

THE FIVE OF US IN ROME

Tine Cool

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Cover photograph taken by Alfred Wilhelm Strohl-Fern in 1893 (letter by Berber), at the Villa Strohl-Fern in front of the atelier rented to *The five of us in Rome*. Left to right: Paul Peterich, Mother (Berber Cool-Kijlstra), Dientje (a.k.a. Dinchen), Father (Thomas Cool) (TC1851), Tine (a.k.a. Tinchen), Wilhelm Kumm. Absent in the picture is the fifth of *The five of us in Rome*: little Gerrit.

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Draft translation by Tine Cool (1887-1944) around 1940. Translated & edited & published in 2011 & 2022 by Thomas Cool (TC1954), great-grandson of the painter.

Tine dedicated the book to the grandchildren of the painter. The English translation was published first in 2011 around the 90<sup>th</sup> birthday of the last remaining grandchild Thomas Cool (1921-2015) (TC1921).

TC1851, TC1921 and TC1954 are indicated by their year of birth.

Tine's webpage: <http://thomascool.eu/Painting/Tine/index.html>.

Paintings can be seen in colour at: [thomascool.eu/Painting/Mini/index.html](http://thomascool.eu/Painting/Mini/index.html).

Photos of 2010 of works by TC1851 are by Aldwin van Krimpen, reprinted here with permission by Willem Winters (Perio) and Geart de Vries (HCL).

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# BEKROONDE BOEKEN

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De prijs werd toegekend aan  
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PREFACE

I want to express my joy that "*The five of us in Rome*" found its way home to so many families, for a second printing proved necessary. It was not only to compete in the contest that this book was written, although it was the occasion, but also to show a happy family, and above all to highlight my father, Thomas Cool, in his creative and happy time as an artist in Rome.

March 1930

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tine Cool". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letter of each name being capitalized and prominent.

TO THE GRANDCHILDREN  
OF THE ART PAINTER  
THOMAS COOL (1851-1904)





## Chapter I. Friesland

When Father and Mother married in August 1883 they stood side by side in the small church of Bears where her own father led the ceremony since he was the village parson.<sup>1</sup>

They were almost as tall. She stood in proud anticipation of a great life with her husband. He had his blue eyes fixed on her, his hair wavy on his head. He was an artist.

The whole village joined the party and it lasted the whole night. People came from afar. It was the parson's eldest daughter who got married!

The young couple moved to Sneek where our other grandfather Gerrit had a company in marble ornaments and mantelpieces. Their first-born in 1884 was my sister Gerardina – Dientje. Their second child was a girl too but sadly she died young. Mother was already pregnant with a third baby and she told Father: "I'll try not to grieve too much so that the new child will have a cheerful start." Years later when Mother looked at the portrait of my dead little sister Alida that Father had drawn we could see tears in her eyes. They moved to Rotterdam where Father became head of a department of the firm. The boy they hoped for did not come and it was a little girl again. My birthday is August 29 1887 and I am called Catharina Alida – Tine for short.

The fourth child in 1889 was Gerrit, a fat, heavy son.

Now the five of us were complete – till Father took us to Rome in 1892-1896 where Dientje got ill and he had to choose between art or family again.

A tempting voice had been calling Father to Rome for ever. It was the city of his dreams, there he would paint in that paradise for artists! The marriage made it a much harder choice since now he would have to leave his beloved ones for a long time. In 1892 he made up his mind, and decided to do it. He would first go alone and when things went well Mother would follow with us children.

Mother sold a lot of things, the furniture, even that beautiful mirror-fronted cupboard, a wedding-present, and she liked it so much. Some nice things were

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<sup>1</sup> [www.historischekerken.nl/Friesland/Bears.html](http://www.historischekerken.nl/Friesland/Bears.html) and [www.uniastatebears.nl](http://www.uniastatebears.nl)

given away, and having arranged it all, she returned to the small village of Bears where she had been born in 1856.

For us children came a wonderful time in the rectory with its big garden – so different from busy Rotterdam.

