



Wessel te Gussinklo

The Fraud

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Ewout Meyster is seventeen years old and thinks he understands the world and life in it, and someday he'll show that to his naïve friends. He wants to astound them, but also the world, with his 'performances' on streets and squares. In conversations with his friends, he explains how to become a real personality, and what you have to do to become important and not remain 'insignificant'. The importance of these conversations for Ewout, mirroring the 'insignificant' friend across from him, lies in exercising his superiority and at the same time seeing it proven. In *The Fraud*, Ewout imagines himself total master of the situation, just as he is subjected to the strong headwinds of his own depressions and his fears.

WESSEL TE GUSSINKLO In 1986, Wessel te Gussinklo (b. 1941) published his debut novel, *The Forbidden Garden*, which was crowned with the Anton Watcher Prize. His second novel, *The Assignment* (1995), was awarded the Lucy B. and C.W. van Hoogt Prize, the ECI Prize and the F. Bordewijk Prize, and nominated for the Libris Literature Prize and De Gouden Uil (The Golden Owl). His novel *Very Bright Light* was shortlisted for the AKO Literature Prize in 2014. Te Gussinklo received the C.C.S. Crone Prize for his complete oeuvre in 2016. *The Returned Flower* was published in 2017. His novel *The Fraud* won the Zeeland Province Book Prize and the Bookspot Literature Prize 2019. *En route to The Hartz*, the fourth novel in the Ewout Meyster Cycle, was awarded the Boekenbon Literature Prize 2021.



The Fraud

by Wessel te Gussinklo

Sample translation by David Colmer

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To have a face, a head like that. He stared at the photo of the conductor in the glossy magazine. To have a head like that, a face like that, with that kind of jaw, and lined, with dark hollows under stark, protruding cheekbones, the noble curve of that aquiline nose. And, of course, eyes like his too: eyes forceful and peremptory, yet benign and understanding. A face like that, an appearance like that, the advantage it gave you. He would cut out the photo and keep it with the other admirable photos he'd cut out and kept, stashed away in his bedroom under books and notebooks. Photos he pulled out in the quiet of his room to study again and again, imagining what it was like to be like them: as powerful and superior, as sovereign. And looking at those photos, sinking into them, he started feeling like that himself, almost as if one of those faces was forming as he looked, strong and benevolent, growing somewhere inside of him. A face like that helped. If you just had a face like that, and the calm relaxed movements that went with it,

which actually imposed themselves on you automatically (no longer jittery and stuttering like he used to be, torn away from himself to answer, to react, to satisfy the demands of other people, grateful for their attention – but calm like now, now he knew how it was done).

The conductor, for instance, the way he stood there in front of his orchestra – seated a little lower than him so he was looking down on them. And they moved in response to his slightest gesture, his slightest glance, and there could be no doubt about it. Or those rulers and leaders he had photos of. And he could see the shouting and cheering crowds on streets and squares, reacting to those rulers' words – but actually to who they were, as if compelled by invisible forces; and those forces were the rulers themselves. That was how it had to be. The way it should be. You had to be cold, hard. You chose, and the world responded.

He'd show the photo to Meindert, but maybe Frits too, who'd be coming by later. Frits, who had problems and worries and wanted to talk to him about them (just like the other guys – girls too sometimes – who sought his advice, now already, even though he was still only seventeen). Three o'clock, he'd told Frits, three o'clock on the dot. I'll have time for you then. (Yes, he was busy, he made that clear, lots to do. His having time was highly unusual, letting Frits drop by just like that was special, extraordinary even.)

