing on the same bearskin rug. He saw him as a sturdy, handsome boy in short pants, with the same curly blond hair, pedaling off on his bicycle. He saw him as a cadet, then a young officer, charming, easygoing, a sportsman, a man of the world . . . He saw him as a husband, and there beside the son he saw his daughter-in-law. She took shape in the flickering flames of the hearth like a specter, a specter of grief: slight, pale and fair, as fair as the child who was playing at his feet.

The grandfather studied the child. Did he look like his mother? Did he look like his father? He resembled both, yet there on the rug in the play of the firelight, his likeness to the mother was unmistakable: the same delicate profile, the same mouth, with the hint of a wistful smile playing at the corners. And those hands and those gestures . . . so strangely evocative, almost bewitching. She had made those same gestures when she arranged flowers . . .

They were both dead now, the young woman, the young man . . . perhaps she had died of sorrow, if a person can die of sorrow, and as for him, he had died of his own vice, if a person can die of vice. Can a strong young man die of passion, a passion for gambling, for sitting night after night with his hands full of cards? Can such a passion be so consuming, the old man wondered, or is each passion bound up with the next; is there a destiny driving our passions; do we slide from one to the other, from the gambling to the drinking, from the drinking to all the rest . . . Passions, had they even been passions? No, they had never been such noble sentiments. Whatever passion is, it bespeaks a soul that is larger than one without passion. Vices, they had been no more than vices—venal and vile, and lacking all nobility.

Now the old man saw his dead son's soul as if it lay open before him. He gazed on it almost without sorrow, for sorrow becomes so slight and frail as the years mount, so thin and strangely weightless in the worn-down soul that is already taking leave of worldly things. Whatever is to come—sickness, an accident, financial troubles perhaps—it will be hard to bear, of course, but such things no longer weigh so heavily on a soul that has seen and suffered so much and yet resurfaced, that has not been swept away in the great sea . . . Now, almost without emotion, after all the agitation of the past, the old man looked upon the soul of his son. In that dim room,

where flame and shadow flickered on the walls, it was like a second specter beside the frail-fair specter of the young woman.

Whom did the boy resemble? His father? His mother? How delicate his forehead was—almost too delicate, with those tender veins at the temples—how silky his blond hair, and those hands . . . ah, the gestures of those tiny hands!

It was that other-worldliness, that strange enchantment, which his mother had so sweetly displayed, which had seemed to hover over her like music. Some tender souls are like that—they seem to emanate a vague dreaminess, a wondrous aura of sweetness. The grandfather thought the boy was like that too—he always had been, even as a very small child—graced with an almost musical sweetness, like a soft, fluid radiance surrounding him. And one had only to look at him to know that he would become a very special person. Yes, he had his mother's frail constitution; would he grow up to be a man in her image? In truth, she had been nothing but sweetness, almost fairy-tale sweetness, until her suffering had ruined her. Perhaps the child's personality would be more stable; perhaps in him the vague poetry would become an artistic nature; who could say what talent might be lurking in the tender riddle of his young soul . . . To be sure, the boy resembled his mother, physically and morally, but something stronger gleamed through that hazy otherworldliness . . . through everything which in the mother had given way and broken.

That had been in the old days, so far away and faint and yet . . . only three or four years ago, perhaps. A man of vice; a frail woman, suffering and dying; the man, afterwards, wrecking his own overpowering life; sorrowful things, oh yes, and to see them in your own children, in your only son, in a sweet, charming young woman like her . . . But as the years pile up, as old age comes, inexorably, those sorrowful things become so slight, so thin, so frail; by then they are so worn out, so used up, that the

saddest memories fade into vague wistfulness; the cruelest scenes dwindle in recollection, dissolving almost painlessly, like a vapor in the mind; the death of a child, a grown child, of a son, of a daughter-in-law, excites little more than a mild pang of resignation, a sense that things could not have been otherwise and that we must accept them in all humility, relieved that no new sorrow has been added, almost grateful to this cruel life for not demanding more, taking more, destroying more . . .

The grandchild remained; the grandchild was all the old man had left. In his sprawling house—the one luxury he had managed to keep, despite all he had sacrificed to his son—he still had the grandchild, playing by the fire, and the boy looked like his mother, that much was certain . . . The likeness quieted a certain vague but lingering fear in the old man, for the likeness was striking, so strange and striking was the real child between the specters, the two specters, that of the father . . . and that of the mother, whom the child resembled—her alone—there in the light of the flames . . . Oh, the sight of those tiny hands gesturing, with that same almost morbid grace! A mellow, wistful calm came over the old man; the yellow-lit book in his hands slid down to his knees as he watched the boy at play. A blond gnome in the glow of the hearth, utterly absorbed in fantasies and games.

All at once the child rose up . . . What was going through his mind now—what childish imaginings, almost artistic, perhaps—as he flung the small felt bear into the air, his dark eyes blazing with anger in his delicate, boyish face? It shocked the old man, deeply, and he stared at the lad aghast. It was as if the child, his head uplifted, were possessed by a strange, mysterious anger at his toy, which seemed for some secret reason to fill him with sudden vexation. Not only were his eyes ablaze, but his almost-frail little mouth was twisted into a cruel sneer, and in his anger he shook the

little felt bear, battering it furiously against the head of the great bear whose hide lay spread before the hearth . . . and he battered bear cub against bear.

“What are you doing, my lad?” the grandfather cried. But the child was not listening and did not answer; he continued his furious battering; the little bear’s torn-off head dangled from its tortured felt body under the onslaught of the boy’s angry fists; and suddenly the grandfather recognized . . . his son! Suddenly he recognized, beneath the semblance of the mother, the father, the father himself, he recognized his cruelty and selfishness, he recognized almost all the father’s vices, and it shocked him so, that all he could do was sit, paralyzed, petrified, his blood cold in his veins, shocked by that vision, which revealed the terrible future that was to repeat itself . . .

Meanwhile, the child's anger had subsided . . . He knelt there for a moment, as if bewildered by his own rage, looking at the torn-off head and torn-up body of his teddy bear and, childlike, fitting the two parts together, as they had been before . . . And then he looked up at his grandfather and smiled. His delicate features were again unmistakably those of his mother; his hands traced an almost musical gesture, a gesture of apology, to what or whom he did not seem to know. But the old man, with the book still on his knees, stared petrified at his grandson and in his heart there was only the egotistical hope that, because he was old, he might not live to see the future that loomed ahead . . . At this thought he softly, silently drew breath again, and recovered the strength, and recovered the voice, to say to the child who was still smiling up at him, “Why did you ruin your teddy bear, little man . . . ?”

translated by David McKay and Barbara Fasting