Everyone entered the house by the side-door, for who would dare to disturb the swallows and their nest above the frontdoor? In front of the kitchen door there was a stoop with yellow bricks. White wooden shoes stood against the wall to dry. On the grass next to the stoop there was a covered well, it was fun to scoop water and pull up the bucket. On the side of the ditch there was a wooden deck for washing. There too, the ducklings passed by in a long row. The drake led the way, his head sparkling green and his eyes beads that did not get wet when he dived. You always feared that they never would come to the surface again but always their heads resurfaced, covered with duckweed.

The corridor had one door to the peat-house, it was very dark there, and we children did not like it when it was said: "I'll put you into the peat-house." But that punishment never happened!

I remember granny always wearing a white woollen cap and a colourful apron. Granny was always busy in the kitchen, making soup, boiling French beans – haricots verts – or making pudding with berry juice, a treat for my little brother. There was always a pleasant smell in the kitchen. Sometimes there were sweets for us children. The kitchen had a big stove and a side-board and a table that were scrubbed white and clean. As usual in a Dutch kitchen everything that hung on the wall was polished and when the sun shone the copper of the pans sparkled.

The cat was a clever one. When granny got a jar of milk from the basement it began mewling and did not stop before it got a portion.

The corridor had a tall clock. Grandpa stepped into the corridor and saw my sister looking at it. He put his hand on her curly head and asked: "Are you watching the little ships with their sails and the little mill that is milling about, are you watching those? Don't get a shock, the clock strikes in a second."

Near the clock a door opened to a very small room. It held a big bed and a closet with a narrow space inbetween, so narrow that you could not move when the closet doors were open. The closet contained a huge amount of toys, left there by Mother and her seven brothers and sisters who had grown up here too. A toy warehouse with bales, bags and balances appealed to boys. A toy drapery shop was for girls. It had flannels, velvet, buttons, pins, needles. A yardstick in the shop allowed a precise measurement of draperies on sale.

The big room had granny's plants and flowers in the window sills. There were so many that we children could not look out of the window. Next to the chimney grandpa's cigar-chest hung against the wall, but also a medicine cupboard with powders and cod-liver oil – and that made this room less pleasant than the other rooms.

The big room also contained our grandparents's bedstead. Grandpa rose very early in the morning and when we children got up we could see granny still sleeping, wearing a white nightgown and her white cap.

Grandpa was already in the garden trying to save some apples or pears from starlings and naughty boys. They were always faster while the fruit was intended for us !

Mother's grandfather and grandmother had slept in that bedstead as well. At that time men still wore nightcaps. It happened that great-grandfather dreamed that he heard thieves in the house and he decided to hide his money in his nightcap. The next morning he woke with his nightcap gone. It was considered lost till one day the straw in the bedstead was replaced and it was found again.

Another time this great-grandfather really heard something. When he went to check the thieves told him off: "Parson, I warn you, return to bed or I'll shoot you."

"Well," he said, "in that case I better leave," and he returned to bed.

"What is the matter?" his wife asked.

"There are thieves and they want to shoot me."

"Well," his wife suggested, "you then better get dressed first."

In the meantime an old aunt sleeping upstairs had heard the noise and threat, and leaning out of the window she called for help. Seized with fright she shouted names of all kinds of people, also of people long dead. This was too much for the thieves and they ran, taking only a little.

Breakfast was not in the big room – where granny slept – but in grandpa's study. For the remainder of the day we children were not allowed there. That was a pity since we longed to see the weather house. Was the lady outside or had the man chased her inside ? It was such a beautiful little house that stood upon grandpa's bookcase.

You could get to the study by passing the milky glass doors of the hall. The hall had such a nice scent. What caused it ? Was it the smoke of the long pipe, or the smell of the ditch and meadow that came from outdoors ? Might it be the perfume of mignonette / reseda that entered via the keyhole of the

front door? When we children had grown up we still savoured the smell and sometimes when we were in a strange house we asked one another: "It is the same smell like at grandpa's, isn't it?"

It was such a joy to have breakfast at that round table in that study. There were small eggs and biscuits, the boiling water on the peat burner simmered with the groats. Pulling on its ears, the tin opened and the groats fell upon your plate. Grandpa had to eat carefully, he had a long white beard.

Between the windows there was a narrow mirror on the wall, with a golden frame, and looking into it you saw the whole room. There was the dumpy little boy, seen on the back; and me myself with my curly head and big smile. Breakfast in grandpa's room was heaven!