Frits was grateful, giving a little cough. Frits with his outsized nose hanging over his chin or lack of it, a chin that receded to his throat, soft flesh that bulged when he looked down – no chin, no chin at all. What

kind of existence was that? How could you even live? If he had a jaw like that, or rather, such a shortage of jaw, such an absence (a sad hindrance, something that prevented you from being who you were meant to be, from becoming who you saw before you), if he had a jaw like that, he would never stop thinking about it and exercise it constantly, pushing it forward no matter how much he had to exert himself to do it. A receding jaw like that, one that didn't jut out, made you different from who you were meant to be. Because others too saw that jaw, or rather, they saw the deficiency, the lack, and linked everything you said, everything you did to it (yes, sure, those are beautiful words he's said, that's vigorous manly behaviour – yes, no doubt about that, but that jaw...) And Frits didn't know, he just lived on, he didn't think about it. Whereas your appearance, the way you carried yourself, your face and also your jaw were crucial, altering the form and value of everything you did and said, and especially your charisma – that hidden strength that reached out to others and shaped and influenced them; a force you had to awaken in yourself by your bearing, looks and behaviour. And also by your voice: a controlled, composed voice of calm superiority. The strict regime you had to impose on yourself to become like that. Otherwise you had no future.

'You have a slightly receding chin,' he'd told Frits once, while subjecting him to a serious and sympathetic appraisal. 'Shouldn't you do something about it? If you pushed it forward a little bit more, your face would be very different: manlier, more forceful. That's important, you know.' And Frits had looked back with astonishment and wonderment.

He hadn't had a clue. Chin? Chin? Jaw? And no, he couldn't possibly – giggling at the words, a weird little laugh.

But it wasn't just the jaw, that jaw and the giggling and that weird little laugh, there were the weird clothes too and his somewhat pudgy build: neckless almost, with hips as wide as his shoulders, and weird brown jumpers, sometimes with brown trousers too and even brown shoes. 'You look like a ginormous turd,' he once said. Not jeering or teasing, but strict and serious. A cold observation of fact.

Ah, poor Frits; he had to help him out by explaining it to him. A warm sense of compassion and understanding rose within him when he thought of Frits, something soft and protective like you get with innocent, unsuspecting animals who look up at you expectantly. He would be strict, but understanding too. And he would also tell the other guys, his friends – Frits doesn't quite get it yet, you have to be patient with Frits – his friends, guys who admired him, who never got enough of his company – Egbert, Chris, Rudie, Meindert, Jan – looking at him expectantly, listening to his words – what had he said now, Ewout, what was he doing now? Boy, Ewout all over. And borne by their approval, their expectant looks, he behaved, he acted like their strength too was pushing him forward, as if they had added themselves to him, becoming the body he expressed himself through, and also their strength, their presence had become his, one with him, as if he had been doubled – no, more than that, tripled, quadrupled, more, rising above himself thanks to them. He was invulnerable.

'You have to go a bit easy on Frits,' he'd say. 'Help him a little. He doesn't get it yet.' And then Frits would come up too, looking at him and

paying attention to the others – the way they held themselves, their attentiveness – and increase his presence further by joining them.

Frits. Even though he had a receding chin, his clean-shaven cheeks were blueish from his already heavy beard. He had that – and he didn't even pay attention to it, he didn't think about it, nothing in his behaviour suggested he even realised it, the advantage it gave him, the head start, the masculine air that kind of growth gave him. Whereas he himself, Ewout, only had a little bit of downy blond stubble on his cheeks and shaved every day, especially his chin, because shaving helped, it stimulated the growth. But it hadn't helped yet. The unfair advantage a guy like that had, someone who was such a drip. He had a beard, unlike others. And maybe even hair on his chest, a thick pelt that proved who you were, that showed your vitality. And he himself: not a single hair on his chest. The skin of his chest as smooth and bare as a baby's bottom. It was unfair, shameful – unbearable, really. He was already seventeen, eighteen almost, and look at him, nothing, no beard, no hair. Maybe he should change his diet – or masturbate less, maybe that would make a difference, the way it drained your power.

In the depths of the living room he looked at his face in the large oval mirror with the dark wooden frame next to the door to the hallway. It was disappointingly ordinary, even here in the dim, indirect light from the two windows. No unusual features, no deep-set hollows under his cheekbones. And his jaw... His jaw was just the bottom of his face – nothing more – a smooth and formless transition, nothing to set it apart from his cheeks, mouth and lips. Nothing that showed the strength he

knew to be inside of him. Maybe he needed to pull down the corners of his mouth a little to make his cheeks tighter and flatter. But the effect was unnatural and strange, not the relaxed simplicity of a face that clarified who he was. No, pulling a face like that was an act, a choice – that mouth was wrong, the face it gave him was wrong too, as if he was somehow annoyed, a bit resentful, contemptuous even; he could see it himself. But it wasn't the right kind of annoyance and resentment. And resentment was never good, and neither was annoyance; it was impotence. Annoyance meant you'd already lost and had essentially given up. It wasn't courage, not real anger starting to show; it was the impotent, almost furtive anger of the weak, the losers who never dared to get really angry. A face like that was wrong, the corners of that mouth, the annoyance and resentment and also the negativity it expressed. No, it wasn't the way to go. Neither was the frown he could see in the mirror now too: unconscious frowning, contracting his brow, narrowing his eyes without even knowing it. That was wrong too, it made it look like he was thinking, concentrating on something, closed off, turned away from the world around him, withdrawn and looking inward, but not the right way, not relaxed and unsuspecting because he was sure of himself and things. No, it seemed evasive, closed, as if you were on your guard instead of relaxed and free. And the others would see that too, they'd see him frowning and evading. He would be recognisable to them, they'd have his measure. No, no more frowning either, he'd have to start watching out for that. Relaxed and unwary, that was how his face needed to be, yet hard and determined with it – not reacting to events, going along with others and competing with them, doing his best to prove himself, to display his abilities. No, you had to astonish them,

surprise them; stay free, unshockable, never reacting to what others said or did, because that was the trap, then you were malleable according to others' expectations and deviating from who you should be. Or else react, but never how they expected: astonishing and surprising them instead, keeping them confused. Then you'd be free, ready to become who you wanted to be.

He looked at his eyes, fixed in place and staring back at him from the mirror. His eyes had to be like cameras, cool and unmoved and open wide to avoid peering and scrutinising – because that too was commitment, that too was recognisable. No, unmoved and unmoving, a gaze like a camera's. He saw it in the mirror. If he could just hold on to that and never forget, he would be safe forever: this look, the cold hardness he could now radiate – whatever others said or did, no reaction. And then, suddenly, out of the blue, because he chose to, a slight smile – or no, less, a gleam, a sparkle in his eye. He could see it in the mirror now too, just his eyes and slightly below them a tension and a slight bulge – he could do that now too, nothing was beyond him. And when others saw it, that gleam in his eye – (He knew it, last night it had been like that too, last night in the jazz cellar. The thought of it made something expand in his chest, his lungs, when he thought of it – only last night he had once again shown who he could be and how he could bend everything to his will. But then that tiredness suddenly, that exhaustion again, for no reason – the impotence of it.) And when others saw it – his smile – they smiled too, relieved because he'd smiled. But he wasn't the one who reacted, they reacted to him, and immediately his smile was over, he was staring motionless and unmoved. He had that

power now, not smiling when they expected it and then, suddenly, his smile again, but contained, more the glimmer of a smile. Because smiling along with others was walking into a trap: they smiled and you smiled too; they got friendly and amicable and they laughed and got lippy and told stories – counting on your reactions and replies. They came too close; they entered the space that belonged to you, tugging at you and poking you with their stories, their laughter, their certainties, as if leading you away from yourself. That made you unfree, a puppet with other people pulling the strings. And if you then fell silent and started staring, no longer reacting... It was too late, too late: you were boring and a drip, a wet blanket instead of strange and enigmatic. No, be free, stay free, never react. Or else react, but not how they expected, reacting with intangible, elusive reactions that were not replies, not attuned to the others, but something else, something new that surprised and astonished them. So that their alienation and discomfort generated space around him. And they in turn were checked, stalled in who they were, checked and stalled by him, Ewout. And in the space that had opened around him, he would speak again, he would act and move. Nothing was beyond him if he just paid attention, remaining alert, intent and unmoved. That was a responsibility, along with all the rest, it brought demands – and every day should be the same – always new demands, new tasks. There would be no end to it. The deadly exhaustion he sometimes felt. But there was no escaping it, because how else could he live? Grey and inconspicuous, head down like the rest of them? Bland and invisible so as to live without demands, without responsibility, drifting faceless through time? No, then you'd already lost, then death had set in. No, there was no escaping it.