Later Dientje joined Mother looking out of one of the sunny windows. The view gave the gravel path, the lawn with chestnut trees, the fence, the road and ditch, and finally the meadows with the cows.

"Look over there, in the distance. Do you see that carriage with its Shetland pony? It's the doctor's cab, somebody has sent for him."

"In the past, your father always came along that path, you see. He always carried an umbrella whether it rained or the sun shone. He will not need one now, in that country so far away."

Mother longed for Father. Dientje knew that, and did so too. The little children? They hadn't forgotten him and life was so good with grandpa and granny and their house and garden, they would happily stay here.

Oh, the big garden! One was around the house but there was another one across the ditch where you got by crossing the bridge. Little Gerrit was a locomotive and he shuffled across, calling "puff, puff, shoo, shoo, shoo, ...". I myself was almost as careful and stepped across foot by foot. I wanted to stay on the bridge to look into the water but Mother forbade that: "You will hang over the railing and drop into the water and that is deep."

Thus I walked slowly, there was so much to see.

I liked to look at the signal box for the train. Antje lived there. When a train passed she came out of her house in a wide cape wearing an oil-cloth hat and holding a red flag. When the train stopped people left it and came down the road along the church, returning from the market in Leeuwarden and carrying baskets filled with cakes and sweets and other delicious things.

The church was on a mound and stood high above the trees. Standing on our bridge you could see the gate of the doorsteps of the church. When

Mother was still a little girl she had to go to church every Sunday and then got a picture-book to look at. Now we children were permitted to stay at home.

Mother told stories about church. Granny was always in a hurry before going to church, the children had to be dressed, and so on, and one Sunday morning she forgot to put off her woollen apron. She noticed it only during singing. It must have been a foolish sight: a lady in Sunday dress wearing an apron. Grandpa hadn't budged. "The outside dress does not matter as long as the inner heart is good," he commented.

Another time he had to laugh though. It was caused by all those eight children of course. Granny, again occupied, had forgotten to bring money for the collection bag. When it was offered to her, feeling in her pocket she found a little brown bean and put it into the bag, without thinking about it because she was singing.

Later that day grandpa asked her: "Dear wife, why did you put a bean into the collection bag?!"

Granny replied: "Well, what do you say?"

Grandpa maintained: "There is only one person in the village who cultivates this kind of beans, and that is I myself."

Then granny realized what had happened and the next time she put in twice as much.

I liked looking at the church with its square spire and its golden weathercock that always showed the direction of the wind. On the other side was the gate,<sup>2</sup> high, on a mound too and very old. By the church and the gate everyone coming by train directly recognized the village. Behind the gate there were smaller houses and in one of them lived the sick boy who made such awful noises because he had a waterhead. Grandpa visited them sometimes and took along one of us children. But we rather stayed at home and when we were there we hid near the door holding on to the candy that the sick boy's mother had given us.

Far across the meadow on the horizon behind Antje's signal box there was another tower, far too far for our short legs ... and Father was even much further.

When we came from the bridge and returned to the garden, there was a scraper to clean our wooden shoes. Around the house we had gravel but the meadows had clay that could stick to our shoes in chunks like snow in Winter.

The garden of the rectory had blackberries in bushes and tall trees with lamma pears and various other good kinds of apples and pears in early and late

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<sup>2</sup> [www.friesland.nl/nl/locaties/2011286569/bezoekerscentrum-uniastate-en-tsjerke-bears](http://www.friesland.nl/nl/locaties/2011286569/bezoekerscentrum-uniastate-en-tsjerke-bears)

varieties. In the back of the garden there was another ditch and you could see the schoolmaster's house and the school next to it – so that the naughty boys might jump across into grandpa's garden. On the side of the ditch there were elm trees with coppice to obstruct the view but the elm trees intercepted the light so that the coppice had few leaves. People were opposed to cutting down the trees: the land was open enough and the village had only few trees.

The drying loft was boring and had to be kept tidy. When it rained we could play in the lumber loft however that was totally free. A corner contained our stuff from Rotterdam that would remain there till we returned from sunny Italy, and we did not play with that. The rest was a hodgepodge of things that tickled our phantasy. There was a box with all kinds of dresses, blue gowns, white shawls with golden stars, flowing wigs and corkscrew curls. We enjoyed ourselves enormously, above all when the raindrops tapped heavily at the garret windows and the gutters were overflowing and the birds twittered in their nests.