But when it was like last night, just last night, in the jazz cellar, the way he had presented himself there and shown how he could be. Thinking back on that, the quiver of joy that went through him, almost like he was holding his breath, or no, as if his breath had caught, and then the expansive exhalation as if everything had come to a halt around him, lying down peacefully. That was the kind of behaviour, the kind of attitude he had already mastered. It would increase and grow until he became the man he was meant to be. But even now: the grip he already had, the power. He would become! He would be!

He sat down on the armchair by the window, put his feet up on the low windowsill – a windowsill at the same height as the seat of his chair – and looked out at the canal behind his house, the quays along the water, the high walls of the cellars that opened out onto them, and above them the street and the row of buildings opposite. Leaning backwards on the chair, he lit a cigarette – the expansive nonchalance of his gestures: the cigarette to the ashtray, him tapping away the ash although that wasn't yet necessary, and then back to his mouth, breathing in deeply and then slowly blowing out the smoke at his calm leisure. That was how to smoke, with those expansive gestures; the space you controlled, the calm confidence, the peace you made visible.

If his mother came in now and saw him sitting like this in the chair with the ashtray, his packet of cigarettes, a box of matches and a glass of cold, still slightly fizzy cola – but especially those legs, those shoes on the

windowsill – she would be angry and annoyed and shout at him or, not quite shouting, her voice would be caustic, loud and flat with pent-up but impotent rage: ‘There he is, sitting on his no-good arse again’ (that word alone) ‘smoking and drinking, too lazy to do a thing. Yes, smoking, drinking, with his feet on the windowsill.’ And then with a cutting voice, ‘Get your legs down!’ And he would do it, grinning and shaking his head. Because what did old people like that matter: grey, silent adults, frozen in their own world without movement or desire. They were lost, their existence meaningless, they had become fixed and immutable and no hope remained. He felt scorn, derision and cold abhorrence – their powerless chatter.

And while she looked at him and past him again: ‘Look at that dossier’ (‘dossier’, that foul word alone, the rank filth it conveyed, as if something dirty was leaking from it, dripping out of it), ‘lazing in bed till midday while everyone else works hard and does their best. No wonder you got expelled from boarding school, no wonder the headmaster threw you out. If your father had lived to see this...’ Yeah, sure, his father, always his father, old reliable, the nincompoop who got himself shot dead in the war. He never wanted to turn out like that. ‘Your father would have put you in your place.’

‘Or me him.’ He couldn’t resist the retort. Staring at her without moving, but with great confidence.

‘Look at that face, those eyes,’ his mother had said while gazing at him, a little shocked, but also with an almost melancholy satisfaction; almost as if she was seeing him with new eyes, only now really seeing him, seeing him properly – now for the first time, only now properly. So the

look in his eyes worked, that was proven again. He was on the right track. The cold unmoved hardness was visible to her too.

‘Look at those eyes. It’s the devil talking through them, son. Turn back from this path you’ve taken.’ And she had left the room without another word. That’s what you got with all those Bibles, prayer books and hymnals, volumes of psalms downstairs in the shop, the bookshop she ran together with a partner; books of sermons and exegesis. Theologians came by and ministers and his mother adopted a modest tone with them, almost reverential.