Now and then one of us was called downstairs to try on some clothes that our aunt Grada was sewing for the journey.

Another aunt Lucretia, the youngest, played piano. When the weather was good she played with the doors open to the veranda, and ducks came waddling from the ditch, one behind the other with their necks stretched-out. We children had to sit still and the ducks showed more patience than we did.

My little brother was happiest when the lady with the fancy-rolls came along. She had a joke with on each side a big basket, and in them delicious French bread, covered in flour with a brown crisp. She came from far and was offered some coffee in the kitchen. She had ample time to tell about what was happening in the village. Before she left she also wondered: "People say that the children are going to Rome too. Is it true? Those poor things!"

"Not at all poor things!" Dientje replied. "There are oranges growing there, and the sun shines every day so that we don't need an umbrella."

"So," the woman said, "is that true, is that true?"

I could proudly add: "Our Father lives there."

And my little tot brother echoed: "Father there."

"Yes, in that case you certainly must go," the woman admitted, and then said goodbye for the next week.

The postman knew it too. We welcomed him with shouts of joy when he came into the gate, carrying his heavy bag on one side and holding a thick walking stick in the other hand.

“Do you have a letter from Father?” we yelled.

“Yes, a fat one!”

We called for Mother, exclaiming “there is a letter from Father, a big one!” Granny covered her ears and auntie poured coffee for the bringer of the tidings.

We followed Mother into the room eager to hear what the letter contained. Overflowing with merriment we were dancing and jumping and yelling.

“We are going to Rome! We are going to Rome! Shoo-shoo-shoo!” my little brother came running at the cat that darted out of the kitchen followed by him.

“We are going to Rome! We are going to Rome! Shoo-shoo-shoo!” The ducks flapped their wings, cackled loudly and fled to the headmaster’s ditch.

“We are going to Rome! We are going to Rome! Shoo-shoo-shoo!” reached the vegetable garden where grandpa was working.

“So, little fellow, it is final then?”

But the little boy did not understand what it means when things are final and fell silent.

“Well,” grandpa cheered him up again, “I’ll give you two carrots for the trip, you like that, don’t you?”

Grandpa came back to the house with my little brother, curious to hear more.

Indeed, the letter told that Father missed us, that we should come quickly, and it gave details for the trip.

We hardly saw the postman leaving as he continued his route, leaning on his cane or striking with it to yapping dogs. His route was across the meadows, through gates and jumping over fences, because the main road was much longer.

A skylark song high in the air and clouds caused shadows over the wide landscape.

We children were aware of all this beauty around us because Mother had shown it to us. “For this you would want to stay in Friesland,” her word was, “for both the high skies and the far horizons.”

In tears we said goodbye when the day of departure arrived. We got on the train at Antje’s place. Mother, us girls, and our little brother now three years of age, in May 1892. Trunks had been sent off ahead but six packets were left to carry. Granny waved from our bridge next to the house and Grandpa brought us to Leeuwarden and then Amsterdam where we changed to the international train.

It would be years before he would see them again, those little faces in that

train window. He thought in himself: my daughter has courage, going alone to a foreign country, but she knows her languages, that will help her. My eldest granddaughter now is seven and a half, she is a smart pretty thing who will help her. Still, the journey was a long one, and with a prayer in his heart he returned home, where it had become real quiet now.



## Chapter II. Rome

### Arrival

On a morning at the end of May 1892, at seven o'clock when the express train from Milan was due, a few railmen nudged each other with a smile to watch a stranger, clearly not from Italy.

What did he plan with his huge bouquet of flowers and stringbag with oranges? Why that face so full of joy?

He would be fetching his date, they assumed.

But she had not come, apparently. When all travellers had left they saw him leaving too. They did not hear how he spoke to himself. "Why did you think they might already be here? The wire clearly stated nine o'clock. Yes, but it might have happened," he apologized to himself. "Suppose that they had chanced on an earlier connection and suppose that I would not have been here. Imagine the disappointment!"

In solace he started to wait. Observing the flowers with care he noted that they needed water. Rome has countless fountains so he went over to one and put the bouquet there for a while.