‘Aren’t you busy?’ he’d once said to his mother when she was standing there, reproachful and a little concerned too. ‘Don’t you need to go downstairs, to sell some Bibles and read a homily or two?’ (You always had to go one step further, stretching the limits of the possible, what he could say and do, each time a little further, a little more.) He laughed a small, controlled laugh, mocking but restrained, keeping his eyes on her. What would she say now, what would she do? She was halfway across the room, her arms hanging limp next to her body as if she was weak, incapable of defending herself and resigned to undergo it, looking at him.

Another step further: decisive, triumphant words.

‘A nice little psalm?’ he said. ‘A hymn or two? And then read a little in those kids’ stories?’ He waited for a moment while looking at her. ‘Kids’ stories,’ he repeated. ‘Fairy tales. Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf. And then singing about Red Riding Hood and warning people about the Big Bad Wolf. *Yowl-howl.*’ He waved the arm with the cigarette

in his hand: expansive gestures, expansive dismissive gestures. 'No, wait, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Better still: praying for Snow White, invoking Snow White, becoming just as white as Snow White. Boy,' he said (really swearing was something he didn't yet dare to do; swearing, those mighty rock-hard words you dropped casually left and right, unable to hold them back). What would his mother do now? She was still standing there, wavering, as if lost for ideas of how to proceed. 'Fairy tales,' he said. 'Red Riding Hood, Snow White. They believe in it so they can wash their hands of everything, to avoid taking responsibility for the person they have become. Nothing,' he said ruthlessly, 'they have become nothing.'

Behind him there was the click of the living room door and, from the hall, from the hallway, he heard a short sobbing sound. But spite was all he felt, unshockable, unyielding, obdurate. His attitude remained unchanged, the fixed groove he had fallen into.

Once he went too far. 'Ah, woman, just go downstairs,' he'd shouted, and then forcefully: 'Go away, get lost, I want to think.' But that was a step too far, too rude, 'loutish' his mother said, 'This week no pocket money.' Those five guilders, the meagre wage for his presence as her son; money he needed, money he counted on - to buy cigarettes, for instance (the extra style and strength, the aura of superiority a cigarette gave you), and sit in a bar with his friends - the guys who never got enough of his company - and drink cola, drawing hard on cigarettes. But no money meant no cola, no cigarettes. (And that other time, it was terrible, horrific, the time she unexpectedly came into his room while he was sitting there with those things, those clothes. 'Oh, son!' she had

cried. 'Oh, son!' As if clapping her hand over her mouth. Immediately he had leapt over to her and shoved her out of his room, locking the door behind her. 'Son!' she cried. 'Son!' She pounded on the door and called out again. It was as if he'd turned to stone, frozen. He didn't react. And then the soft, almost whimpering sound of his mother on the other side of the door refusing to go away. She stood there crying, powerless and resigned. And it was only much later that he heard her soft, almost shuffling footsteps moving away. Never had she said anything about it, not mentioning it with a single word. The incident was non-existent, dissolved like a dream.)

Press Quotes *The Fraud*:

'Te Gussinklo's style is irresistible. Recognizable but his own, free of convention, witty and timeless. [...] That's how he drums up the tragicomic portrait of an unforgettable boy, so irresistibly vulnerable.'***** - *de Volkskrant*

'In a fine novel about a rebellious boy, the writer once again shows his great talent.'***** - *NRC Handelsblad*

'Our literary landscape sometimes suffers from a lack of daring, but Te Gussinklo won't be to blame - we have to cherish an odd duck such as this one.'***** - *HUMO*

'With his hypnotic, repetitive style, Te Gussinklo paints his main character's inner condition in singular fashion.' - *Trouw*

'This time again, in *The Fraud*: it's another unprecedented triumph, in a deeply fascinating way; call it a shackling, nervous-laughter-filled descent into the most terrifying. I said it like this before: "In his sultry novels Te Gussinklo carries his reluctant reader along to a small, swampy field. Above all, it's being nimbly lured to that unpleasant destination that proves to be an unforgettable experience.'" - *Vrij Nederland*