Long before time he was back at the platform again and walked it up and down in quick strides. Sometimes he paused, stroke his hair, watched keenly in the distance, and continued his stride.

The train arrived. The railmen watched him now, curious for the date who put him in so much excitement. How would she look, that lady who got the flowers and the oranges?

It was a surprise how fast he could run. Yes, over there was a waving handkerchief, there she would be.

And what did they see?

First the man lifted a rather large girl from the compartment. Then another smaller girl. Then a fat little boy.

They milled around on the platform. Then he took six parcels that were handed to him. Finally he helped a lady descend from the high steps.

And then, oh my, they were all kissing, weeping and laughing, again and again.

Really, the railmen hadn't expected any of this.

In the end the little boy sat on Father's shoulders, banging his orange against his hat. Father held one of his legs and his other hand held the youngest girl who was jumping and dancing also with an orange. The eldest girl walked quietly on his right hand side, but she looked anxiously at the parcels. She had looked after them during the whole long trip and now they were left just lying there. But no, a boy carrier had been signalled and followed them.

Mother looked at her bouquet: "I see so many strange flowers! Be careful with Gerrit, he is only three! And I have so much to tell you!"

Father beamed with happiness and pride. This was his own wife walking with him and these were his own children, as healthy as Dutch kids can get, with their blue eyes, the red cheeks of the youngests and the blond curls that shone as gold in the sun.

"It is true!" Dientje said. "The sky is blue, it does not rain and there are even no clouds!"

The sun was bright and where there was a shadow, it was a deep one. She had seen oranges from the train and now she carried one too. The girls in the village had not believed her when she told them about the wonders in Father's letters.

Outside of the station there were carriages. A farmer from Friesland would have spotted the poorly fed horses but we children only saw the hat on the horse of our carriage, a straw hat with holes for his ears.

We pointed and laughed, and, funnily, the ears moved up and down, listening to us.

"Why do the horses wear hats, Father?" Dientje asked.

"Because of the sun, it would burn on them too hot, and then they would drop dead," Father answered.

The five of us rode in the foreign city. Father was the tour guide.

When we passed through a narrow steep road and saw an open horse tram he told this story:

"Once a lunatic sat in that horse tram on this road. In the ride uphill he leaned out and pointed downhill as if something happened there. People in the street stopped and looked to see what was happening. The further the tram rode the more people were looking downhill. When the tram arrived at the

top the whole street was filled with people looking downhill. There the lunatic stepped out, enjoying himself immensely.”

“What are those green and red vegetables?” Dientje pointed. “They seem like melons?”

Father was alarmed: “Those you should never eat! Beware of those! Those are watermelons, they are too coolant for strangers like us and we would get very ill. Never eat those in your life!”

“What a pity, they look so tempting,” Mother commented.

“Yes, they are beautiful,” Father agreed, “their greens and reds are very strong.”

Mother again realized that her husband was a painter, whose eyes had a different way of seeing.

Finally we reached Father’s home. We had to climb many steps and came into the large atelier that had two rooms besides, one for living and one with our beds.

When we had inspected our quarters Father gave us something to eat for we had been travelling so long. He cut bread, buttered them and sprinkled them with salt.

We were amazed. “Who eats a sandwich with only salt?” I asked.

“Butter is scarce here,” Father explained. “They don’t put salt in it either. Milk is scarce as well since they hardly have cows here. But they have beautiful goats, you will see them.”

We were hungry and bravely ate these strange sandwiches.

Mother decided to a washing. We were all so dirty – it must be because of the tunnels, Mother explained to Father.

This was the first thing Mother could report about our trip. “All those tunnels! But the children were not afraid, on the contrary, they cheered when we entered and cheered when we saw light again. Their fun made the other travellers laugh too. But the thick smoke made us black, and it smelled awfully.”

“That will improve over time with electrification,” Father said.

We had spent a night in Cologne and again in Basel, and then had a direct train to Rome. The trip had not been boring, not at all!

“And how did you like the mountains, that you never saw before?” Father asked Dientje. “Is it not breathtaking at the Gotthard tunnel?”

Mother also told about the difficulties she had met but waited till the children were asleep. Preparing the beds, she removed many fleas from the